



OUTER  
BANKS

# Shipwrecks and Conservation: How History Shapes the North Carolina Coast



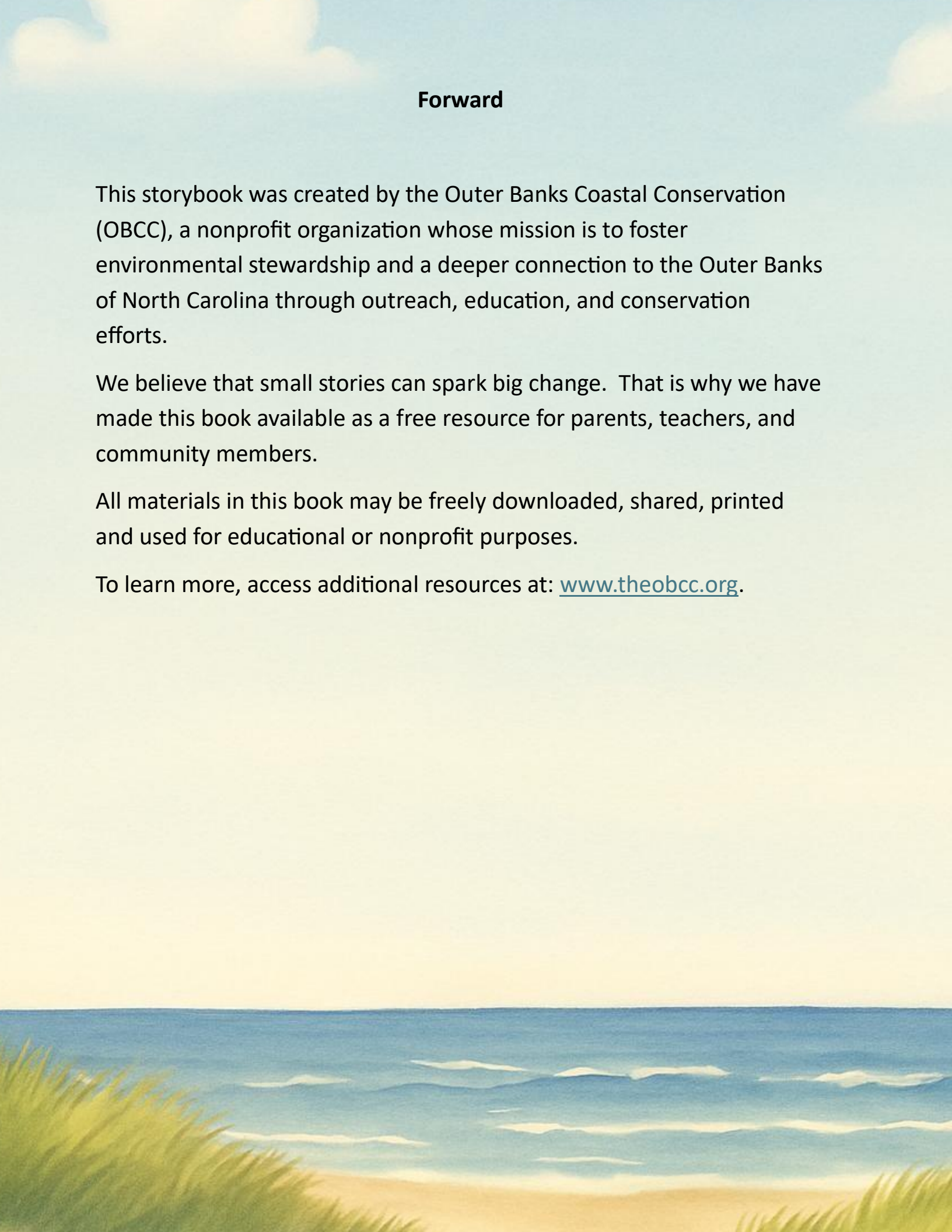
## Forward

This storybook was created by the Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to foster environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through outreach, education, and conservation efforts.

We believe that small stories can spark big change. That is why we have made this book available as a free resource for parents, teachers, and community members.

All materials in this book may be freely downloaded, shared, printed and used for educational or nonprofit purposes.

To learn more, access additional resources at: [www.theobcc.org](http://www.theobcc.org).







# Introduction The Graveyard of the Atlantic

Stretching from Corolla to Ocracoke, the Outer Banks of North Carolina have earned the nickname “Graveyard of the Atlantic.” Over 2,000 shipwrecks rest beneath these waters — from wooden colonial schooners to modern steel freighters. Fierce storms, shifting sands, and powerful currents made this coast one of the most perilous maritime routes in America.

Cape Hatteras

OCEAN

But these wrecks are more than markers of tragedy — they are living museums, preserving centuries of human endeavor and serving as unexpected sanctuaries for marine life. Each wreck tells a story not only of loss and courage but also of how nature reclaims and transforms what humans leave behind.



An artistic illustration of a shipwreck scene. In the upper left, a three-masted sailing ship with orange sails is partially submerged. The water is dark blue with white-capped waves. Below the surface, a large fish swims towards the right. In the center, a wooden shipwreck is partially buried in the sandy seabed, surrounded by coral and seaweed. Various artifacts are scattered around: a large green bottle, a wooden barrel, a long wooden pole, and a small crab. In the bottom right, a sea turtle is swimming. The sky is a mix of blue and grey clouds.

# Stories Beneath the Waves

Shipwrecks aren't just remnants of disaster; they are time capsules of our coastal heritage and crucial ecosystems in their own right.

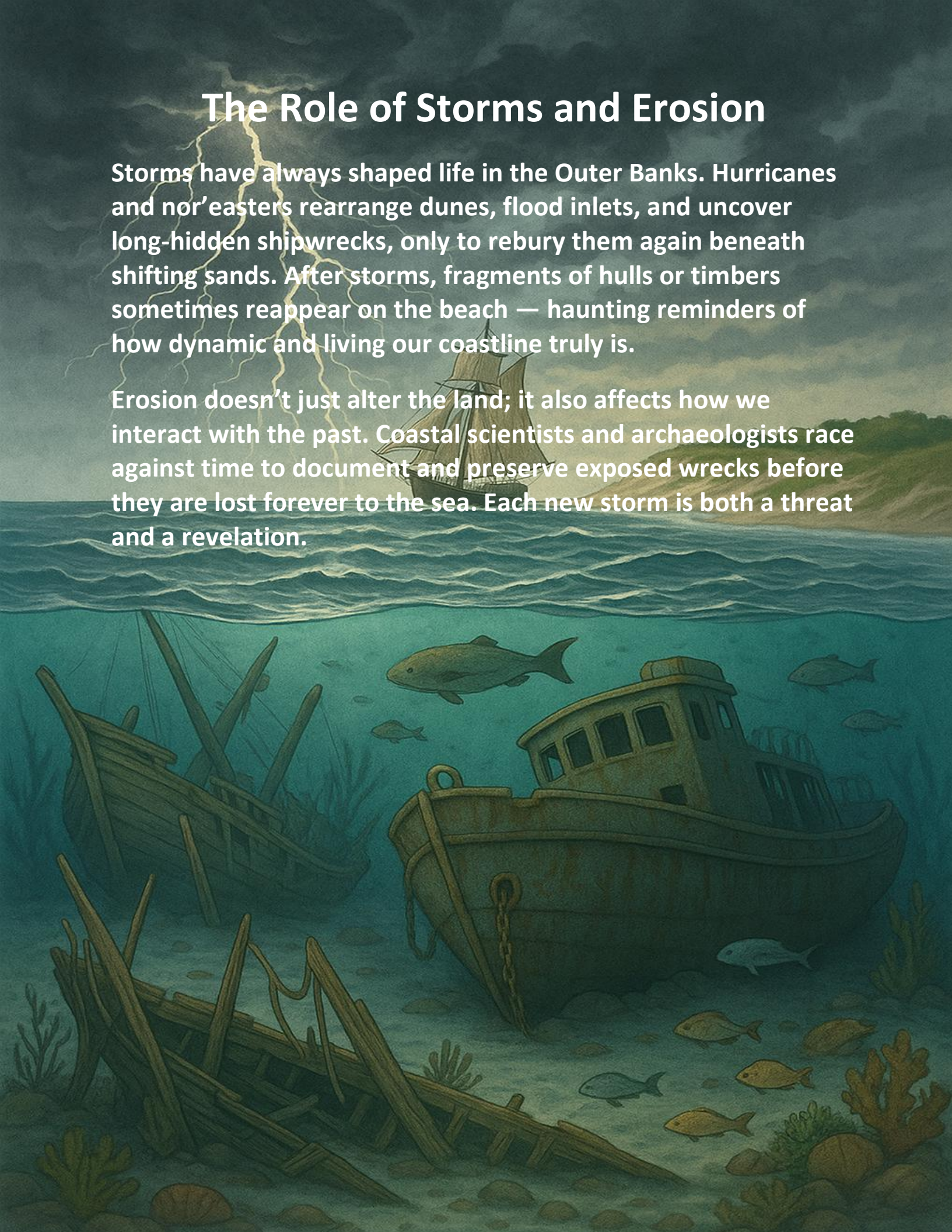
- **Cultural Value:** Each wreck reveals stories of exploration, commerce, and conflict — from Civil War ironclads to fishing vessels and merchant ships. Artifacts such as anchors, bottles, and cannons help historians reconstruct the daily lives of sailors and the economic lifelines that once sustained coastal communities.
- **Ecological Value:** Over time, wrecks evolve into thriving artificial reefs, providing a stable surface where corals, sponges, and seaweed can grow. They attract fish, crustaceans, and even sea turtles, enhancing local biodiversity.
- **Educational Value:** Many wrecks within the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and nearby sanctuaries serve as underwater classrooms. Divers, students, and scientists study them to better understand both history and ocean ecology — a perfect union of past and present.



# The Role of Storms and Erosion

Storms have always shaped life in the Outer Banks. Hurricanes and nor'easters rearrange dunes, flood inlets, and uncover long-hidden shipwrecks, only to rebury them again beneath shifting sands. After storms, fragments of hulls or timbers sometimes reappear on the beach — haunting reminders of how dynamic and living our coastline truly is.

Erosion doesn't just alter the land; it also affects how we interact with the past. Coastal scientists and archaeologists race against time to document and preserve exposed wrecks before they are lost forever to the sea. Each new storm is both a threat and a revelation.



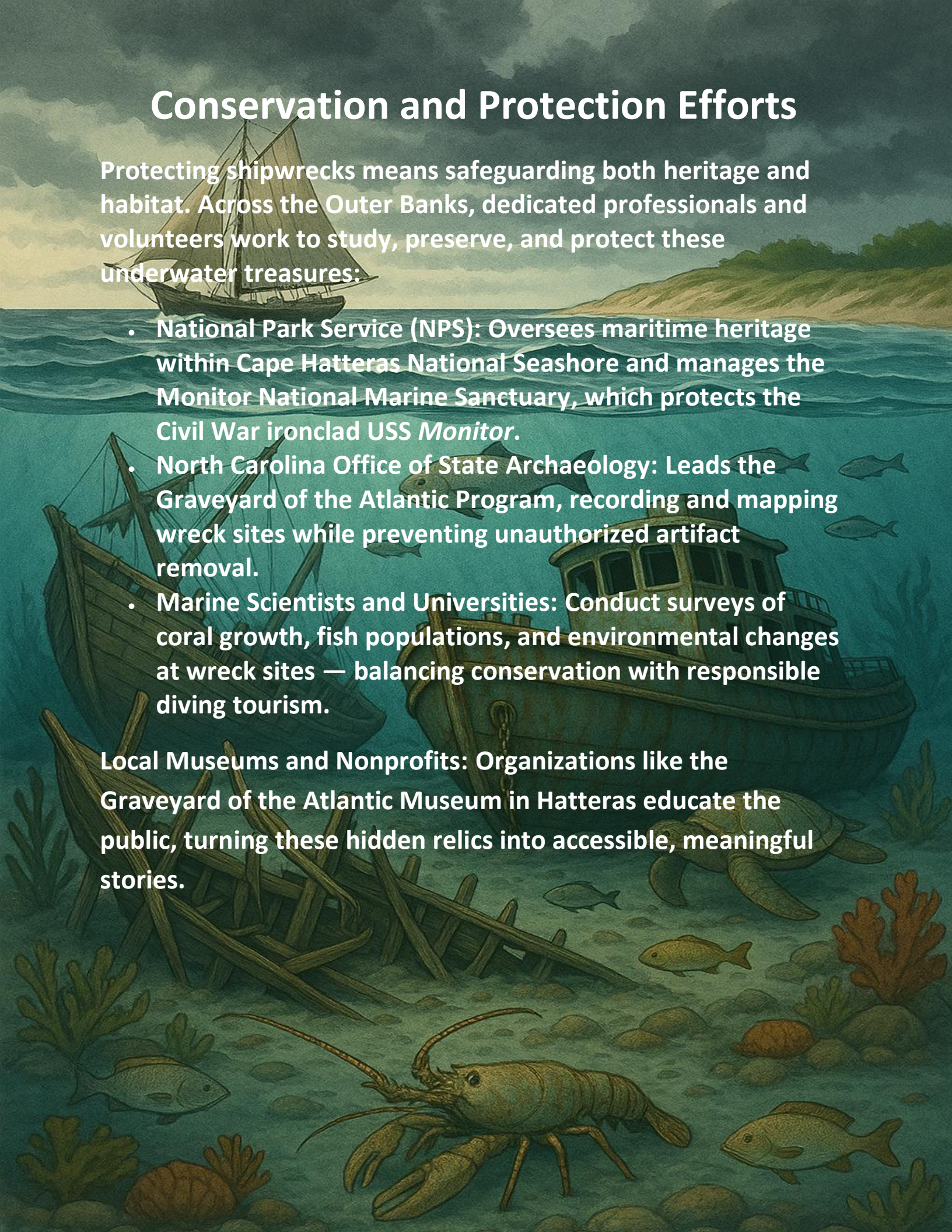


# Conservation and Protection Efforts

Protecting shipwrecks means safeguarding both heritage and habitat. Across the Outer Banks, dedicated professionals and volunteers work to study, preserve, and protect these underwater treasures:

- **National Park Service (NPS):** Oversees maritime heritage within Cape Hatteras National Seashore and manages the Monitor National Marine Sanctuary, which protects the Civil War ironclad USS *Monitor*.
- **North Carolina Office of State Archaeology:** Leads the Graveyard of the Atlantic Program, recording and mapping wreck sites while preventing unauthorized artifact removal.
- **Marine Scientists and Universities:** Conduct surveys of coral growth, fish populations, and environmental changes at wreck sites — balancing conservation with responsible diving tourism.

**Local Museums and Nonprofits:** Organizations like the Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum in Hatteras educate the public, turning these hidden relics into accessible, meaningful stories.



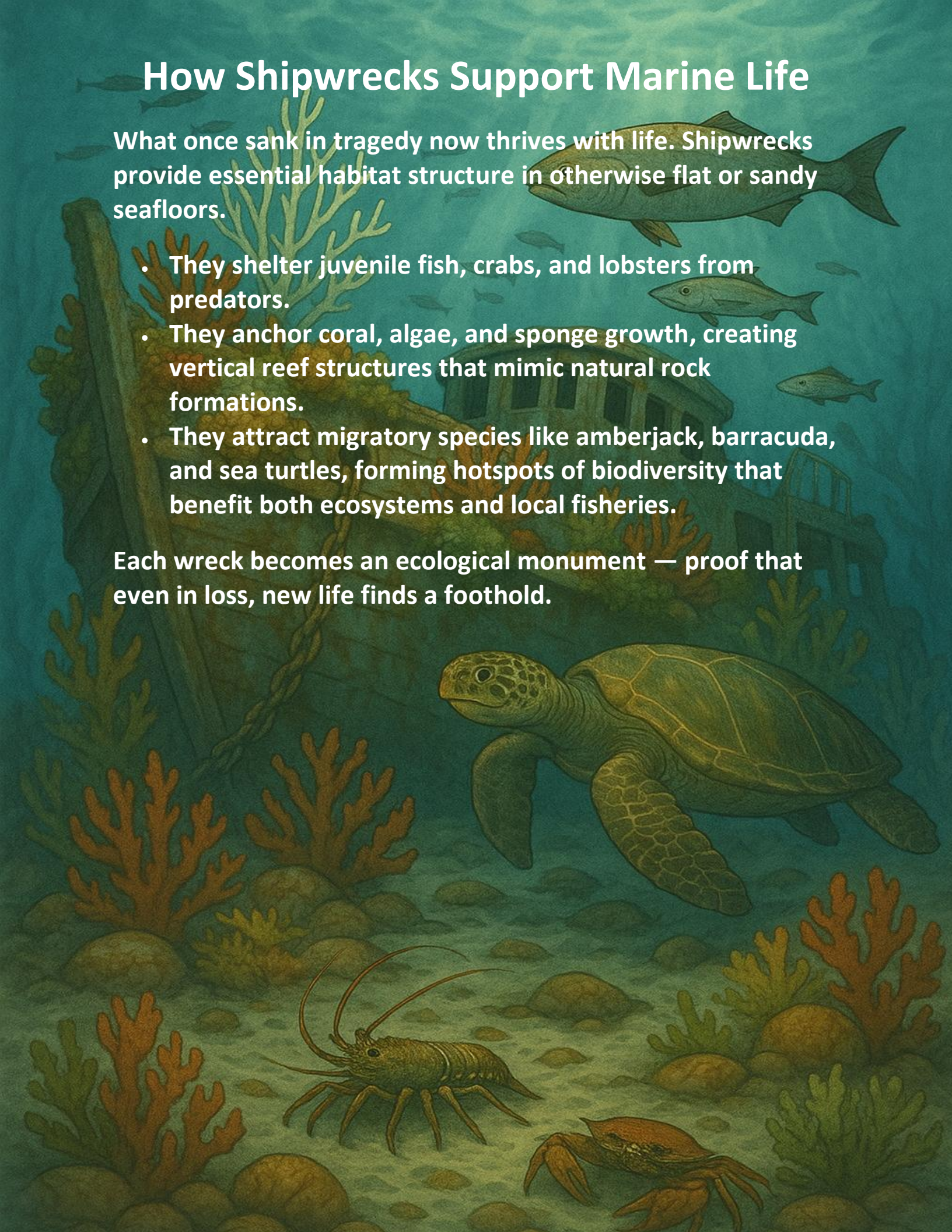


# How Shipwrecks Support Marine Life

What once sank in tragedy now thrives with life. Shipwrecks provide essential habitat structure in otherwise flat or sandy seafloors.

- They shelter juvenile fish, crabs, and lobsters from predators.
- They anchor coral, algae, and sponge growth, creating vertical reef structures that mimic natural rock formations.
- They attract migratory species like amberjack, barracuda, and sea turtles, forming hotspots of biodiversity that benefit both ecosystems and local fisheries.

Each wreck becomes an ecological monument — proof that even in loss, new life finds a foothold.



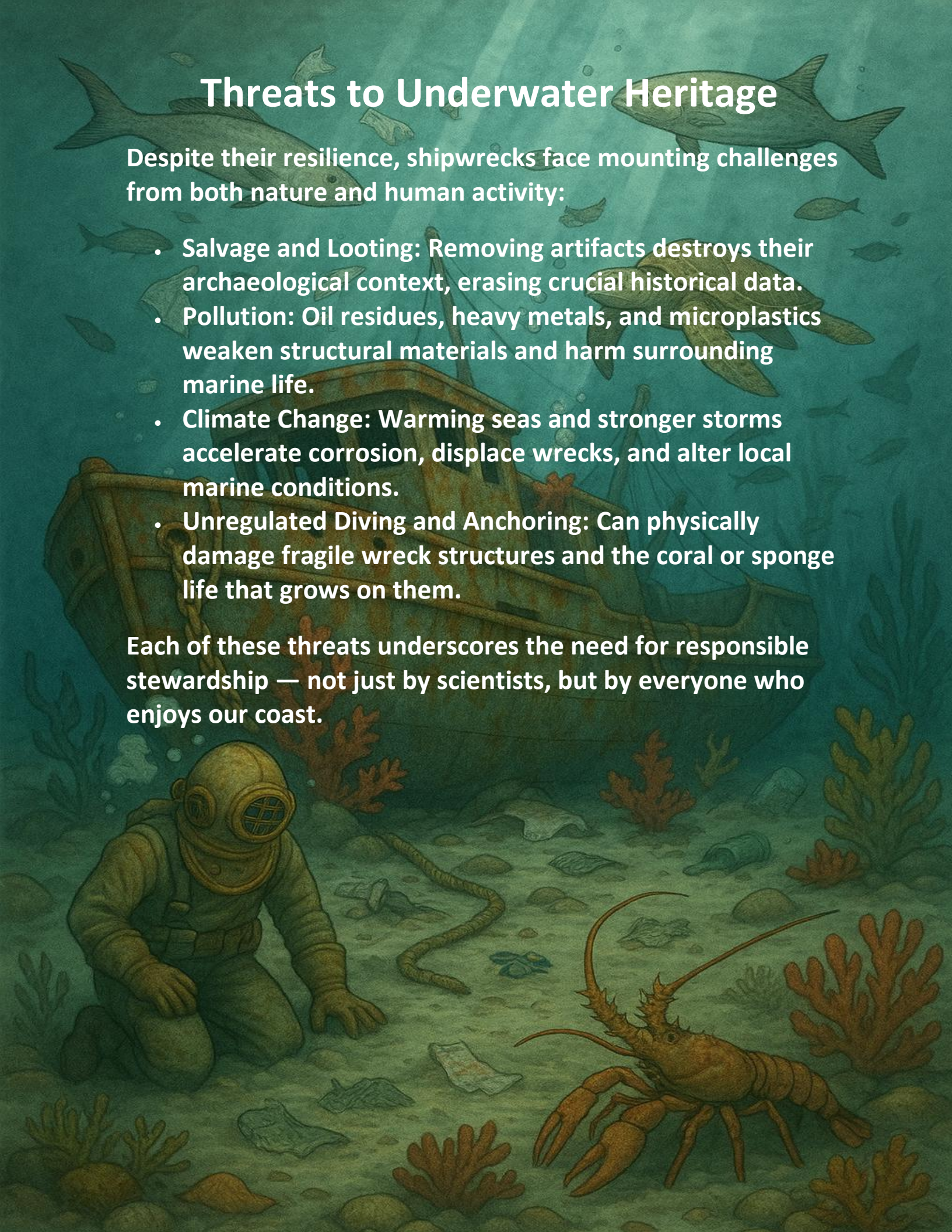


# Threats to Underwater Heritage

Despite their resilience, shipwrecks face mounting challenges from both nature and human activity:

- **Salvage and Looting:** Removing artifacts destroys their archaeological context, erasing crucial historical data.
- **Pollution:** Oil residues, heavy metals, and microplastics weaken structural materials and harm surrounding marine life.
- **Climate Change:** Warming seas and stronger storms accelerate corrosion, displace wrecks, and alter local marine conditions.
- **Unregulated Diving and Anchoring:** Can physically damage fragile wreck structures and the coral or sponge life that grows on them.

Each of these threats underscores the need for responsible stewardship — not just by scientists, but by everyone who enjoys our coast.





# How You Can Help Protect Our Maritime Heritage

Every visitor, diver, and coastal resident plays a role in preservation:

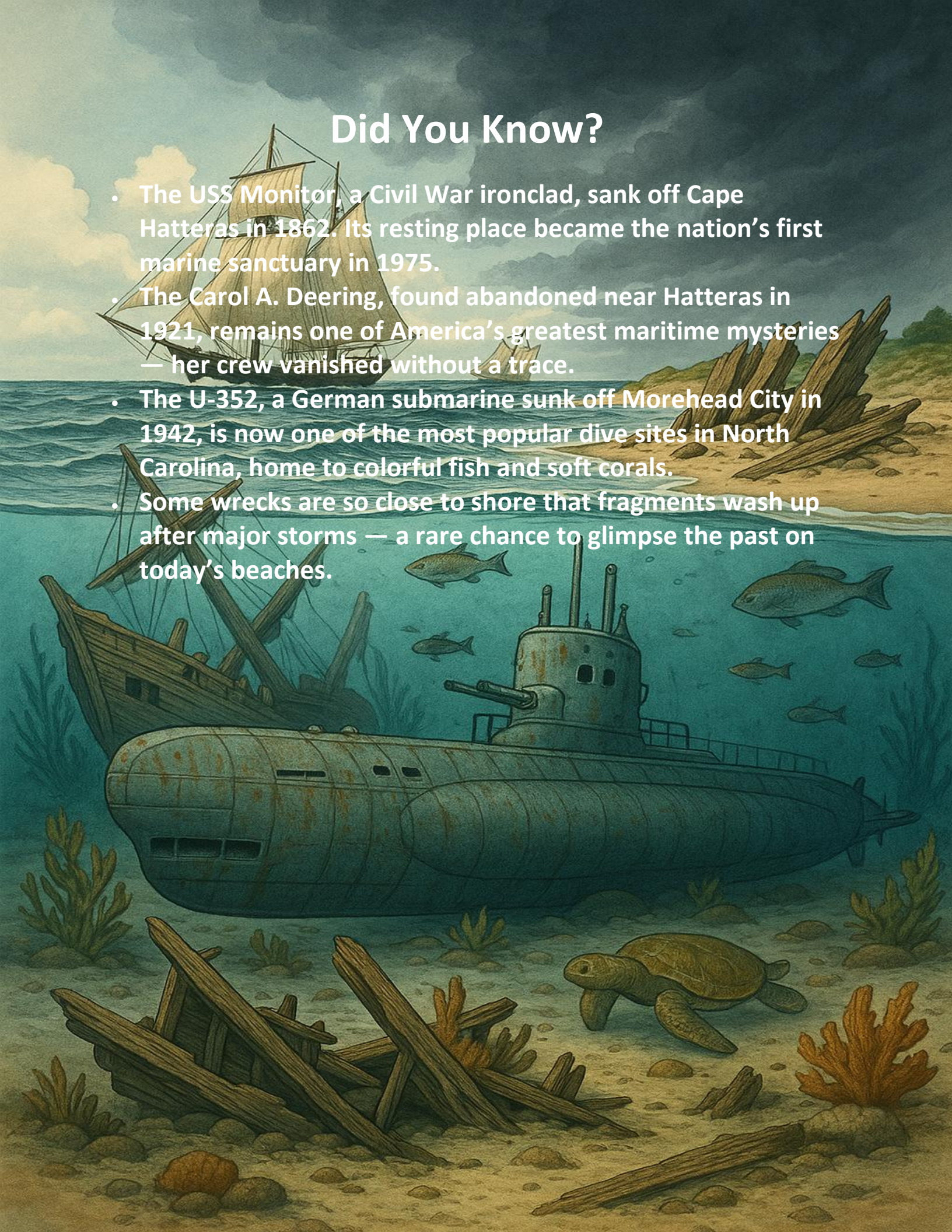
- **Visit Responsibly:** Follow diving and boating regulations near wrecks to prevent damage.
- **Report Discoveries:** If you see an exposed wreck or artifact after a storm, contact the NC Office of State Archaeology instead of removing items.
- **Support Conservation:** Volunteer at local maritime museums or contribute to programs that protect historic and ecological resources.
- **Educate and Share:** Spread awareness about how shipwrecks link human history and natural processes — turning curiosity into conservation action.





## Did You Know?

- The USS Monitor, a Civil War ironclad, sank off Cape Hatteras in 1862. Its resting place became the nation's first marine sanctuary in 1975.
- The Carol A. Deering, found abandoned near Hatteras in 1921, remains one of America's greatest maritime mysteries — her crew vanished without a trace.
- The U-352, a German submarine sunk off Morehead City in 1942, is now one of the most popular dive sites in North Carolina, home to colorful fish and soft corals.
- Some wrecks are so close to shore that fragments wash up after major storms — a rare chance to glimpse the past on today's beaches.

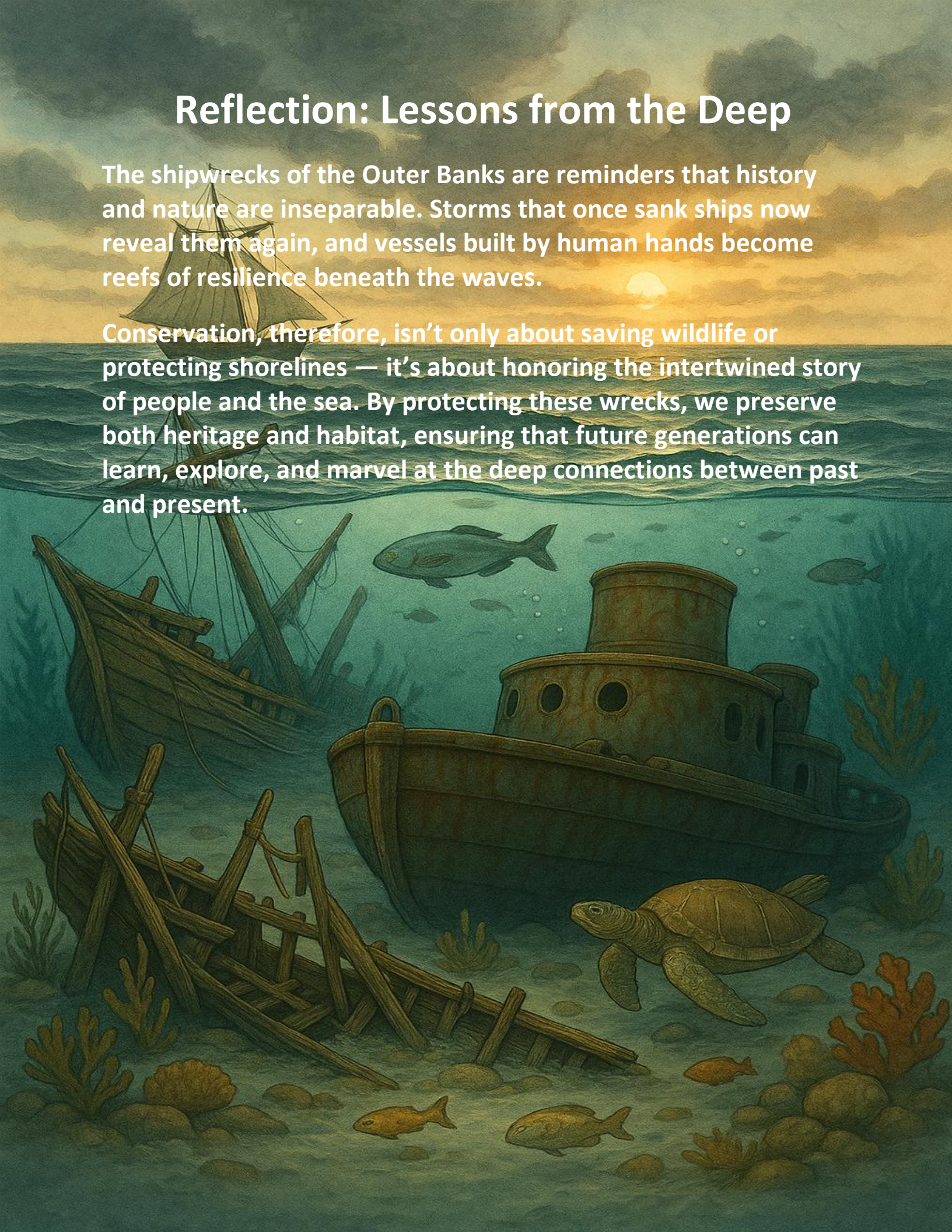




# Reflection: Lessons from the Deep

The shipwrecks of the Outer Banks are reminders that history and nature are inseparable. Storms that once sank ships now reveal them again, and vessels built by human hands become reefs of resilience beneath the waves.

Conservation, therefore, isn't only about saving wildlife or protecting shorelines — it's about honoring the intertwined story of people and the sea. By protecting these wrecks, we preserve both heritage and habitat, ensuring that future generations can learn, explore, and marvel at the deep connections between past and present.





# References

Monitor National Marine Sanctuary. (n.d.). *USS Monitor: America's first national marine sanctuary*. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Retrieved from <https://monitor.noaa.gov/>

North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. (n.d.). *Graveyard of the Atlantic: Maritime heritage of North Carolina*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncdcr.gov/>

National Park Service. (n.d.). *Cape Hatteras National Seashore: Maritime archaeology and shipwrecks*. U.S. Department of the Interior. Retrieved from <https://www.nps.gov/caha/learn/historyculture/shipwrecks.htm>

Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum. (n.d.). *Shipwrecks of the Outer Banks: Stories of courage and tragedy*. Retrieved from <https://graveyardoftheatlantic.com/>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2023). *Artificial reefs and marine life enhancement*. NOAA Fisheries. Retrieved from <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/>

North Carolina Office of State Archaeology. (2022). *Underwater archaeology in North Carolina: Protecting our submerged history*. Retrieved from <https://archaeology.ncdcr.gov/>

Rogers, M. (2020). *The maritime history of the Outer Banks*. University of North Carolina Press.

Stick, D. (1952). *Graveyard of the Atlantic: Shipwrecks of the North Carolina Coast*. University of North Carolina Press.

U.S. Department of Commerce. (2021). *Climate impacts on coastal heritage sites*. NOAA Climate Program Office. Retrieved from <https://www.noaa.gov/climate>