

HEPCA DEFENDS THISTLEGORM CLOSURE

By Charlotte Boan

RED SEA

THE DECISION to close one of the world's most famous wrecks for one month while preservation work is carried out has been defended by the Hurghada Environmental Protection Conservation Agency (HEPCA). HEPCA's diving team set to work in early December to put a new buoy mooring system in place on the northern Red Sea wreck of the Thistlegorm as part of the Saving the Red Sea Wrecks project.

Mooring points and separate descent and ascent lines are being set up to ease pressure caused by vessels mooring on the wreck. A series of holes are also being drilled into the main structure of the wreck to allow divers' trapped air bubbles to escape and thus prevent corrosion.

However, HEPCA has come under fire for its decision to close the wreck by a handful of diving operators. In a hard-hitting letter to the diving community this week, HEPCA chairman Amr Ali defended the project, calling uncooperative operators 'irresponsible' and 'greedy'.

'Many diving operators consider the closure of the Thistlegorm impractical

and have voiced their objections,' Ali said. 'However, the fact remains that we are losing this wreck and many others.'

'HEPCA is fed up with the continued resistance for change. We are fed up of being asked to defend our actions that are merely the last resort in a battle that has been going on for years to ensure the future sustainability of our Red Sea.'

Ali also pointed the finger of blame at boat operators for the recent collapse of the mast from the wreck of the Rosalie Moller, another site marked out as a priority for protection by the Saving the Red Sea Wrecks scheme.

'Only a few weeks ago the magnificent rear mast was upright and many a diver enjoyed diving around it,' added Ali. 'Over the years, many liveaboard operators have opted to tie their boats to the top of the mast. Now, alas, the mast is no longer standing in its majestic form.'

'What fell down was the remaining respect that these liveaboard operators, dive guides and divers held for our Red Sea. What also fell down was any final shared sense of responsibility, team work and credibility.'

Ali said it was the responsibility of the diving community to prevent further damage to such dives sites. He also said it was vital that new mooring systems 'made sense' and would not endanger divers, wrecks or reefs.

RETURN OF THE RING

By Charlotte Boan

WRECK TREASURE

A GOLD ring belonging to a British sailor who died during the First World War has been found by a diver while exploring the wreck of the HMS Opal in Orkney, Scotland. Retired Brigadier Malcolm Cubiss, 78, from York, was shocked when he received a call from diver Peter Brady about the engagement ring which originally belonged to his uncle Stanley Cubiss.

Cubiss died when HMS Opal ran aground along with HMS Narborough off the Orkney Islands during a fierce snowstorm, with the loss of 188 men. He was wearing a gold band engraved with the words 'To Stanley from Flo, March 1916', given to him by his sweetheart Florence shortly before they married in 1917.

During a routine dive Brady, 51, spotted something half-buried beneath the sand and at first thought it was part of the ship's plumbing. However, after closer inspection he realised it was an engraved gold ring.

Brady and his dive buddy Bob Hamilton then searched through the ship's casualty lists to find a sailor with the initial 'S' and managed to track down Cubiss' nephew.

'The list mentioned that he was the son of a couple in Keighley, but we could find no trace of the Cubiss family there, so widened the search to the whole of Yorkshire, and there was Malcolm Cubiss near York,' said Brady.

Malcolm Cubiss said he has decided to donate the ring and family photographs of the couple to a naval museum in the Orkney Islands.

PICK OF THE BUNCH: a diver explores a rock formation by David Barrio [main photograph]; filefish by David Barrio [1]; parrotfish by José Ángel Fernández [2]; blacktail coma by Jesús Villalba [3]

3