



The last sailing kalia in Tonga at the National Cultural Centre; once an exciting indoor exhibit now left to rot, hidden in the bushes.



Tourists in the National Cultural Centre watch a tin of corned beef being opened, while hidden in the bushes is a sailing treasure!

CULTURAL VANDALISM IN TONGA? WHO CARES!

An open letter to the people of the Friendly Isles

An incident of cultural vandalism occurred in Ha'apai on Tuesday, November 13 last year that should make Tongans very angry. But who really cares?

Today in the National Cultural Centre, a once proud indoor exhibit of the only sailing kalia left in Tonga, an icon, so closely

connected to the very roots of a once proud sailing nation of brave warriors and explorers, is left to rot and die, hidden from view behind some bushes. Tourists are shown instead how to open a tin of beef, to make an umu (earth oven), but who really cares?

Cultural heritage and national treasures define a nation clearer than words. This living history

directly connects us all to our ancestors. Nations around the world understand this and proudly display their heritage to tourists and at times of great importance, like coronations.

Much of Tonga's past maritime history has been lost. Many old sailing ships, "killed" and plundered by warriors for iron and cannon hundreds of years ago,

remain hidden beneath the ocean. In 2009, an anchor believed to belong to William Mariner's ship, the *Port au Prince*, was discovered in Ha'apai. Being a famous ship, the discovery was widely reported around the world. The dive company Fins 'n' Flukes, which made the discovery, attempted to have the area declared a heritage site, but no one cared? They instead turned it into a successful tourist attraction for divers.

Earlier this year the discovery of the wreck of the *Port au Prince* in Ha'apai made headlines internationally. It was exciting news. This wreck and the stories surrounding it changed the course of Tongan history forever. The wreck site is of national significance and is woven into the very making of this nation and should be considered a National Treasure and subsequently a heritage site. This wreck

deserves a full archeological survey, investigation and accurate documentation, with every item recovered going through a detailed conservation process to ensure the artifacts are preserved for posterity and achieve appropriate values if they are to be sold.

Ultimately, a site-management plan should be developed, which may allow it then to be utilised as a world-class heritage dive site, attracting divers from around the world.

HELP YOURSELF

At 11am, last November 13, unannounced to the people of Ha'apai, the ferry MV *Pulupaki* positioned itself above the anchor of the *Port au Prince*. With the support of a foreign dive team, the anchor was ripped from the bottom and dragged up the stern of the ferry, using its mooring winch.

No impact-assessment caused

by the removal appears to have been undertaken. No attempt was made to survey and document the site before removal. No attempt was made to handle this priceless icon gently, with the care and the respect it deserves, mitigating further damage. No conservation of the anchor was carried out at the surface to stop the immediate attack on it by the effects of exposure to air? This is archeological vandalism of a National Treasure at its worst! But who really cares?

If you belong to the Kingdom of Tonga and are proud of its special place in the world, or are just a friend of Tonga, you need to care and ask questions. Tonga may have just lost more than a dive site!

With another coronation scheduled and the Pacific Games coming to Tonga in years ahead, the country's cultural heritage will be on display to the world. But who

IF YOU BELONG TO THE KINGDOM OF TONGA AND ARE PROUD OF ITS SPECIAL PLACE IN THE WORLD, OR ARE JUST A FRIEND OF TONGA, YOU NEED TO CARE AND ASK QUESTIONS



Above photos: The anchor believed to come from the *Port au Prince*, discovered by Brian Heagney in 2009. He runs dive tours (click on www.finsnflukes.com) in Ha'apai and hopefully one day will again be able to show you this anchor... on the seabed.

really cares?
Mark Belvedere and I are humble guests in the Kingdom of Tonga. We respect and admire the rich cultural heritage and tread gently where we go. We love everything about the Friendly Isles. In the years ahead, we hope to work with the people of Eua and Nomuka Islands to uncover some of this lost maritime history, in a responsible, accountable and transparent way. We will always place great importance on the cultural and environmental sensitivities of any wreck site. We will never claim a wreck or anything on it for ourselves as they are all owned by the people who should care, the people of Tonga.

But who cares? We both hope you do. If so, sign the petition to recover the anchor for the people of Tonga, at www.thepetitionsite.com/162/356/474/please-return-the-anchor-of-the-port-au-prince-to-its-rightful-resting-place-in-haapai

LATEST UPDATE

Following the removal of the anchor, the ship moved a few miles to the possible wreck site of the *Port au Prince* and started ripping-up more artifacts for about a week before returning to Nuku'alofa. The people of Ha'apai were upset and a growing number of Tongans overseas became angry. Fortunately the police were waiting and the anchor is now in custody awaiting further investigation.

Those involved with the company issued with the Salvage Permit and who carried out this action include the Deputy Prime Minister's daughter. It is yet to be determined if this action was sanctioned by the government or if any official even knew what was happening. A new government department is being formed now to take responsibility for archeologically-sensitive artifacts and sites, possibly moving control of these issues away from the Ministry of Transport, which is currently headed by the Deputy Prime Minister.

In the past few weeks, when same divers returned to the wreck site to start again, they were banned from the area by the Governor of Ha'apai, who is acting for all Tongans.

The reported sale of the anchor to a buyer in Britain for \$500,000 may

well have collapsed, not just over the controversy but because the divers shot themselves in the foot. No buyer will pay big money for anything unless it has provenance, a piece of paper proving the authenticity of the artifact. The only way you can get that is to do the long, delicate surveys and archeological investigations proving identity. If you just rip something off the bottom, all you have is an old thing.

Three years ago I was invited to a meeting with a senior Tongan Cabinet minister to discuss the situation regarding the ongoing plunder of historic wrecks in Tonga. From that meeting I was asked to return to Tonga and assist with uncovering and documenting lost Tongan maritime heritage, and the establishment of a system that could ultimately lead to the building of an Underwater Heritage dive trail. I said I would. He has since passed away, but I continue to work toward that goal in his memory.

Tonga Blue Ltd is established in Tonga, with a growing logistics and support base of concerned locals. We will never claim any wrecks as our own. They belong to the Kingdom of Tonga and the local people beside that wreck. We will only ever work on a wreck or seek out its location if invited in writing by the local people. We are assisting them now to form local committees on many islands, to take control of their wrecks and stop the ongoing plunder and loss of significant National Treasures. We offer experience, logistics and knowledge to these committees to empower them.

This will ensure that each site has a full environmental assessment, photographic survey, detailed mapping and archeological investigation before any actions on the site take place. We will also help them develop a suggested management plan to put to government on how each site could be managed in the interest of Tourism.

In 2013 we are seeking up to 10 volunteer divers interested in underwater history, photography, film making, archeology, biology etc. to join three teams based in Tonga. It will be an exciting time. Call me! 📞



Above: The only photograph taken of the anchor being hauled up the side of the ship. If this had gone unnoticed, the people-movement to save the anchor may never have happened. Please sign the petition! Below: Tonga Blue's dive support boat *ICE*. In 2013, we will have three more 4.7m RIBs and an 8m workboat, establishing a land base on an uninhabited tropical island owned by His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Tonga.

