Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
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Resolution 1869 (2012)[1]
Final version

The environmental impact of sunken shipwrecks

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Shipwrecks, ocean acidification and the dumping of waste into oceans are among the biggest sources of marine pollution. Some 75% of sunken wrecks date back to the Second World War; their metal structures are ageing and their metal plates are deteriorating, thus threatening to release their contents into the ocean due to the effects of corrosion.

2. The North Atlantic Ocean contains 25% of the potentially polluting wrecks in the world. These wrecks are estimated to contain nearly 38% of the total volume of oil trapped in sunken vessels. The Mediterranean has 4% of the world's sunken vessels and around 5% of the estimated oil volume. These numbers are high, considering its size and the fragile marine environment of landlocked seas.

3. Oil is not the only threat to marine biodiversity. The warships used in the Second World War also carried munitions which, over the years, have become corroded to the point where they are liable to start leaking significant quantities of toxic substances. Some of these toxic substances, such as mercury, are not biodegradable and can cause chemical contamination of the food chain.

4. Referring to the research carried out by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Italy, and the non-governmental organisation, Legambiente, and to the report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean on "Dumping of toxic and radioactive waste and human trafficking in the Mediterranean", the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe expresses a strong concern over the illegal disposal of toxic and radioactive waste transported in old vessels that have been deliberately sunk in the Mediterranean.

5. The Assembly therefore underlines that, without maps charting these risks, no accurate assessment of the threat can be made. An inventory of potentially polluting wrecks was compiled by Environmental Research Consulting (ERC) in 2004. This International Marine Shipwreck Database has identified some 8 569 potentially polluting wrecks around the world, including 1 583 tank vessels. However, accurate information and data on deep-sea wrecks below 600 metres are scarce.

6. The Assembly considers that decisions to salvage oil and other dangerous substances from a sunken wreck must be based on sound risk assessment and a thorough cost–benefit analysis since any salvage effort is usually expensive, time consuming and risky.

7. The need for a common policy on the treatment and removal of wrecks has long been a topic of discussion at the International Maritime Organization. The Nairobi International Convention on the Removal of Wrecks (Nairobi Convention), opened for signature in 2007, therefore provides a harmonised legal framework for dealing with the issue of wrecks. The convention provides a set of rules aimed at ensuring the prompt removal of any wrecks that may pose an impediment to navigation or a threat to the environment and that are located in States parties' exclusive economic zones, environmental protection zones or on their continental shelf.

8. The Assembly welcomes the inclusion in the Nairobi Convention of a financial security regime which is intended to ensure that the owners of sunken vessels are primarily liable and financially responsible for marking and removing wrecks that pose a threat to the environment.

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1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 9 March 2012 (see Doc. 12872, report of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Ms Papadimitriou).

9. However, the Assembly strongly regrets that only four countries have so far signed the Nairobi Convention – that is Estonia, France, Italy and the Netherlands – precluding its entry into force for the moment.

10. In the light of the above considerations, the Parliamentary Assembly recommends that the member States of the Council of Europe:

10.1. sign and ratify the Nairobi International Convention on the Removal of Wrecks;

10.2. create a European database on wrecks, their location, cargo and pollution potential, in co-ordination with national maritime pollution bodies or within the framework of the regional sea conventions: the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR Convention), 1992, entered into force on 25 March 1998; the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean (Barcelona Convention), 1976, amended in 1995; and the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention), 1974, revised in 1992;

10.3. carry out systematic assessments of wrecks to identify any that pose a threat to the environment and keep this information up to date;

10.4. support research in order to improve:

10.4.1. the ability to predict rates of corrosion and degradation of sunken wrecks for different conditions (water temperature, currents, etc.);

10.4.2. knowledge of the physical properties of oil and toxic and radioactive substances in deep water, cold water and high-pressure seawater environments;

10.4.3. the technology of remotely operated underwater vehicles (ROVs), with a view to reducing the cost of identifying and locating wrecks, as well as the cost of removing oil or neutralising toxic or nuclear waste, and/or wreck removal;

10.5. consider setting up a European fund for old shipwrecks whose owners are either unknown, not available or are insolvent, to meet the cost of investigating and treating shipwrecks that pose a threat to the environment.