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ISLE ROYALE'S SUBMERGED RESOURCE

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To many people the mention of Isle Royale suggests the rugged north woods, a wilderness resource to be seen with the aid of tents and backpacks. But for an increasing number of people the submerged cultural resource of this national park is equally attractive. Divers come from throughout the nation to these cold, deep Lake Superior waters that shelter one of the country's most significant collections of shipwrecks.

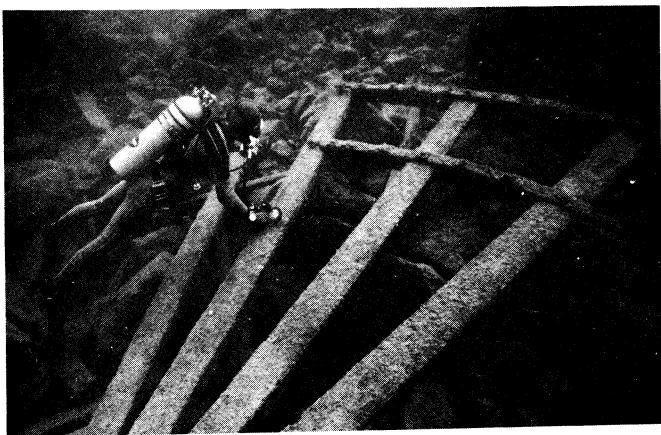
Isle Royale in Michigan has been a national park for half a century, but it has been for little more than a decade that the popularity of scuba diving justified the concern of park managers. While the clear lake waters were well known on the surface, the cultural treasures beneath were relatively unknown except to a hearty clan of salvors and diving enthusiasts who largely kept this information to themselves.



Three divers of the NPS Submerged Cultural Resources Unit carefully review procedures before descending underwater to study one of Isle Royale's many submerged sites. NPS/Submerged Cultural Resources Unit Photo.

It was former Superintendent Jack Morehead and his Chief Park Ranger Stuart Croll, among others, who worked hard to change all that. Being divers themselves, they could visit submerged sites—much as former managers had visited the old copper explorations in the Island's backcountry wilderness. They recognized that modern technology was enabling increasing numbers of divers to enter frigid deep waters that only the brave or foolhardy would have ventured into previously. They also recognized that the resources in the water could be just as interesting and significant to park visitors as those land resources that qualified the Island as a national park.

The Submerged Cultural Resources Unit of the National Park Service became involved in the summer of 1980. The Submerged Cultural Resources Unit (SCRU) team, using their underwater archeology skills to explore, measure, photograph, decipher, and draw, has helped the park come to terms with its underwater resource. The SCRU has at its command all the basic equipment needed for cold, deep dives in waters whose temperatures hover near the freezing point year round. In addition, the Unit has access to some of the most sophisticated equipment in the field, enabling team members to locate as well as make a permanent television record of what they see below.



In frigid waters where temperatures hover near freezing even in mid-summer, an NPS diver measures the paddlewheel of the Cumberland, a wooden passenger vessel wrecked a century ago in the waters of Isle Royale. NPS/Submerged Cultural Resources Unit Photo.

Archeologist Dan Lenihan, chief of the Submerged Cultural Resources Unit team, has worked on both land and water sites throughout his NPS career. He knows that the value of the work his team is doing goes beyond Isle Royale and extends to park areas throughout the National Park System.

"To help put things in perspective," he writes, "consider that even without any formal inventory of sites we can recognize underwater archeological needs in at least 40 areas of the National Park System including marine, Great Lakes, riverine, karst, and reservoir environments. Of those, at least 20 have significant shipwreck populations. Between wrecks and components of land-based activity areas, historic and prehistoric, our submerged sites number well into the thousands."

Because submerged cultural resources are a nationwide problem as well as a national opportunity, Isle Royale National Park and the SCRU team hosted a major training course at Isle Royale in 1982. It attracted participants from throughout the country, a diverse batch of two dozen individuals who shared a concern for

submerged resources despite their different backgrounds. Half were active scuba divers. Four were from nearby parks on Lake Superior. Two came from Canada. Two were from California. One represented the Michigan State Museum and another the State Salvage Commission. Two were from the Army Corps of Engineers. Several came from regional office staffs.

The training course was a combination of class work as well as practical field experience. When not discussing the basic issues of submerged sites, research and management, the group had a chance to practice such basics as how to twist knobs, point a camera, and measure underwater. Orientation dives were made to familiarize both divers and non-divers with scuba gear, signals, environments, lights, and silt control. Non-divers even learned the basic elements of tending divers in the water.

Isle Royale National Park has 10 major shipwrecks that range in scale from the CUMBERLAND, a 204-foot long, wooden sidewheeler that sank in 1877, to the 525-foot long steel ore freighter EMPORER, which went down in 1947. Another, the ALGOMA, was one of the most modern steam and sail passenger liners of its day when it smashed onto the rugged Isle Royale shore in 1885 killing 45 people aboard and becoming infamous as one of Lake Superior's greatest disasters. Some of the wrecks are intact, others are in fragments; all attract an increasing amount of interest and visitation.

But shipwrecks were not the only concern of participants at the course, for Isle Royale has a wealth of other submerged cultural resources. These include a dozen small shipwrecks and numerous land-based submerged sites such as 41 commercial fisheries, several fur trade posts, one dozen copper exploration sites, eight old resorts, four lighthouses, three Civilian Conservation Corps camps, and the sites of numerous vacation homes.

While actively involved with shipwrecks and shallow water sites at Isle Royale, Dan Lenihan's focus and direction is clearly on the national scene. He is a man with a mission. He cautioned participants that there is more well-financed outside pressure on some of these (national) sites from commercial treasure hunting, pot hunting, and sport diving interests than there is on any other cultural properties in the system.

The Isle Royale "wilderness" may continue to be the rugged north woods environment for backpacking visitors. But for the Submerged Cultural Resources Unit team, course participants, and those who come to dive the Island's superb assortment of shipwrecks, the "wilderness" is out there, 10 fathoms down in Lake Superior's frigid, clear waters.

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