HPER’s Underwater Science Program Helps the Dominican Republic Protect Its Historical and Cultural Resources

On August 1, a delegation of faculty and students from Indiana University Bloomington participated in the dedication of the world’s first underwater museum, the 1724 Guadalupe Underwater Archaeological Preserve. In addition to the IU students and faculty who participated in the museum’s creation, the opening was attended by Dominican government dignitaries, hotel association representatives, and the media. The museum is located in the clear, relatively shallow waters of the Dominican Republic’s Bayahibe Bay where snorkelers, divers, kayakers, and waders have easy access to this important piece of Caribbean history.

Fronted by several resorts, the museum will promote the cultural history and archeological resources of the country. The Guadalupe underwater museum represents the latest in a series of projects between IUB’s Underwater Science Program in the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (HPER); the Mathers Museum of World Cultures; the government of the Dominican Republic; and La Romana Bayahibe Hotel Association.

Originally co-proposed by Charles Beeker, director of IUB’s underwater science program in HPER’s Department of Recreation and Park Administration, and Geoff Conrad, director of the Mathers Museum and professor of anthropology, the museum features artifacts from the shipwreck of the Guadalupe, a Spanish galleon that sank during a hurricane in Samana Bay in 1724. The most pristine and significant artifacts were salvaged 24 years ago and have been housed aboveground at museums in the capital, Santo Domingo, and in Spain. Beeker and Conrad proposed the underwater museum as means to help the country sustain and promote their cultural resources as well offer their students international fieldwork and research opportunities.

Beeker and Conrad have been doing underwater archaeology in the Dominican Republic for a number of years. In 1993, Beeker was contacted by the Dominican Republic’s Comisión de Rescate Arqueológico Submarino to determine IU’s interest in searching for a possible Columbus shipwreck in Isabela Bay, the site of Columbus’ first city in the Caribbean. In 1996, Beeker, Conrad, and a team of researchers discovered and documented a remarkable deposit of artifacts found in a freshwater subterranean cave originally belonging to the Taino Indians, inhabitants of the Caribbean when Columbus arrived (reported in the OIP Newsletter of January 1997).

“Most people in the United States have heard of the Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas,” says Conrad, an expert on the Taino, “but few know about the Tainos—yet they were the first American Indians to meet the Spanish conquerors and bear the impact of the collision between the Old and New Worlds. The story of the contact between Spaniards and Tainos is the story of the birth of the modern world. That story has to come not just from written accounts, which are incomplete and biased, but from archaeological sites, both on land and underwater.”

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Beeker and Conrad’s research on the Taino Indians and the Columbus era shipwrecks resulted in the production of two Emmy award-winning documentaries.

Long years of research, preparation, and good relationships with Dominican Republic government representatives enabled Beeker and Conrad, together with teams of IU students, to carry out the actual creation of the underwater museum in only two weeks. For the exhibit, the ship’s heavy canons and anchor were relocated to Bayahibe Bay and supplemented by smaller artifacts like amphora, or pottery jars, brought out from 24 years in storage. IU students planned the object placement; determined the objects’ weights and calculated the number of inflatable lift bags needed to move the heavy items; and assisted in planning the aboveground exhibits, and the placement of buoys and markers. The students will continue to participate in future biological surveying and monitoring of the site, as well as in the production of interpretative materials.

IU’s Underwater Science Program trains students with the conceptual tools and hands-on experience they need to protect submerged cultural and biological resources. Past student projects have included documenting several shipwrecks and creating artificial reefs. In 1996, IU students documented the shipwreck of the San Felipe, a Spanish galleon that sank in the Florida Keys in 1733. They mapped, photographed, and conducted the preliminary research needed to place the ship on the National Register of Historic Places. In June 2002, IU students were involved in sinking the 1955 U.S.S. Spiegel Grove, the largest ship ever sunk to create an artificial reef. They helped in the setup of diver access holes, site marking, and in creating interpretive materials. Florida’s Key Largo Chamber of Commerce spent $1 million to sink the ship, but it estimates $22 million in income from recreational fees in the first year alone.

The underwater science program combines courses in environmental science and policy, biology, anthropology, SCUBA, and archaeology, with unique fieldwork opportunities to apply knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom. Currently, there are 7 students in the undergraduate individualized major Underwater Archaeology Program, all of whom worked on the Guadalupe project. The program offers a 24-credit hour Underwater Resource Management Certificate (URMC), currently being pursued by 21 students. Upon completion, students can work in state and federal agencies, underwater parks for the National Marine Sanctuaries, or the National Park Service.

Asked how creating and interpreting underwater parks and preserves can help protect cultural resources, Beeker explained that when the government documents the site, creates guides, and enforces rules, people are less likely to disturb the artifacts. “Until recently, especially in the Florida Keys, it was possible to buy shares into a wreck site in exchange for the right to dive and take souvenirs from Columbus era shipwrecks. . . . IU is helping to lead the international movement to protect underwater history. We’re helping a developing country protect and promote their cultural and historical resources in a cutting-edge and sustainable manner.”

—RV

(seated left to right) Geoff Conrad signs the five-year renewal agreement with Dominican Republic colleagues Francisco Escoto, Oficina Nacional del Patrimonio Cultural Subacuatico and Lisette Gil, Asociación de Hoteles la Romana-Bayahibe, in the presence of a staff attorney (standing).

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