

Concept Note

Round table

Museums as key custodians of underwater cultural heritage

*innovative approaches, good
practices and accessibility*

10 June | 4pm – 5h30pm (CET)

Online

Background

Ten years after its adoption, the **2015 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections** highlights more than ever the transformative role of museums in advancing social development, cultural understanding, and sustainable policies. In today's rapidly evolving world, museums have expanded their educational missions, engaging diverse audiences through curated exhibitions, interactive learning programs, and accessible digital resources. They serve as dynamic spaces for both formal and non-formal education, allowing individuals to explore culture and history.

The ongoing United Nations Ocean Decade and the third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice, France, (9 -13 June 2025) present a timely opportunity to strengthen awareness around the protection and valorization of underwater cultural heritage (UCH) and to underscore the role of museums in its preservation and promotion. Underwater cultural heritage holds extraordinary value as a scientific and historical resource, in complete symbiosis with the aquatic element, but remains unseen, buried beneath oceans, lakes, and rivers.

Making underwater cultural heritage visible, accompanied by meaningful, contextualized interpretation to the public is essential for a better understanding and enhanced preservation.

As custodians of memory, museums—particularly those focused on maritime and underwater heritage—are increasingly adopting participatory and inclusive management strategies. These include collaborations with maritime archaeologists, local population, fishermen, and industries that rely on aquatic ecosystems, as well as addressing broader challenges like climate change, mass tourism and the preservation of collective identities.

Museums are also called upon to align with sustainable development goals, balancing curatorial responsibilities with accessibility, stakeholder engagement, and ecological awareness. In this context, effective safeguarding practices emerge through synergies between communities, cultural institutions, regulatory frameworks, and environmental priorities.

International legal instruments such as the **2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage** and the **2015 Recommendation on Museums** provide critical guidance for policymakers. These instruments support innovative, long-term strategies that place museums at the forefront of protecting underwater heritage and promoting sustainable development worldwide.

Objectives

The overall objective of the proposed Round Table is to explore good practices in maritime and underwater cultural heritage-based museums and pioneering paradigms in valuing and promoting the importance of safeguarding underwater cultural heritage, in proximity with local communities, including in Africa.

The 2015 Recommendation on Museums and collections and the 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage are complementary instruments that together promote the preservation, accessibility, and educational use of cultural heritage. While the 2001 Convention provides the legal framework for safeguarding underwater heritage, the 2015 Recommendation emphasizes the role of museums as key actors in their interpretation, promotion, and sustainable management.

UNESCO is launching discussions with a view to providing **guidance to its Member States as regards the accessibility and contextualization of underwater cultural heritage at museums**. In this regard, the event will directly contribute to the development of draft “Guidelines to present Underwater Cultural Heritage to the public”, as a follow-up on the IOS Evaluation conducted of the 2001 Convention in 2019.

In particular, **the round table will:**

- Explore the role of Museums in safeguarding underwater cultural heritage by discussing how museums, particularly maritime and underwater heritage-focused institutions, contribute to the documentation, preservation, and promotion of underwater cultural heritage.
- Promote awareness within the Framework of the United Nations Ocean Decade, by
 - strengthening visibility and awareness-raising strategies about the need to protect underwater cultural heritage, in alignment with the goals of the UN Ocean Decade (2021–2030).
- Highlight the importance of participatory - and community engagement - based methodologies as well as policies of accessibility that promote and render effective and unrestricted access to culture.
- Discuss international examples of UNESCO’s Best Practices of Access under the 2001 Convention.
- Discuss the importance of context and contextualization for the study, safeguard and promotion of underwater cultural heritage, notably in relation with maritime natural heritage.
- Museums as drivers of sustainable development and reflect on how museums can contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly through inclusive education, community identity preservation, and climate-conscious practices.

Format and audience

The online event will be organised by UNESCO with the support of the non-profit association Culture for Causes Network.

With the duration of 1.30 hour, it will feature experts of diverse backgrounds to explore new forms of institutional engagements and partnerships to discuss best practices and results of pioneering approaches to museums' role in promoting underwater cultural heritage, including on the topic of accessibility of collections.

The event will be livestreamed online, in English language, across the several museums of the Network.

