Underwater projects range from the exploration of 19th-century shipwrecks below the ice of Canada's Arctic Ocean to surveys of artificial islands in Polynesian Tonga, and from inundated springs in Florida containing some of the oldest physical remains of humans in the New World to Bronze Age lake dwellings in the Swiss Alps. Because most of the earth's surface is covered in water, and the underwater world until recently has been largely inaccessible, the underwater archaeological repository is vast.

Some current research includes La Salle's ship La Belle (1686) in Texas; a flooded cave in the Dominican Republic containing pre-Columbian artifacts; the Emanuel Point shipwreck (1564) in Florida; the remains of prehistoric dwellings in Scottish lochs; the Pandora (1791) in Australia; the British warship Mary Rose (1545) in Portsmouth, England; the Swedish warship Kronan (1676) in the Baltic Sea; and a 14th-century B.C. shipwreck in Turkey.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL Conservation

Underwater archaeology does not always involve excavation, but when material is removed for detailed study, laboratory facilities to preserve the artifacts are essential. The miraculously well-preserved condition of objects recovered from underwater sites is more apparent than real.

During lengthy immersion, artifacts react chemically with the water and sediments surrounding them. Sudden removal from their watery environment and exposure to air can set off a chain of chemical and physical reactions in the objects which could lead to their destruction.

Conservators are specialists who work with archaeologists to preserve artifacts for study and display. The conservation of objects takes much longer than their actual excavation, and the long-term care of a collection of excavated objects is expensive and time-consuming. Unless proper facilities and resources are available, it is often best to leave objects in their underwater environment. Conservators also work with archaeologists and site managers to monitor the condition of sites and artifacts left in place to preserve them for future generations.

PRESEVING A Threatened Resource

Through archaeological investigation, a window to the unknown past is opened, allowing a view of life as our ancestors lived it. Preservation of our archaeological resources is vital to keeping this window open. Inevitably, a few archaeological sites are lost each year as the result of accidents and natural processes, but the pillaging of sites for the recreation or commercial profit of a few individuals is far more destructive. Whether it be relics from a Civil War battlefield or gold or silver from a shipwreck, the clandestine “mining” of sites results in an irreparable loss to the collective heritage of present and future generations.

Simply put, archaeological investigations are the best, most efficient use of a nonrenewable resource — a nation’s cultural heritage. A site can be destroyed and its contents dispersed in a moment from salvage, or it may be preserved and studied by scientists and enjoyed by the public in perpetuity. All people, not just a select few, benefit from our shared heritage. The study and enjoyment of archaeological resources for science, tourism, recreation, and education not only preserves sites but benefits the economy over a long period of time.

HOW TO Get Involved

Underwater archaeologists are typically employed by government agencies, museums, universities, and private consulting firms. As an exciting career for talented, motivated individuals with a great love for studying and preserving the past, outdoor activity, and travel, underwater archaeology requires individuals with technical abilities such as scientific writing, drafting, conservation, photograpy, electronics, remote-sensing, diving, vessel operations, and chemistry. Opportunities for full-time career employment may be limited, but participation in professional and avocational organizations offers additional occasions for selective involvement. Conferences and meetings, such as the annual SHA Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology, provide professional and avocational archaeologists, and stu-