



Frequently Asked Questions about Submerged Cultural Resources in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary



1. What is a cultural resource?

According to National Marine Sanctuary Program regulations, a cultural resource is one that has any type of historical, cultural, archaeological or paleontological significance and is greater than 50 years old. These can be shipwreck sites, structures, and objects that can be associated with earlier people, cultures, human activities or events.



2. What are some examples of cultural resources?

One example of a cultural resource is a prehistoric site. At a prehistoric site, you may find plant remains or animal bones, stone tools, items carved from wood or bone, or pieces of pottery, all of which are considered cultural resources. A historic site may contain wreckage from a shipwreck or could be a wharf or other submerged structure. Shipwrecks can include parts of the actual ship structure such as pieces of wooden or iron hull and frames, as well as associated items like masts, cannons, and ship's fittings. It is also common to find items associated with the crew or cargo, including ceramics, glassware and coins. Cultural resources can even include living cultures. For example, Native Hawaiian traditional fishing practices are being studied at the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary.

3. Why are cultural resources important?

We can learn much about how people lived from material culture or artifacts. Cultural resources help us learn about Native American culture before European contact, when there were no written records. Even more recent finds like shipwrecks add to our knowledge of Keys maritime history, ship architecture, and the everyday lives of sailors and coastal residents. Proper archaeological excavations can teach us about a culture's economy, customs and social organization.

4. What are some of NOAA's responsibilities regarding cultural resources?

The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has a responsibility to protect and manage

cultural resources discovered within a National Marine Sanctuary. The National Marine Sanctuaries Act mandates NOAA to abide by laws and regulations of the Federal Archaeological Program. These include developing resource management programs and overseeing federal activities that may affect cultural resources. NOAA issues permits necessary for the exploration or disturbance of a cultural resource and has a responsibility to inventory and evaluate cultural resources within sanctuaries, and nominate them to the National Register of Historic Places.

5. How does NOAA protect submerged cultural resources within National Marine Sanctuaries?

The National Marine Sanctuary Act makes it illegal to disturb a site or recover artifacts without a permit. NOAA encourages responsible institutions to conduct permitted research in the sanctuaries under certain conditions. All permits require that a qualified marine archaeologist oversee the project. Applications require a research plan and carefully considered methodology. An applicant must also provide plans for the conservation and curation of artifacts and submit a comprehensive professional report at the completion of the project.

6. Am I allowed to dive in areas of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary that contain cultural resources?

Most of the Sanctuary is open to diving and snorkeling, including the nine shipwreck sites featured on the Sanctuary's Shipwreck Trail. However, the "Research-only Areas" of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary are "no-entry" zones that are set aside for research purposes. Therefore, no diving or snorkeling is permitted within these zones. Research-only Areas are located at Tennessee Reef, Conch Reef, Looe Key patch reef and Eastern Sambo. The Tortugas South Ecological Reserve is also closed to diving and snorkeling. For more exact locations of closed areas or for information about the Shipwreck Trail, visit: <http://www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov/> or contact the Sanctuary.



Frequently Asked Questions about Submerged Cultural Resources in the FKNMS

7. What do I do if I find a cultural resource?

If you discover a cultural resource in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, please notify the Upper Keys Regional Manager at (305) 852-7717, ext. 35. Proper steps will then be taken to document the artifact and ensure that important archaeological and historical information is not lost. Artifacts must be left where they are found and not touched or disturbed in any way. You should list the items that were observed and describe the material, dimension, and type of artifact. It is also helpful to photograph objects at the site and to sketch a site map. Remember to include a latitude/longitude of the site's position.

8. Is everything I find while I am diving considered to be a cultural resource?

The Archaeological Resources Protection Act covers artifacts and sites that are more than 100 years old and of archaeological interest. The National Register of Historic Places recognizes sites more than 50 years old that meet certain criteria of significance.

If you are not sure, anything that does not look modern and looks man-made should be considered a cultural resource, until proven otherwise.

9. Why should I not disturb or take a cultural resource?

Submerged cultural resources represent our shared cultural heritage. Researchers gain a better understanding of the past when they are able to study artifacts in their original context. The relationship of one artifact to another and to the surrounding soil is important, and if artifacts are moved, the information value of the site is diminished. After proper investigation, researchers have an obligation to educate people about past cultures through museum exhibits, publications and other forms of interpretation. Disturbing a cultural resource often leads to deterioration. Special chemical and physical treatments are necessary for artifacts that are removed from the water. These procedures are best carried out by a professional conservator.

10. Is it ever necessary to disturb a cultural resource?

Under certain circumstances, the removal of artifacts

may be necessary. In such situations, there is a need for controlled and planned recovery in accordance with the permit process and federal laws. Some possible reasons for recovering artifacts include: protecting artifacts from harsh environmental conditions; conducting research that includes public education; making artifacts more available to the public; and improving the scientific understanding of the Sanctuary.

11. Is it possible for me to be involved with NOAA's study of cultural resources in the National Marine Sanctuaries?

One of the Sanctuary Program's goals is to involve the public in the study, protection and enjoyment of submerged cultural resources. If you would like to volunteer to assist the Sanctuary Program in protecting submerged cultural resources, please call the Upper Keys Regional Manager at (305) 852-7717, ext. 35.

12. What role does the State of Florida play in managing submerged cultural resources?

The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Division of Historical Resources of the Florida Department of State share responsibility for submerged cultural resources within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. All historic resources are managed in accordance with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act, the National Marine Sanctuaries Act, the Abandoned Shipwreck Act, and Florida state law in accordance with the Federal Archaeological Program. The Florida Division of Historical Resources retains title to abandoned shipwrecks on state-owned submerged lands within Sanctuary boundaries. However, NOAA and the State share co-trustee responsibilities for natural and historic resources within the state portions of the Sanctuary. A Programmatic Agreement established between NOAA, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the State of Florida details the management policies and procedures governing submerged cultural resources in the Sanctuary. Copies can be obtained by contacting the Upper Region Sanctuary Office at (305) 852-7717, ext. 35.

Note: The artifacts pictured above were recovered from Spanish shipwreck sites in the Florida Keys. These artifacts ("Ming" tea cup, jug, and bar shot, circa 1733) are housed at Florida's Bureau of Archaeological Research in Tallahassee. Photos taken by Florida Bureau of Archeological Research.

