THE PROSPECTS OF A BOTTOM-UP MODEL FOR THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT AND PROMOTION OF UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years we have been part of several initiatives in eastern Mediterranean in the context of national and transnational publicly funded projects, aiming at the accessibility, protection and promotion of Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH). This paper focuses on the implementation of a series of bottom-up efforts in Greece, as an example of the prospects of a model for the sustainable management and protection of UCH. The model proposes the establishment and sustainable operation of Accessible UCH sites with the integration of technology to enhance responsible accessibility at the sites to both divers and non-divers, while it introduces the concept of Knowledge Awareness Centers (KACs) to raise public awareness on UCH. We believe that responsible accessibility of UCH promotes sustainable tourism development in islands and coastal areas and generates multiple benefits for local communities. Sustainability depends on the engagement of stakeholders including competent authorities, the diving community, and local operators in the culture and tourism sector. To this purpose, a roadmap has been developed to facilitate stakeholders to uptake the proposed model in areas with similar characteristics.

Keywords: Underwater Cultural Heritage, public awareness, sustainable management, bottom-up initiatives, roadmap.

Introduction

Coastal areas or distant islands with small economies rely mostly on tourism, which is a dependent variable as tourism in these areas is seasonal and the revenues are hard to predict. In the contemporary world with economic fluctuation, such areas need to invest on competitive advantages so that they stand out in the world tourism map with a distinctive tourism product, which will generate income and socioeconomic benefits for the local community. Given that alternative tourism is an emerging global trend [1] and recreational diving is very popular nowadays, cultural diving tourism can be a drive for economic growth for coastal and island economies. Investing on the promotion of accessible Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH) that combines a cultural and diving destination, Accessible UCH sites can attract different categories of visitors (families, divers, cultural tourists etc.) from around the world and enhance tourism development in the wider area. Considering that cultural tourists are highly educated and usually high spenders [2] and that international travelers tend to visit several countries spending around a week in each destination [3], the valorization of Accessible UCH sites can upgrade the touristic attractiveness of coastal areas and islands and therefore generate significant direct and indirect revenues and enhance sustainable tourism development [4].

The Mediterranean is a popular tourism destination with favorable prospects for the development of cultural diving tourism, as there is a great number of UCH sites to promote and make accessible in this diachronic crossroad of cultures, like ancient shipwrecks and submerged sites, and numerous World War I & II underwater monuments of ships and aircrafts [5]. According to UNESCO [6], there are approximately three million ancient shipwrecks worldwide, while in the Mediterranean the volume of UCH sites can hardly be estimated due to the lack of extensive underwater research and mapping. As a result, a huge part of UCH remains unknown mainly due to limited funding for research, conservation, and monitoring of the sites. Most importantly, these are left unprotected on the seabed, when they are cultural wealth that if accessible, it can become an active part of local communities thus creating benefits for the area.

The UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage has prioritized the in-situ preservation of underwater monuments [7] and encouraged the responsible non-intrusive access to the sites for observation or documentation reasons, when required and appropriate and under preconditions [8]. In situ preservation enhances public awareness on the value of Accessible UCH [9] and its protection [10]. When people are aware of their cultural heritage, they realize its value and develop an interest for its protection, while locals often build a bond with the sites as part of their identity and history [11].

In addition, there can be multiple socioeconomic benefits from the promotion of Accessible UCH [12] and a great social impact for local communities [13]. The engagement of local and regional stakeholders, including operators and competent public authorities, further supports the responsible promotion and sustainability of Accessible UCH sites.

The promotion of Accessible UCH sites provides broad accessibility of UCH to the citizens and can be an investment with multiple benefits for small coastal and island economies. What is needed is an integrated framework for the sustainable management and responsible accessibility to the sites that helps their protection. This paper presents a model for the establishment, sustainable management and promotion of Accessible UCH sites that has been developed in the frame of a series of bottom-up initiatives with a focus on its implementation in Greece.

1. A model for the sustainable management and promotion of Accessible UCH

The establishment of Accessible UCH sites in Greece is an effort in progress since the mid-1990s and has developed since in the frame of several initiatives with achieved first results, multiple prospects, and various challenges to address. The focus of this paper is the Northern Sporades area in Greece, where a series of bottom-up initiatives began in 2006 aiming at the development of diving tourism in Accessible underwater archaeological sites in the area. Currently, 15 years later, a cluster of 5 Accessible UCH sites are operating in Alonissos island forming the largest Underwater Archaeological Park in Greece within the largest Marine Protected Area in the Mediterranean, the National Marine Park of Alonissos and Northern Sporades [14] for the protection of the monk seal *Monachus monachus*.

The goal was the development in Northern Sporades of a high-quality thematic tourism product that highlights the attractions in the area, both on land and in sea, where several ancient shipwrecks of great archaeological value are located. In Alonissos stands out the impressive ancient shipwreck of the classical period at the Peristera islet that was discovered by the local late Dimitris Mavrikis and was excavated by the Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities under the direction of Elpida Hadjidaki. A partnership was formed with participation of local stakeholders from the islands of Alonissos and Skopelos and the support of competent organizations, which led to an awarded proposal "Ano Magniton Nisoi" [15] for the development of diving tourism in Skopelos and Alonissos in Accessible Underwater Archaeological Sites. The studies for the Operational Program for the Creation of Underwater Museums & Diving Parks in the Sporades Islands & Western Pagasitikos were then implemented during 2013-2014.

The efforts had a significant restart between 2016 and 2020 with the BLUEMED Interreg MED 2014-2020 Programme [16] project, a transnational partnership among countries in the Mediterranean aiming at the protection and promotion of underwater natural and cultural heritage in the Mediterranean. The project goals were to raise public awareness on UCH and enhance accessibility to UCH sites and sustainable tourism development in coastal regions and islands. Based on international good practices for the protection of UCH, a framework for the sustainable management and promotion of Accessible UCH sites was developed under the project and was pilot tested in 3 countries in the Mediterranean. Four Accessible UCH sites in Greece [17], all located in the Northern Sporades and the Western Pagasitikos Gulf in the region of Thessaly, were among the pilot sites of the project.

The shipwreck of Peristera [18] is located at the islet of Peristera in Alonissos island and lies at a depth of around 27 m. It is dated between 425 to 420 BC with a cargo of transport amphoras of the Mendean and the Peparethian type, both from famed Greek wine-production centers in antiquity, Mendi in Chalkidiki and *Peparethos* (modern Skopelos island), respectively. The wreck forms an impressive concentration of around 3000 amphoras that seems to maintain the shape of the merchant ship, indicating also that vessels with huge volume cargoes sailed in the Mediterranean already in the 5th century BC (fig. 1). The other three Greek pilot sites are located at the Western Pagasitikos Gulf, near the village of Amaliapolis. A shipwreck from the 11th–13th century AD at the islet of Kikinthos lies at a depth of 3 to 11 m [19] as a concentration of mainly pithos and amphoras sherds. At Cape Telegraphos there is a shipwreck of the Roman period at a depth of 17 to 27 m [20] with scattered amphoras sherds of three main types, while at a shallower depth of 10 to 20 m there are also the remains of a second shipwreck from the 12th–13th century AD. In Cape Akra Glaros [21] at Nies Bay, several shipwrecks of different periods have been discovered, among which a shipwreck of the Middle Byzantine period at a depth of 15 m, with big amphoras sherds and anchors of different eras, and a second shipwreck at about 20 m depth, with intact amphoras and scattered fragments of a great stone stock of a wooden anchor of the Archaic period (7th–6th century BC). The several shipwrecks of different time periods indicate the diachronic trade activity in the area.

Fig. 1 - ***The ancient shipwreck of the classical period in Peristera, Alonissos island, Greece (425-420 BC). (© Ministry of Culture and Sports, Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities, ph. M. Collina - University of Calabria, DIMEG).***

The other pilots were the Baiae Underwater Archaeological Park [22] and the Capo Rizzuto Marine Protected Area with the Cala Cicala shipwreck [23] in Italy and the Cavtat Underwater Archaeological Site in Croatia [24]. In Italy, the Cala Cicala shipwreck lies at a depth of about 5–7 m between the Bay of Scifo and Capo Colonna in the Marine Protected Area of Capo Rizzuto in Crotone. It is a shipwreck of the Roman imperial period with the remains of 36 marble artifacts of different shapes and sizes. Baiae, on the northwestern coast of the Bay of Pozzuoli in Naples, was an ancient, popular resort during the Roman times until the end of the 4th century AD, when it sank gradually and now lies underwater at a depth of 5 m. At the Underwater Archaeological Park of Baiae one can dive at the remains of luxurious villas and other architectural structures. In Croatia the two pilot sites are in the underwater archaeological zone of Cavtat on the east coast of the Adriatic, including the *Amfora site*, a shipwreck from the 4th century AD with a cargo of whole amphoras, and the *Dolias site*, a unique shipwreck with a cargo of whole or almost whole dolia (or pithoi) from the 1st century AD.

To enhance accessibility at UCH sites and include non-divers, BLUEMED worked on the digital documentation and the 3D reconstruction of the sites and developed a virtual diving system [25] that offers a dry dive experience and provides augmented and contextual information about the sites and the marine environment, in a fun and educational context. To host an exhibition of the sites, either on a virtual reality (VR) environment or through interactive touch screens, BLUEMED introduced the concept of Knowledge Awareness Centers (KACs) [26], a type of an information center that can host digital exhibitions, showcase replicas of underwater finds or the actual recovered artefacts and hold events to raise awareness among local communities and visitors. KACs can also support the operation of the Accessible UCH sites if located nearby, indicatively provide information about the operating hours of the site, while the VR dry dive system hosted the KACs can become a tourism attraction in the area. Four KACs were established under the BLUEMED project in total. There is a KAC hosted at the National Archaeological Museum of Capo Colonna, in Crotone, Italy and

Fig. 2 - ***The Knowledge Awareness Center in Alonissos, Greece.***

Fig. 3 - ***The Knowledge Awareness Center in Amaliapolis, Greece.***

another one in the Archaeological Museum of Konavle, in Croatia. In Greece, there are two KACs, one in Chora in Alonissos and another one in Amaliapolis, with more than five thousand visitors in total since their opening in 2020 (figs. 2-3). A web platform [27] was also developed to promote a network of Accessible UCH sites on an interactive map by providing information and multimedia material about the sites, diving parks, maritime museums and KACs, and offering the possibility for a dry dive at selected sites.

BLUEMED developed an integrated model with policy recommendations, development strategies, and a management framework for the sustainable operation of accessible underwater cultural and natural heritage sites and KACs. The model aims to support the competent authorities and managing bodies of Accessible UCH sites and marine protected areas or diving parks to issue policies and manage effectively and sustainably the sites with the goal to protect the sites and enhance coastal and island tourism development. The model focuses on operation sustainability in the long-term with monitoring of cultural, environmental and socioeconomic Key Performance Indicators, based on a validation methodology that assesses the operation of both sites and the KACs. In addition, a roadmap allows the uptake of the model which can be adaptive to the local context. It is a guideline with steps to follow and describes the technical, operational and policy requirements to fulfil, the barriers to overcome and possible risks and limitations to consider, such as funding

issues, legislation barriers, limited promotion, and lack of tourism infrastructure. The roadmap also considers the specifics of each site and its location and provides a guide with a checklist of the steps to follow for the protection, responsible promotion, and sustainable management of Accessible UCH sites.

With the goal being the consolidation of the idea for the protection of UCH, new technologies contribute significantly to raising public awareness on that goal. Other projects for the promotion of Accessible UCH have been implemented in the past years or are currently ongoing, all of which have included and promoted Accessible UCH sites in the Northern Sporades area. Indicatively, a thematic tourism product including Accessible UCH sites in Greece, Italy, Croatia and Montenegro was created under MeDryDive [28] an EU co-financed project under COSME Programme that has integrated AR and VR apps to create personalized dry dive experiences and the first serious game with a theme about UCH, with the goal to enrich the experience of tourists, both divers and non-divers, and stimulate their interest on UCH and diving. MAREBOX project [29] co-funded by Creative Europe Programme of the European Commission was a different approach that brought together the cultural, artistic, and creative sectors with technology and created an art exhibition also as a virtual walkthrough under the theme of the current challenges of the sea. Among the results was a dry diving AR application for the shipwreck of the classical period in Peristera in Alonissos. The i-blueCulture [30] is an ongoing project co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and Greek national funds through the Operational Program Competitiveness, Entrepreneurship and Innovation, under the call RESEARCH – CREATE – INNOVATE. i-blueCulture is developing a novel 3D navigation system in live underwater image for a virtual dry dive in pilot sites in Alonissos and Skopelos. The user of the i-blueCulture system will have an immersive dry diving experience while sailing on a boat over the site or from a distant location on land, for example while visiting a museum or a KAC. The system also offers the possibility for real time and efficient surveillance of the site for the authorities with a low cost and in safety conditions, as it captures the image of the underwater environment in detail and allows the user to move within the broadcasted underwater live image.

Given the advancements in technology that allows responsible accessibility of UCH, the focus needs to be the operational sustainability of Accessible UCH sites. Policy makers, managing authorities and stakeholders by acknowledging that Accessible UCH enhances blue growth in islands and coastal areas need to work together for the sustainable management of the sites, focusing on operational issues including monitoring and safeguarding, attractive content and ticketing policy, responsible promotion and secure funding.

2. Discussion and conclusions. The challenges and potentials

The outputs of actions carried out in recent years in Alonissos, Greece towards the sustainable operation of Accessible UCH sites have indicated aside the significant positive impact of the initiatives so far, also the challenges that need to be addressed.

A tangible result is that the Peristera Accessible UCH site in Greece since 2020 has recorded 260 dives every year and has secured funding until 2023. In addition, since 2022 it is permitted to dive to 4 other Accessible UCH sites in Alonissos with the escort of archaeologists of the Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities. These are ancient shipwrecks with cargo amphoras at an average depth of around 35 m, more specifically, the shipwreck in Cape Tzelios in Peristera islet from the Hellenistic period, the shipwreck in Skantzoura island dated at the end of the 4th century BC, a shipwreck from the mid-12th century AD at the location Aghios Petros in Kyra Panagia island, and a shipwreck of the archaic period in Fagrou islet. Therefore, the largest Accessible Underwater Archaeological Park in Greece with a cluster of 5 ancient shipwrecks is being created in Alonissos that is expected to place the area among destinations of cultural diving tourism worldwide.

In the case of Alonissos, there was a maturity of the local people about the benefits and the limitations of the development of a framework for the sustainable management of the marine environment due to the establishment of the Marine Park in the area some years before. The local and regional authorities have promoted the site in Peristera (for example there is an official website of the municipality about the Underwater Museum of Alonissos [31]) and supported the operation of the KACs by providing the necessary staff. However, despite the warm welcome of both the locals and the visitors in Alonissos testified by the increasing number of visitors in the KACs, the budget originally set for the promotion of the sites in the area has still not been absorbed and there has been little progress to the studies for new buildings to host the KACs in Steni Vala and Amaliapolis as originally planned.

Now that a cluster of 5 Accessible UCH sites has been created, there is the possibility for more dives and an extended visit in the area, and therefore the conditions are

mature for the development of a weekly based tourism product. Granted the budget is available, a promotional strategy can be developed for the promotion of the sites and further include the "CHRISTOPHOROS" modern wreck, an accessible and popular diving site in Skopelos that has now become a point of reference for the island in part due to the establishment of a KAC in Skopelos and the development of a dry dive app [32] for the site. Despite these individual results, there needs to be an integrated long-term plan for the promotion of the Accessible UCH sites to enhance cultural diving tourism. In the case of Alonissos it is estimated that ten more years are required for the goal of the island becoming a cultural diving tourism destination, considering the 5 first years for building the facilities at the Accessible UCH sites and the next five years to invest on the promotion of the sites and the tourism infrastructure.

The Accessible UCH sites in Western Pagasitikos Gulf are ideal for snorkeling and easily accessible from the mainland as the area is well connected to the national road network, an airport and the port of Volos. However, even though the KAC in Amaliapolis could operate for 12 months as it is located in a favorable location for visitors to reach from the mainland, especially to welcome school visits from all over the country, since the municipality has not taken the initiative and the KAC operates for only a limited period in the summer. Moreover, there has been slow progress in the development of necessary facilities for the operation of the sites, with major drawback the fact that there are no diving centers to support the operation of the sites and facilitate diving tourism development in the area. As a result, despite the 3 Accessible UCH sites and a KAC in Amaliapolis nearby, the limited tourism infrastructure and the lack of diving services have not favored sustainable tourism development.

Despite the great interest for the shipwreck of the classical period in Peristera, certain interventions would increase the attractiveness and the accessibility of the site. For instance, the task of installing proper buoys has still not been completed. Ticketing policy is also an issue as currently the dive in the Peristera Accessible UCH has a relatively high price of 50 euros for a single dive site when in other sites in the Mediterranean it is free or with a fee of 5 euros, like in the case of Baiae. The high-price strategy aims to cover for the high maintenance costs of the site, which include the underwater monitoring cameras and the underwater archaeologists who are responsible to operate the site and guide the dives. According to the operational framework, the dives are carried out with at least 3 guides who can be except for the staff of the archaeological service also professional scuba divers that have been specially trained and certified by the Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities for that purpose. The current model of maintaining underwater cameras and a group of 3 guides for each dive is not sustainable financially in the long term, when there is no longer secured funding after 2023 and the ticket is not attractive. Alternatively, an all-inclusive ticket for the other 4 Accessible UCH sites in Alonissos could be more attractive for visitors. Further, a different protection model should be adopted that does not require cameras in every site and the guides for the dives can be the certified by the Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities professional divers. Like the example in Croatia with the active role of local diving centers [33], this strategy could be more sustainable financially, as the managing authority would be relieved of a significant part of the expenses.

The promotion and valorization of UCH in Alonissos is an example of how the involvement of the local community has contributed to its protection. Indicatively, the photomosaics made in all the Accessible UCH sites in Alonissos since 2008 indicate that there have been no missing amphoras and confirms that raising awareness and engaging the locals is an effective protection strategy for UCH, as they safeguard the sites when they realize the sites are a part of their heritage and the benefits from the valorization of the sites for the community. The focus should therefore be on how the local and regional stakeholders could contribute to the sustainability of the sites in the context of an effective collaboration. In the case of Alonissos, there has been a three-part agreement signed among the Municipality, the Region of Thessaly and the Ministry of Culture that defines the roles of each contributor, who are responsible for the operation of the KAC, the funding and the management and protection of the sites, respectively. Most importantly, it is necessary that there is a solid and long-term policy framework, while the operational and management framework to consider key performance indicators of the Accessible UCH sites and the KACs, including the social and cultural impact and economic growth in the area.

With the goal being the protection, responsible promotion and sustainability of Accessible UCH sites and the enhancement of tourism in islands and coastal areas, the proposed model is replicable in areas with similar characteristics and applies in the case of a shipwreck with cargo amphoras, which is difficult in terms of monitoring. The proposed operational framework with the support of local diving centers and the engagement of local authorities has shown positive results so far, proven by the

increasingly rising interest in the shipwreck of the classical period in Peristera. Aiming at the sustainability of the Accessible UCH sites, issues like the ticketing policy and the high cost of maintenance should be reconsidered, while funding must be secured in advance for the promotion and the sustainable operation of both the sites and the KACs. The roadmap developed guides the stakeholders to uptake the proposed model for the establishment and sustainable management and promotion of Accessible UCH sites in areas with similar characteristics, even beyond the Mediterranean; the tools are now available.

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