

## FEATURES

By Michael Bawaya

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



# SALVAGING SCIENCE

Underwater archaeologist Charles Beeker works to preserve famous wrecks as museums

PHOTO: INDIANA UNIVERSITY