



# How We Explore Maritime Heritage Sites

It takes many different skills to reveal and understand maritime heritage sites. Maritime archaeology is an interdisciplinary field, requiring the expertise of historians, biologists, conservation scientists, engineers, data specialists, technical divers, and many others. Whether these specialists are documenting a shipwreck, a plane wreck, a submerged landscape, or an underwater battlefield, the approach to exploring these sites is the same.

## How do we explore maritime heritage sites?

Investigations in maritime archaeology usually involve several steps:

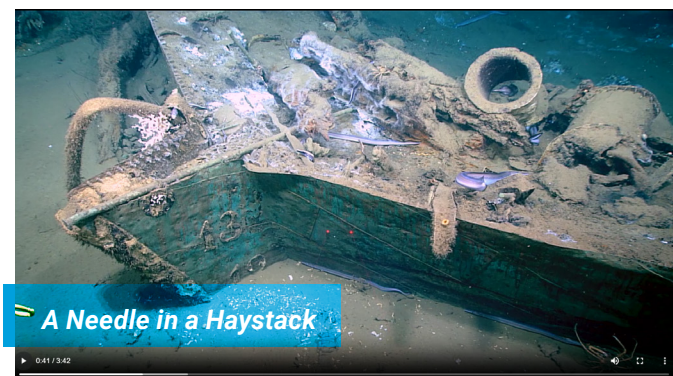
- 1. Identify a target** exploration site or search area based on previous knowledge.
- 2. Conduct research** to gain background information about a site and determine individuals/groups who have important connections to the area. This may include reviewing sources such as naval and lighthouse keeper records, oral and written accounts, maps and charts, court records, or local stories.
- 3. Develop an exploration plan** outlining the [tools](#), [technologies](#), [people](#), and other resources needed to locate and analyze the target site.
- 4. Search for** and, if found (often a big “if!”), investigate and document the site. This may include creating detailed site maps, collecting imagery and video, and possibly carefully collecting artifacts or other samples.
- 5. Conduct post-exploratory research** to analyze image/video data, samples, and/or artifacts collected.
- 6. Establish methods for site and sample management.** This may include preserving and storing collected samples and carefully selected artifacts, as well as developing a Cultural Resource Management Plan to protect the maritime heritage site.
- 7. Communicate key findings** to other archaeologists, resource managers, and the public. The locations of wrecks are kept confidential to protect them from unauthorized or improper disturbance.



A science team explores the wreck of *Humaitá* (ex-USS *Muskallunge*), an American submarine that served in two navies between 1942 and 1968 (U.S. and Brazilian). *Image courtesy of NOAA Ocean Exploration.*



The historic first visual survey and identification of the wreck of the Japanese aircraft carrier Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) Akagi 赤城, during 1942’s Battle of Midway (24 mins). *Video courtesy of Ocean Exploration Trust.*



Finding wrecks on the seafloor is a lot like searching for a needle in a haystack. Learn more about the process in this video (4 minutes). *Video courtesy of NOAA Ocean Exploration.*

Sometimes we don’t find what we went looking for. In these two short videos, expedition teams were looking for shipwrecks. Look at what was found instead!

- [Tar lilies](#)
- [Washing machines](#)