

CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE TIME OF COVID: THE CASE OF HMAS *PERTH* (I)

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this abstract best fits within Session 4, ‘Underwater Cultural Heritage of World War II in the Asia-Pacific Region: Discoveries, Opportunities & Challenges’ because of the latter’s focus on World War II heritage in the Asia-Pacific. The case study under consideration in this paper is that of HMAS *Perth* (I), an Australian warship sunk in Indonesian waters in 1942. The focus of this paper is Australia’s maritime capacity building initiative for the wreck of *Perth* (I), and the challenges and opportunities of advancing this project in the time of COVID-19. While some projects lent themselves to being conducted online, many others were forced to re-evaluate their feasibility entirely. This paper considers the changes wrought by COVID-19 on conventional heritage capacity building and management models, and the extent to which these models still apply. As it proposes, the limitations posed by the pandemic on capacity building projects created space for more inclusive and enduring knowledge building approaches, which elevated local stakeholders and, arguably, contributed to more sustainable outcomes in the long-term. At the same time, however, broader questions remain about the uses of digital heritage in a connected world.

* A detailed publication on this topic is available. [Pearson](#), Natali. “Too Little, Too Late? Redefining the Legacy of HMAS *Perth* (I), an Australian Warship Sunk in Indonesian Waters.” *Historical Archaeology* (2023).

KEYWORDS

World War II, naval shipwrecks, capacity building, heritage post-COVID

INTRODUCTION

International capacity building projects were seriously affected by the combination of travel restrictions, reduced budgets, and health considerations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. While some projects lent themselves to being conducted online, many others were forced to re-evaluate their feasibility entirely. For Australia and Indonesia, the limitations imposed by COVID-19 prompted a re-evaluation of what constitutes capacity building, and the extent to which maritime heritage collaboration and cooperation can be advanced in the absence of face-to-face engagement.

Australia and Indonesia share one of the longest maritime boundaries in the world and have expressed their commitment to working together to build and strengthen cooperation in the area of maritime cultural heritage. This commitment is articulated in the Plan of Action for the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2020–2024), which places a priority on intensified maritime cooperation and posits cooperation as critical to both country’s shared strategic interests (Australian Government, 2018).

In recent years, bilateral maritime heritage cooperation has centred around HMAS *Perth* (I), an Australian warship that sunk in Indonesian territorial waters. As the final resting place for hundreds of sailors, *Perth* represents both a complex and sensitive example of the challenges of protecting and preserving shared maritime heritage. In many ways, COVID exacerbated these challenges. At the same time, however, and as this paper argues, the limitations imposed by COVID have presented unexpected opportunities to imagine a more sustainable model for future maritime engagement between the two countries.

CASE STUDY: HMAS *PERTH* (I)

HMAS *Perth* (I) was a modified Leander class cruiser that began life as HMS *Amphion* before being purchased by the Royal Australian Navy, prior to the outbreak of WWII. *Perth* and her crew saw action all over the world, including in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. In 1942, *Perth* joined American, British, and Dutch forces to guard Java from Japanese occupation in the Battle of the Java Sea (27–28 February 1942). The Allies were decisively defeated, and *Perth*, together with USS *Houston*, was fortunate to escape (Perryman, 2017).

The two vessels fled west, arriving in Tanjung Priok (Jakarta) on 28 February to re-fuel and re-load. Almost immediately, they received orders to sail through the Sunda Strait and towards Cilacap on the southern coast of Java. Although they had been told the coast was clear, *Perth* and *Houston* encountered the Japanese Western Invasion Convoy in waters near Banten Bay, just west of Jakarta. The intense battle that ensued has come to be known as the Battle of the Sunda Strait (28 February–1 March 1942). Both *Perth* and *Houston* were destroyed by Japanese torpedoes and gun fire, with *Perth* sinking just after midnight and *Houston* shortly thereafter. Japan also suffered losses. HMAS *Perth* (I) had 681 men aboard, including naval personnel, air force personnel, and civilian staff. Of these, 353 died when *Perth* went down. Of the 1061 aboard USS *Houston*, 693 lives were lost. Most of the survivors were taken as prisoners of war and endured years of suffering on the Thai-Burma railway.

HMAS *Perth* (I) sank, largely intact, on her port side in Banten Bay. The wreck lay undisturbed until 1967 when it was rediscovered by Australian diver David Burchell. His intention was to recover touchstone objects from the vessel before it was ravaged by what he called ‘diving pirates,’ who, he feared, were salvaging non-ferrous metal from the many sunken warships scattered across the region (Burchell 1971, 26). After twenty-five years in the warm waters of Banten Bay, both *Perth* and nearby *Houston* had become thriving marine ecosystems, alive with colour. Then as now, local fishermen have relied on these wrecks for their livelihoods and, due to the birds they attracted, as navigational aids.

Burchell’s efforts to find and recover objects from HMAS *Perth* (I) heralded the first of many human interactions with the wreck. Many of these interactions were motivated by a desire to pay respect to *Perth* and her crew. Some visitors placed floral wreaths into the water above the site, while others descended below the waves to the wreck itself. These divers, some of whom visited the site on a semi-regular basis, were the first to sound the alarm in 2013 that *Perth* was being salvaged on an industrial scale due to the re-sale value of its scrap metal (Besser, Oakes, & Hermant 2013). The salvaging of *Perth* for scrap metal has destroyed marine habitats, deprived local communities of sustainable livelihoods from tourism and fishing, and desecrated the final resting place of Australian war dead. Besides the concern over human remains, the presence of unexploded ordnance and fuel oils add a further complication.

Despite the imminent threat of destruction by looting, bilateral collaboration to protect and preserve *Perth* was—for reasons outlined elsewhere in the literature (Pearson 2023)—slow. In May 2017, the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM) and the National Centre for Archaeological Research (*Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional*, or Arkenas) conducted a technical survey of the site, which revealed that just 40 per cent of the wreck remained in situ (Hosty, Hunter, & Adhityatama 2017). The 2017 survey, together with petitioning by the Banten provincial government, played a critical role in supporting efforts to advocate for the establishment of a protected zone around the wreck.

RESOURCES

For Australia and Indonesia, the salvage of *Perth* placed maritime heritage cooperation in the spotlight, prompting greater bilateral engagement and collaboration to manage the wreck for the

future. In February 2018, then-Minister for Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti, issued a Ministerial Decree designating HMAS *Perth* (I) and surrounding waters as Indonesia's first Maritime Conservation Zone (*Kawasan Konservasi Maritim*) (Republic of Indonesia 2018). The Maritime Conservation Zone establishes a core zone around the wreck, surrounded by a zone of limited utilisation. The Decree provides a legal basis for site protection, and, in accordance with Indonesian law, was introduced at the national level but must be implemented at the provincial level.

Since the establishment of the Maritime Conservation Zone around *Perth* in 2018, key stakeholders on both sides have worked hard to develop and refine a comprehensive management plan for the site that incorporates the technical requirements of wreck conservation with the historical, administrative, and economic considerations of managing a tourism site of *Perth's* significance. Some of these efforts have taken place under a project funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Maritime Capacity Building Initiative (MCBI) and managed by the ANMM with support from the Australian Embassy in Jakarta and the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre at the University of Sydney. The MCBI, as initially conceived, was aimed at promoting greater awareness of the challenges and opportunities of managing HMAS *Perth* (I). In particular, it recognised the need to balance preservation interests with economic benefits for local communities.

One of the first activities conducted under the auspices of the MCBI *Perth* project was a follow-up survey of the wreck by ANMM and Arkenas in May 2019 (Hosty, Hunter, Adhityatama, & Malliaros 2020). Results suggested that the wreck had been damaged further by a tsunami in Banten Bay in late 2018. Community consultations and capacity building were also considered to be essential components of the MCBI in its original incarnation, due to the value of *Perth* not only as a grave site and a historic site, but also as a source of tourism opportunities and sustenance for the local fishing economy in Banten Bay. These consultations, involving Australian and Indonesian stakeholders, were due to take place in Banten in 2020, and were intended to contribute towards the development of an overall management plan for the wreck.

FRAMEWORK

Plans to undertake community consultations and capacity building were, however, temporarily, and then permanently, disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges posed by COVID had a severe impact on the project, with travel (both international and domestic), budgets, timelines, and expectations all affected. In the absence of face-to-face activities, were the capacity building aspects of the project still feasible?

Initially, consideration was given to engaging local enumerators to conduct community consultations, but it was agreed that this would pose an unacceptable health risk to the enumerators themselves. Instead, adapting the project required the development of methodological alternatives. This included engaging more directly with key Indonesian collaborators to facilitate access within and beyond the national level of government. In some respects, this approach serves the capacity building objectives better, in that it allowed for deep and extended engagement with specific individuals. At the same time, however, this reliance on certain stakeholders placed a significant imposition on their time and commitments. This was a delicate balance and one that had to be negotiated with care.

Another consequence was a greater reliance on existing networks. This has served as a valuable reminder of the importance of investing in relationships prior to any capacity building project. Strong relationships don't come about because of capacity building projects; successful capacity building projects are the result of such relationships.

RESULTS

Due to the pandemic, and in lieu of face-to-face activities, the MCBI pivoted to support a range of other events and programs. This was a complete reframing of what constitutes capacity building in a travel- and budget-constrained environment, requiring a reconsideration of the purpose of such

activities within the context of the MCBI project. The activities conducted as part of this pivot were led by the author in her capacity as project consultant to the ANMM. To guide the re-design, the project objectives—to balance *Perth*'s preservation requirements with its tourism potential—were front of mind.

The first pivot activity was the Historic Shipwrecks Workshop Series, which ran online across five modules in November 2020. The Series was designed to promote understanding among Indonesian government stakeholders, academics, and diving practitioners about the significance of HMAS *Perth* (I) and the necessity of working together to develop a plan to protect and preserve the wreck. It attracted key representatives from the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Education and Culture; the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs; the Indonesian Navy; Indonesian Universities; and representatives from local diving associations. Australian, Indonesian, and international experts presented on themes relating to maritime heritage in Indonesia, sustainable management of WWII wrecks, and public education and engagement.

The Historic Shipwrecks Workshop Series helped identify areas for further collaboration. Subsequently, representatives from the University of Sydney and the ANMM met with representatives from the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (national level) and the Marine Affairs and Fisheries Service in Banten (provincial level) to review and refine the draft management and zoning plan (*Rencana Pengelolaan dan Zonasi*) for HMAS *Perth* (I).

To ensure access to knowledge for ongoing capacity building, Australia also supported the creation of digital content that can be accessed online. This includes a limited podcast series called *Perth's Stories* (https://soundcloud.com/hmasperthi_asharedhistory). Produced and hosted by Australian and Indonesian partners at the University of Sydney and the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, the podcast features survivors, descendants, historians, advocates, officials, scholars, students, archaeologists and Banten Bay locals. The podcast series is readily accessible via major streaming platforms including Spotify and Soundcloud.

The project team also developed a bilingual digital museum via an online portal, with the intention that it would be made publicly available. The portal seeks to do justice to HMAS *Perth* (I) and its communities by broadening the scope of our understanding of underwater cultural heritage management beyond a conflict-centred approach to one that instead creates space for multiple viewpoints, including not only survivors and descendants but also those who have lived with the wreck in their waters for close to eighty years. It provides an entry point for members of the public interested in learning more about both HMAS *Perth* (I) and Banten province, and features themes including 'The Battle of the Sunda Strait,' 'The Ship's Bells,' 'Waters of Banten Bay,' 'View from the Shore,' 'Sites of Pilgrimage,' 'The Pepper Sultans of Banten,' and 'Preserving a Wreck.' A key feature of the website is an option for members of the public to submit their own stories and photos of *Perth*. The portal also provides links to *Perth* and Banten-related resources and websites.

Many of these activities and achievements have resulted from a project-based approach to maritime heritage collaboration between Australia and Indonesia. However, Australia has also taken steps to establish a more strategic and sustainable model of maritime heritage engagement. It has done so by embedding bilateral collaboration within a revitalised whole-of-government approach, building on previous ad hoc arrangements and ensuring ongoing future collaboration between Australia and Indonesia on maritime archaeology research and underwater cultural heritage management.

CONCLUSION

As project managers, researchers, and educators reconsider what bilateral engagement looks like in a post-pandemic world, this project also offers an opportunity to reassess what heritage will look like.

First, COVID has forced us to face the problems of extractive research. We now rely on local partnerships more than ever and must recognise the shared responsibility of these research partnerships. This prompts the question of why we haven't been doing this all along, and how we can embed this as part of collaborative research practices in the future.

Second, given the healthcare and economic crises across the world, it is increasingly important to be aware of why we are choosing to give time and resources to heritage. We need to not only have a keen sense of why heritage matters at a time when there are so many competing priorities, but to be able to communicate the value of heritage meaningfully and effectively. As the dismantling of confederate and other pro-slavery statues in the United States in 2020 demonstrated, heritage is a flashpoint for the biggest issues of our times. It is where these debates—about identity, inequality, privilege, opportunity, modernity, colonialism, national ambition—come together, where the ideas and legacies of the past intersect with the present and create both friction and opportunity.

Finally, COVID has accelerated the push toward digitisation and access for all. With museums closed and travel banned, the need to digitise the past and make it accessible seemed to become more pressing. At the same time, however, the embrace of digitisation raises many important questions that we are yet to fully reckon with, such as the value we ascribe to authenticity (Lixinski 2022), and the potential for open access data to be exploited for purposes other than those intended.

Although many decades have passed, the sinking of warships and the catastrophic loss of life that accompanied their destruction continues to reverberate today as nations grapple with the complexities arising from the presence of naval shipwrecks in foreign territorial waters. Cooperation and collaboration are essential if this maritime heritage is to be managed for the future. HMAS *Perth* (I) is a significant shipwreck for both Australia and Indonesia, and there is strong interest from both sides in working together to ensure that we can do justice to its communities and continue to tell its stories for the future. COVID forced us to think more creatively and more expansively about heritage and about bilateral cooperation. Even as we continue to prioritise the protection and preservation of sites such as HMAS *Perth* (I), we must also be cognisant of the broader questions about how heritage is being used, and the opportunities, for better and for worse, it presents.

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