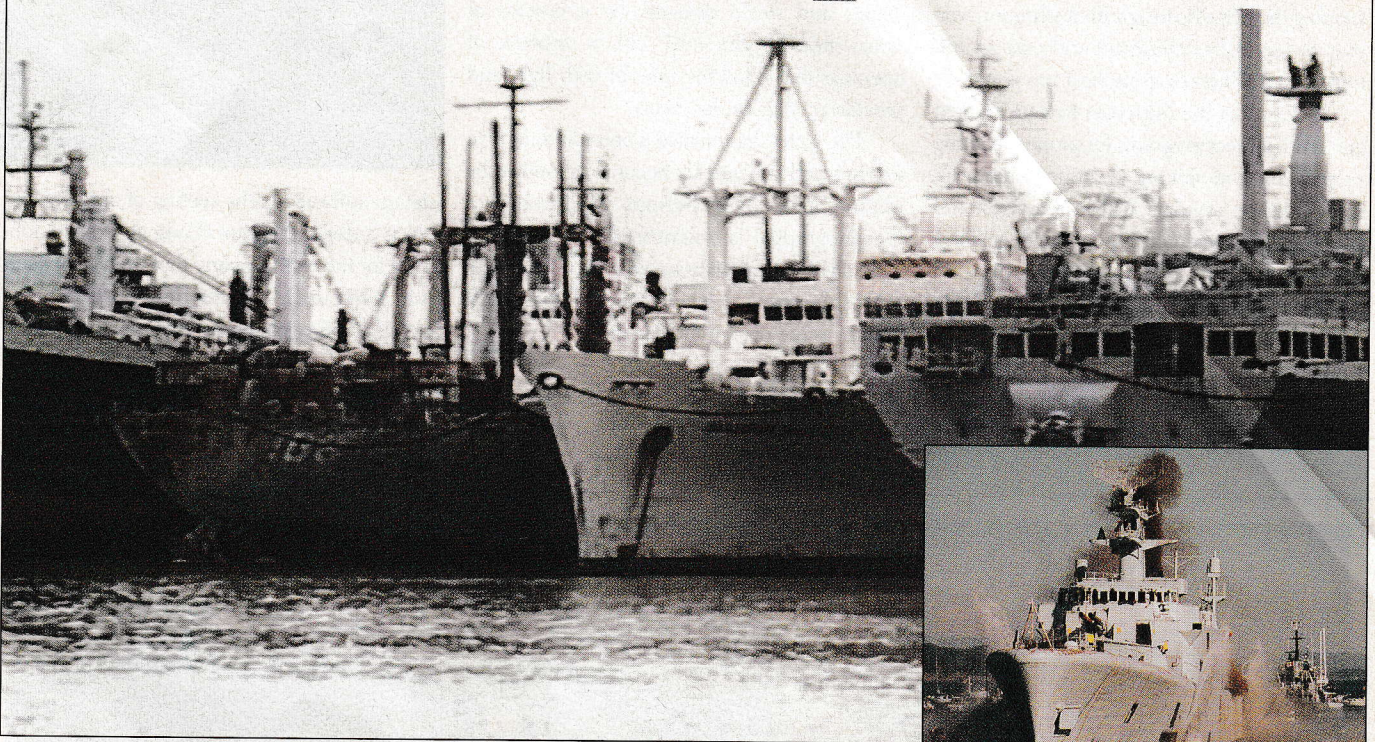


Special Report

Military Shipwrecks



COURTESY OF ARTIFICIAL REEFS OF THE KEYS

The U.S. “mothball fleet” represents a unique opportunity to save tax dollars, the environment and the **sport of diving.**

Floating at anchor in backwater depots and shipyards around the U.S. are about 400 obsolete U.S. Navy ships, ranging in size and shape from submarines to aircraft carriers to freighters. Many of the ships date back to World War II and have been waiting to be scrapped for decades. The problem is: Nobody wants them.

Environmental laws, logistical problems and a soft materials market make scrapping unprofitable. So the way Dick Long sees it, there are only two options left. We can let them rot away, possibly leaching oil and chemicals into the water and costing taxpayers \$20,000 per ship a year just to keep the hulks floating. Or we can clean them up and sink them as artificial reefs, a move that will enhance the marine environment, save billions of dollars for taxpayers and create new and exciting dive sites.

“It really is a no-brainer,” says Long, a dive industry pioneer and president of the San Diego Oceans Foundation. “We have the answer to the problem of how to dispose of these ships.”

A New Mission for Old Ships

He’s not alone in his assessment. The process of turning

The U.S. Reserve Fleet could be a boon to diving. Surplus Canadian warships like the *MacKenzie* (inset) have already been sunk as artificial reefs.



ARTIFICIAL REEF RESOURCES

San Diego Oceans Foundation www.sdoceans.org and www.hmcs-yukon.org.

Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia www.artificialreef.bc.ca.

Artificial Reefs of the Keys (ARK) www.bigshipwrecks.com.

Rodale's Scuba Diving www.scubadiving.com/US/sandiego/.



ships into artificial reefs has been identified by the Rand Corporation, a consultant to the U.S. Navy, as the cheapest, safest and most environmentally sound way to dispose of old ships.

According to preliminary findings of a Rand study, scrapping the ships overseas is no longer a viable option. And even if the government could find domestic scrappers willing to take the ships, that option will cost taxpayers \$1.9 billion over the next 20 years. The cost of keeping the ships floating will mushroom every year as the hulls deteriorate and cost an estimated \$4.9 billion over the next 100 years.

But turning the ships over to state and federal artificial reef programs for proper cleaning, preparation and sinking as artificial reefs, the study's authors estimate, will cost just \$500 million over 20 years, will comply with environmental safeguards, enhance the marine environment and ultimately boost the tourism economy in communities where the ships are sunk.

For proof that turning military ships into artificial reefs is a good idea, divers need to look

Turning surplus military ships into artificial reefs will save taxpayers billions of dollars.



no further than the *Yukon*, the 366-foot Canadian destroyer escort the SDOF sank off San Diego in June 2000. Following procedures perfected by the Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia (see: "The Canadian Model"), the ship was carefully cleaned of all toxins, and made dive-safe by a process of "swiss-cheesing" the hull with a network of openings that flood the interior with light and provide easy access for divers.

The wreck has created a boom in new dive tourism and has quickly become colonized by marine life. The Scripps Institution of Oceanography is scientifically monitoring what divers can already see with their own eyes: that shipwrecks provide new habitat that enhances the overall marine life.

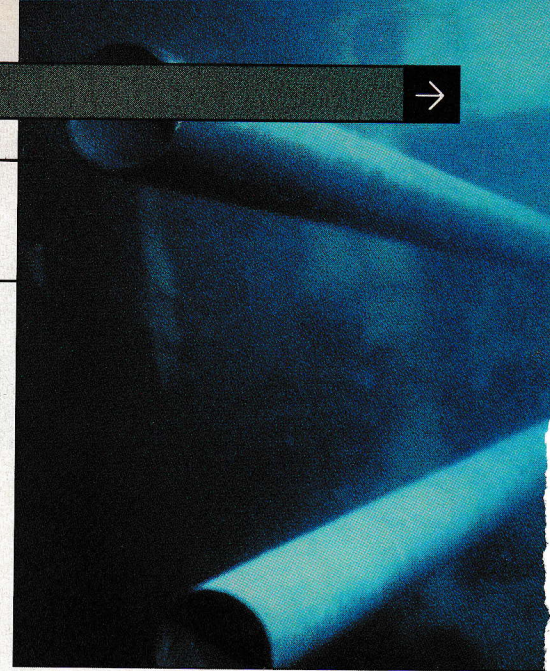
A New Mission for Divers

There is one catch. Congress must rewrite leg-

islation authorizing the reefing of obsolete vessels as a disposal option. Long and others lobbying for the change worry that such a low-tech issue won't make it to the front burner. There are also some concerns that environmental groups will reflexively oppose the plan of putting man-made objects into the ocean.

The solution to both problems is diver

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The Canadian Model

When it comes to sinking large military ships, nobody does it better than the Canadians. The standard protocols for preparing and sinking retired warships were perfected by the nonprofit Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia (ARSBC), which has sunk five major vessels since 1991 and turned the Canadian province into one of the top wreck diving spots in North America and the world.

"We're all standing on the shoulders of the Canadians," says SDOF President Dick Long, who worked with ARSBC to secure and sink the *Yukon*.

The ARSBC's latest project is the sinking of the 441-foot *HMCS Cape Breton*, a World War II Liberty Ship converted for later use as a maintenance vessel. The *Cape Breton* is scheduled to go down off Nanaimo, B.C., on Oct. 20, 2001. To help preserve the ship's history for nondivers, the ARSBC has donated the Cape Breton's stern and massive triple expansion engine to the North Vancouver Museum as a permanent display on the area's shipbuilding legacy. For more information, visit www.artificialreef.bc.ca.



involvement. By writing their U.S. representatives and senators, divers can build support for the plan of reefing ships and educate leaders on the positive and proven environmental benefits of artificial reefs. For a sample letter, join our campaign at www.scubadiving.com/feature/shipstoreefs. To contact your representative and senators, see the government listings in

your local telephone directory or visit www.house.gov/writerep and www.senate.gov/contacting/index.cfm.

Finally, divers will have to get involved with artificial reef projects. Two ambitious artificial reef projects underway in the Florida Keys now (see sidebar, pg. 48) also demonstrate the complexity and expense of sinking larger

military vessels.

But the rewards, promises Long, are worth it. And if divers want to reap the benefits, they have to get involved. "We're all just trying to do some good for the oceans," says Long. "Divers need to see to it that these ships are cleaned properly, that they are prepared properly and that they are sited properly."



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