Underwater cultural heritage as a means for sustainable development

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The 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage drew the interest of the scientific community to the importance of preserving and making accessible to the public, the underwater heritage (UH) lying on the seabed, describing the sea as the largest museum on earth. Moreover, the same Convention (rule 1) encourages the preservation of UH in situ whenever it is not possible, as in the case of insufficient economic resources, for appropriate underwater archaeological excavations. For this reason, underwater archaeological trails and parks have been instituted and created all over the world. We have to acknowledge that underwater archaeological parks could represent a great opportunity to combine environmental and heritage preservation, and that these parks could become a sustainable resource for the development of the territories, like any other marine reserve. Because of environmental, historical and climatic factors, the Mediterranean Sea is the perfect place to implement accessible underwater environmental and cultural park/itineraries. Experiments and projects realized in France, Italy and Spain have been analyzed, in order to understand the drawbacks and the advantages of instituting underwater archaeological parks, considering especially how local communities react to the institution of the park, whether or not they are really sustainable (from both an environmental and economic point of view) and their efficacy as heritage conservation and dissemination tools. The aim of this presentation is to present the result of this analysis, suggesting best practices and indicating drawbacks, by considering UH as part of the natural seascape, and above all considering the sea and the entire marine world as the core of the sustainable development discourse but no longer from a strictly environmental perspective.

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