

HEPCA's warning to Thistlegorm offenders

THE ORGANISATION responsible for installing dive-boat moorings around the Red Sea's *Thistlegorm* wreck has thanked the boat-owners and divers now using the system as required – but has issued an ultimatum to some who are not.

The Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA) has said that it is “delighted that so many of you are using the new system and that this action is directly contributing to prolonging the life of this wreck”.

But it added: “We are disappointed

by reports that some safari boats and dive guides continue to moor on the wreck itself.”

HEPCA stated that, while such practice already committed would be disregarded as “due to a lack of awareness and knowledge”, it will now act against those who drop shots into the 126m-long WW2 freighter, which lies in 31m of water with first diving touch-down at about 15m.

“Following the installation of the new mooring system, mooring on the wreck is strictly forbidden and violators will be prosecuted,” it said.

The system consists of 32 mooring lines, 16 down each side of the ship, anchored in pairs and running along the seabed parallel with the ship's sides, about 5m off.

However, the buoys are not at the surface but at a depth of 22m, as it “is not possible at this location for the mooring ropes to reach any further to the surface without compromising safety”.

It appears that some skippers have been tempted to drop in a shot rather than send a guide down to find and secure to a mooring line.

Requiring divers to swim across 5m of open water between the wreck and a mooring line, which doubles as a hotline once a boat is tied to it, may also be an issue.

HEPCA's view is that “any diver who cannot swim 5m from the rope to the wreck in a current should not be diving on this wreck”.

From its comment, and a diagram released by the organisation to depict the mooring system, it seems that an original plan for a system of surface-buoyed diver descent and ascent lines, set over the wreck and reached by tenders deployed from moored dive boats, is not being followed through.



Where the moorings have been used, said HEPCA, some have “been cut and damaged due to misuse”.

Reiterating its request for diving visitors to use and respect the installation, it said that the mooring system was preferable to a wreck-management plan, which it had opposed.

This would have been the alternative brought in by the Egyptian Government, with “a substantial increase in fees and dramatic limitations on diver numbers”.

In pushing for a moorings system, HEPCA had “trusted in the conscience and commitment of all Red Sea stakeholders to support our mooring plans as the only acceptable solution to sustaining the wreck of the *ss Thistlegorm* and our ability to continue diving her”.

As **DIVER** went to press, a mooring system was due to be installed during February on another wreck, the *Rosalie Moller*, as part of HEPCA's Saving the Red Sea Wrecks campaign.

The *Thistlegorm* moorings diagram can be seen at www.hepca.com/thistlegorm-mooring-system.aspx ■



A 25lb gun on the deck of the *Thistlegorm*.

JOHN BANTIN

ORKNEY DIVERS GET TOGETHER TO FORM RECOVERY TEAM

A GROUP OF DIVERS have formed a voluntary underwater search and recovery team in the Orkney Islands.

The move, charter-boat skipper and co-organiser John Thornton told **DIVER**, is designed to “fill a gap” left by police and Ministry of Defence divers, who face restrictions relating, for instance, to maximum depth, gases used and tethering.

The Orkney Underwater Search Unit (OUSU) held its inaugural meeting on 23 January.

“At the moment there are 11 of us,” said Thornton. “We come from among the boat operators and diving industry professionals, bringing a broad mix of skills and huge experience of the wrecks of Scapa Flow.”

The team's work is likely to involve mainly searches for deceased divers.

Apart from the need to recover bodies for the sake of families and investigations, such recoveries also help to keep wrecks open to the public, so are in the interests of

divers and business alike. The local authority will shut a wreck if a diver goes missing and it is thought that the body could be inside it.

As such, said Thornton, even if a body cannot be located, it can still be valuable to establish where “bodies definitely are not”, in order to guarantee re-opening a wreck to the public.

OUSU's first challenge has involved the wreck of the *König*, which was closed by police at the end of last season after a Dutch diver was lost and thought

to be inside. The police lifted their ban at the beginning of the year – only for the local harbour authority to impose its own restriction.

It is thought that the authority may have concerns about the safety of the wreck.

As **DIVER** went to press, even OUSU's divers were not being allowed to enter the *König*.

The group was trying to get permission to search the wreck, both for human remains and, if needed, evidence of dangerous structural deterioration. ■

DiveSight

THE ONLY UK SITE SPECIALISING SOLELY IN **PRECISE PRESCRIPTION DIVING** MASKS AND CORRECTIVE SWIMMING GOGGLES

www.divesight.co.uk ● www.divesight.co.uk ● www.divesight.co.uk ● www.divesight.co.uk ● www.divesight.co.uk