

WRECK INSPECTION REPORT

**Maritime archaeological site inspection for proposed
aquaculture licence Gun Island, Houtman Abrolhos**

by

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Summary

The Department of Maritime Archaeology was invited to join Drew and Katrina Bessen of Southern Pearls Pty Ltd in a site inspection for the proposed Blacklip Pearl Oyster aquaculture lease west of Gun Island, inside Half Moon reef. Corioli Souter joined the team on board Southern Lady II from 15 to 18 January 2001. Andrew Beer, Fisheries Aquaculture Development Officer also joined the expedition to assess the suitability of the proposed area for the lease.

The proposed area is inshore of the *Zeewijk* (1727) wreck site and there was a possibility that associated artifacts may be located within the lease boundaries. Various concentrations of wreck material have been observed in previous surveys (Ingleman-Sundberg, 1976, 1977 and 1978) with a possibility of locating more in the future. Any material from the wreck in this area is automatically protected under the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*.

The inspection's aims were to survey the lease area and record any material within it. An evaluation of site conditions was also required to ascertain if the lease area could have further artifacts uncovered in the future. The potential for material washing in from the neighbouring wreck site in particular conditions was also considered.

Technical Data

Site Name *Zeewijk* (Inshore of wreck site) **Date lost** 1727

Date of Inspection: 15-18 January 2001 **OIC** Corioli Souter

Diving Personnel: Drew Besson
Andrew Beer
Bevan Sucking
Ty Suckling

Approximate Location 100ha 0.6km west of Gun Island

GPS.

(Datum Used.WGS84)

Wreck Site

Chart No: AUS 751

Lat: 28°52.75'S

Long: 113°49.10'E

Total Lease Area

Corner A

Lat: 28°53.026'S

Long: 113°50.436'E

Corner B

Lat: 28°53.026'S

Long: 113°51.086'E

Corner C

Lat: 28°53.576'S

Long: 113°51.086'E

Corner D

Lat: 28°53.576'S

Long: 113°50.436'E

Initial Farm Area

A

Lat: 28°53.155'S

Long: 113°50.686'E

B

Lat: 28°53.157'S

Long: 113°50.857'E

C

Lat: 28°53.270'S

Long: 113°50.687'E

D

Lat: 28°53.269'S

Long: 113°50.853'E

E

Lat: 28°53.045'S

Long: 113°50.684'E

F

Lat: 28°53.039'S

Long: 113°50.861'E

Site Photographs:

Video: MA 486 (Digital Underwater) Video shows bottom topography in initial farm site.

Site Conditions on inspection

Sea and Swell: 0.5m with seabreeze.

Surge: Nil

Visibility: 10m

Current: Nil

Sea-bed coverage: Predominately limestone bottom covered with seasonal algal growth., interspersed with some sand and coral patches.

Site Inspection

Towed diver searches using manta boards were undertaken the full length and breadth and diagonal lengths of the lease area with efforts concentrated on the initial farm area site (Refer GPS positions). Six buoys marked the boundaries of this latter area that is intended as the main site within the total proposed lease area for the first few years of the farm setup. Divers examined the seabed within this area in detail.

With the completion of the survey of the initial farm area, divers concentrated on the north west corner of the lease, an area considered most likely to contain material related to the *Zeewijk* wreck site as a result of prevailing sea, weather patterns and bottom topography.

Site Description

The seabed in the initial farm site almost totally consists of solid limestone with occasional sand patches. The site was also covered with extensive algal growth at the time of inspection. This algal covering may have obscured cultural material at the time of inspection, although the flat and solid bottom topography combined with prevailing south westerly sea conditions would more likely result in material being washed further inshore.

Coral patches occur intermittently though out the total lease area, and these areas are noted to be likely points within the lease where cultural material may collect after being uncovered or washed in from the main site due to storm surge. No material was noted in these areas during this inspection.

The site is c.600m from the most westerly point of Gun Island. Material has been discovered in the shallows west of Gun Island, inshore from the lease site and there is a distinct possibility that material may occur in this region in the future.

The lease site, at a maximum depth of c. 4 metres is not in a tidal reef flat area and the tidal amplitude is negligible (c. 0.5m).

Site History

The ship *Zeewijk* was constructed for the Zeeland Chamber of the Dutch East India Company in 1725. The *Zeewijk* was a ship of 145 feet (47.5m) in length and carrying a capacity of 140 lasten (278 tonnes). The vessel, commanded by Jan Steyns and manned by a crew of 212 men, departed Vlissingen on 7 November 1726, bound for Batavia (Jakarta) with a rich cargo including 315,856 guilders carried in ten chests. The *Zeewijk* safely reached the Cape of Good Hope on March 1727 and departed for the voyage across the Indian Ocean on 21 April.

At 7pm on 9 June she unexpectedly struck the reef skirting the western side of the Pelsaert Group of the Houtman Abrolhos Islands. The sailor on lookout had sighted the breaking surf fully half an hour previously, but thought it to be a reflection of the moon on the sea. Following the wrecking the crew turned their wrath on the skipper, accusing him of running too close to the coast against the protests of the steersman and contrary to the strict orders of the Company. The vessel did not immediately break up, but due to the heavy swell washing over the ship it was more than a week before the longboat could be launched. A camp was then established on a nearby Island, later to be named Gun Island, and the crew began salvaging articles from the wreck. Soon afterwards the longboat was put in order and 11 of the best seamen under the command of the 1st officer, Peter Langeweg, set sail for Batavia to obtain help, but they were never heard of again. A small sailing vessel named *Sloepie* was constructed on the Island out of the wreckage salvaged from the *Zeewijk*, and late March 1728, the remaining survivors left for Batavia. Eighty two men arrived at Sunda Strait in this vessel on 21 April. The skipper, Jan Steyns, was prosecuted for his carelessness in sailing too close to the Southland, and for endeavouring to falsify the journals to hide his mistake.

Site Identification

Relics from the survivor's camp were found in 1840 by the surveyor, John Stokes, of the *Beagle*. A breech loading 4 pounder brass swivel cannon found by Stokes on Gun Island was taken back to Britain. In the 1890's when guano was being mined on Gun and Pelsaert Islands by Messrs Broadhurst, MacNeil and Company, a collection of bottles, cooking pots and other objects were assembled, and most of this material is now housed in the Western Australian Maritime Museum. In 1952 during a visit to Geraldton, Lieutenant Commander M.R. Bromell of the Royal Australian Navy, learned that a cray fisherman had discovered a number of cannon on the reef skirting the west side of the Pelsaert Group, and during a subsequent visit as commander of HMAS *Mildura* he located the cannon on the leeward side of the reef. He found about six guns, three cylindrical pieces of iron and two bundles of what appeared to be iron bars. On a later expedition crew member from the *Mildura* and *Fremantle* were successful in raising three of the cannon. During the 1960's newspaper sponsored expeditions further examined the material on Gun Island and the leeward side of the reef and in 1968, Hugh Edwards led Western Australian Museum staff over the reef to find cannons and anchors on the seaward side comprising the main wreck site. Maritime Archaeologists from the Museum paid a brief visit to Gun Island in 1974 to assess the archaeological potential of the island and the wreck site and extensive surveys have been carried out in 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979, financed by the Australian Research Grants Committee. An inspection of the inside reef, and examination of the Zeewijk land sites was carried out in 1992. GPS positions for the wreck site and associated land sites were also obtained.

Recommendations

Although this inspection did not reveal any cultural material, the proposed lease site is in an area where prevailing sea conditions may wash or uncover material related to the either the *Zeewijk* wreck or survivor camp site. The proponents need to be fully aware of their obligations and responsibilities to both sites under the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* in the event that material is observed in the lease area and/or it's surrounds. The proponents have not indicated they will be conducting any shore-based activities and their presence should not further impact Gun Island land sites. Similarly, with the lease area being c.600m from Gun Island, the proponents' presence should not effect the potential for further material to be found inshore.

The area surrounding the lease, especially that which contains coral reef is already utilised by cray fisherman with minimal recorded disturbance to the wreck site and associated artifact assemblage. The proposed lease has the potential to work as a form of 'watch keeping' on-site as storm swells and SW sea conditions may in the future wash or uncover material in the lease and surrounding areas. It will also be one of the few aquaculture sites in the area regularly attended throughout the year.

It is recommended that the aquaculture farm is set up on the flat limestone seabed only, avoiding coral patches where cultural material may collect. The impact on the seafloor is understood to be minimal, but the positioning of the panels on the seabed should be carefully considered as they may act as a catchment device for cultural material moved from the wreck site into the lease area by strong current and surge action.

The possibility of material from the land camp being washed in with SE weather and sea conditions must be also considered.

It should be made a requirement before granting the lease that the proponents are aware of their legal obligations under the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* and are willing to enter into a reporting agreement with the Museum and Fisheries in the event of cultural material relating to the *Zeewijk* being found on the lease or in surrounding areas.

References

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- Maritime Archaeology Departmental Files: MA 455/71 Zeewijk
MA 56/72 Abrolhos Colonial Wrecks

Appendix-Inside Reef Recorded Artefact Scatter (Ingelman-Sunderberg 1978)

ZEEWIJK WRECKSITE 1978

