One day during fieldwork in March 2010, Charles Beeker was having a drink with his dean and several colleagues at his favorite restaurant in Santo Domingo. Noticing their Indiana University (IU) shirts, an inebriated American staggered over and asked if they were the archaeologists who stole the Captain Kidd shipwreck. The man was an investor in a treasure-hunting operation that had searched for months for the remains of Kidd’s ship, the *Quedagh Merchant*, which famously sank off the southeast coast of the Dominican Republic in 1699. But it was Beeker who had identified the wreck and won international press attention.

The investor “started getting a little rowdy,” Beeker recalls. There was pushing and shoving, overturned tables and broken glass. “The guy had spent his savings and lost his marriage, and I guess he blamed me.”

Such is life for Beeker, the founder and director of the Underwater Science Program at IU Bloomington. “I’ve been working for years to put treasure hunters out of business,” he says. The treasure hunters, for their part, would like to do the same to him. In addition to the occasional fisticuffs, Beeker has been sued (he won), slandered, and harassed by treasure hunters who oppose his efforts to find, protect, and research historic shipwrecks.

To archaeologists such as Beeker, wrecks offer a bounty of information from a single moment in time. But researchers are waging increasingly bitter battles over access to this sunken scientific booty (*Science*, 17 May 2013, p. 802). Treasure hunters are often supported by investors who hope to profit by selling items from the shipwreck, Beeker says; they offer a portion of the take to governments in exchange for diving and salvage permits. Archaeologists can have a hard time competing because we’re “selling history, not artifacts,” he says.

Beeker, 61, claims some success in this battle, uncovering key information for science and preserving historic wrecks. A big man with a no-nonsense demeanor that can border on gruffness, he is a workaholic who has investigated more than 200 shipwrecks and visited thousands more. Last May, he made the news for evaluating a wreck off the north coast of Haiti that he thinks could be Christopher Columbus’s flagship, the *Santa Maria*. Other experts disagree, but Beeker...
isn’t backing down, and this week he presented his case at the Society for Historical Archaeology meeting in Seattle.

As satisfying as his discoveries have been, Beeker considers his work helping preserve wrecks as dive museums to be his greatest achievement. “Beyond the sustainable tourism value of living museums, we consider the sites living laboratories” for many scientific disciplines, he says.

Establishing underwater museums “is not unique to Charlie,” says James Delgado, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) director of maritime heritage, who’s based in Silver Spring, Maryland, and has known Beeker since the 1980s. But he is a leading advocate and has done tremendous work ... in the theory and practice of in situ preservation of shipwreck sites and public outreach with them.”

BEEKER STARTED DIVING at age 11 and was a scuba instructor by 1974. While working in a paleobotany lab and taking graduate classes at IU, he started a scuba training center and came to realize that his real passion was shipwrecks. By 1984, he was teaching academic scuba diving at IU. His dives have uncovered exquisitely preserved mammal fossils and prehistoric Taíno Indian sites, but his focus has been shipwrecks.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, historic shipwrecks had no value beyond exploration and plunder. Dive magazines glamorized the looting of wrecks. In the 1980s, Beeker helped change that, serving on a federal advisory committee that helped draft the Abandoned Shipwreck Act of 1987. The act acknowledged the archaeological importance of historic wrecks and clarified their ownership and management on federal, state, and tribal submerged lands.

At the time, most people thought that the best way to preserve historic shipwrecks was to raise them for display in museums. Beeker and a number of other archaeologists stood that concept on its head, bringing the museum to the wreck rather than the reverse. In 1989, he helped create the San Pedro Underwater Archaeological Preserve State Park in Florida, which features the remains of the San Pedro, a Dutch-built ship that sank in 1733. It was plundered by treasure hunters in the 1960s, but divers and snorkelers can still examine ballast stones, seven replica cannons, and an anchor.

Beeker went on to help create 11 more underwater shipwreck parks in Florida and California. By 2000, he and other archaeologists, most with government agencies, had formed a national system of marine protected areas to preserve wrecks. Beeker “is one of the few in the academic field” to push for these museums, Delgado says.

During the past 20 years, Beeker has joined with the government of the Dominican Republic to establish three underwater museums, including the Quedagh Merchant site. That’s progress, given that a number of treasure hunters, thwarted by preservation laws in the United States, had moved east to the Caribbean, where laws are lax and wrecks plentiful. If a shipwreck isn’t in a national park, the Dominican Republic allows treasure hunters to haul up artifacts and sell them, as long as the government gets half the take. “I tell my students we’re in the Dominican Republic because we need to be there,” Beeker says.

To wean officials from treasure-hunting revenue, Beeker offered an alternative: Protect wrecks and earn tourism revenue by creating museums in the sea. “You can only sell [a shipwreck] once as a treasure hunt,” he told them. “I can sell it forever” as an underwater museum.

The government has bought into the idea. “Beeker has provided [the] Dominican Republic the ‘Living Museums in the Sea’ model, which preserves shipwrecks as part of our marine environment,” says Francis Soto, technical director of the underwater museum program of the country’s Ministry of Culture, which oversees shipwrecks. “Rather than allow important shipwrecks to be excavated for profit, instead they are preserved for future generations.”

Shipwreck museums contain mooring buoys for boats, historic marker buoys, artifacts, and underwater plaques with interpretive information. One, the 1724 Guadalupe Underwater Archaeological Preserve, “is one of the most dived shipwrecks in the Dominican Republic,” Soto says, explored by up to 300 people a day, according to Beeker.

The museums are free, but divers bring in revenue by buying equipment, food, lodging, and more. Beeker adds that underwater traffic tends to inhibit rather than promote vandalism, as people tend to be better behaved when observed. The museums also protect the ecosystem that has formed around the wreck. Large artifacts like anchors and cannons offer habitat for hard and soft coral and many kinds of fish, “turning an archaeological project into an envi-
working with treasure hunters sends the wvettts, who had a permit to work in Haiti, in-
s Barry Clifford of Provincetown, Massachu-
to 3 centuries, the *Quedagh Merchant* rested peacefully in shallow water, somehow eluding treasure hunters, until a snorkeler noticed part of the wreck and alerted government officials. They told Beeker, who visited the site in 2007, then led an investigation that discovered part of the lower hull, 26 guns, a ballast stone, and other artifacts.

To confirm the authenticity of the ship, his team identified the composition of the ballast stone and traced it to western India outside the city of Surat. They also determined that the hull was made of teak and featured rabbet joint construction, in which one piece of wood is notched in order to accept another, a method used in western India, according to Beeker.

These findings all fit with Kidd’s accounts of the ship: The pirate mentioned the Indian construction of his ship in his testimony in New York. “There are thousands of shipwrecks in the Dominican Republic, but this one is the *Quedagh Merchant*,” Beeker says. James concurs: “From what I have seen, everything points to it being correctly identified.”

Kidd’s testimony didn’t save him: He was hanged for piracy on 23 May 1701. On the 310th anniversary of his death, the wreck of his ship was dedicated as a museum.

To further research the wreck, Beeker visited India and found that rabbet joint construction is still used to make teak ship hulls in remote areas outside of Surat. The *Quedagh Merchant* “represents one of the only archaeological examples” of this unique construction, he says.

Beeker’s latest target is even higher profile: the *Santa Maria*. According to historical accounts, the 40-man ship ran aground off the coast of what is now northern Haiti some 500 years ago. Last year, underwater explorer Barry Clifford of Provincetown, Massachusetts, who had a permit to work in Haiti, invited Beeker to examine a wreck there.

Some archaeologists decline any contact with such explorers. “My opinion is that working with treasure hunters sends the
d the wreck at the request of Haiti’s government. The team determined that the wreck was too far from shore to be the famous vessel and that artifacts in it, such as bronze or copper fasteners, were used in 17th and 18th century shipbuilding, long after Columbus’s time. UNESCO announced that the shipwreck was not the *Santa Maria*, and Haiti’s government rejected IU’s proposal for a detailed investigation.

Although Beeker admits that bronze fasteners are unusual for Columbus’s time, he argues that they alone don’t rule out a 15th century origin for the ship. He saw no copper sheathing and notes that UNESCO hasn’t analyzed the wreck’s wood, ballast, or datable ceramics. He argues that UNESCO’s study offers “no real proof” that the wreck is not the *Santa Maria*. In his talk at the meeting, he revealed that he was able to sample the ballast stone. Its composition included the mineral pigeonite, which is not native to the Caribbean; more analysis is needed to determine if it could have come from Spain.

Ulrike Guérin, a Paris-based program specialist for UNESCO’s Secretariat of the 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, says that their investigation was run by top experts, and Delgado and Roger Smith, the state of Florida’s underwater archaeologist who’s based in Tallahassee, agree. “Everybody wants to make this a controversy,” Smith says, “but to my mind it’s not a controversy; it’s simple archaeology.”

Whatever comes of the *Santa Maria* hunt, Beeker intends to carry on with his work in the Dominican Republic, persuading the public that historic shipwrecks should be preserved. “I’ve seen a lot of people in your government come and go,” Beeker tells residents. But he promises that he’s there to stay.

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