Chapter 10

Norway

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1. The Norwegian Territorial Sea and the Exclusive Economic Zone

Norway is situated on the northern fringe of Europe, bordering large areas of open seas. Seafaring has traditionally been a precondition of human life in large parts of the country. Even today, Norway is a maritime nation. The country receives about 70 per cent of its total export income from maritime activities, with oil and gas as the main contributors. The assertion of sovereign rights over the continental shelf for the purpose of exploring and exploiting its natural resources that took place during the 1960s, and the further expansion of rights that came in the 1970s when Norway acquired its 200 nm exclusive economic zone (EEZ), laid the foundation for the economic prosperity of Norway today.

The Norwegian coastline is estimated to be approximately 88,000 km in length. As such, it is one of the longest coastlines in Europe. Norwegian authorities assert jurisdiction, at different levels, over approximately two million sq km of ocean. This vast area represents six to seven times the terrestrial area of Norway.
1.1 Types of sites

The types of cultural heritage sites that are located in the seas surrounding Norway range from prehistoric sites from the Palaeolithic era to sites evidencing present-day human impact. While only a little work has been done to investigate prehistoric sites underwater, the potential is evident, particularly in the North Sea. Prehistoric archaeological remains dating back 100,000 years can be found over almost the whole floor of the North Sea. In practice, artefacts dating from the last 10,000–12,000 years have been found at sites scattered from Viking Bank to Dogger Bank and at other locations. Mammal bones from 500,000 years B.P.¹ have been found on the floor of the southern part of the North Sea.²

Relics of ships from medieval times onwards are the most abundant category of the known underwater cultural heritage (UCH). The major sea routes around Norway go back many centuries and when the data is eventually collected the wrecks will be counted in tens of thousands. The fragmentary inventory of UCH inside the territorial waters of Norway identifies approximately 3,000 protected sites today and this is considered to be only a fraction of the potential sites. The knowledge of sites outside territorial waters is patchy and has not yet been collected in one inventory.

1.2 Threats to sites

The main threats to sites outside the territorial waters of Norway are today considered to be industrial activities – fisheries, especially trawling, dredging and the exploitation of oil and gas. Measures taken, and not taken, to respond appropriately to the negative impact on UCH of these legitimate activities will be discussed further on. Inside territorial waters the main threat comes from development activities, which generally take place rather close to the shore.

There is no clear evidence that commercial exploitation of UCH, in particular activities aimed at the sale, acquisition or barter of UCH, is a significant problem or is increasing. Nonetheless, reports indicate that there is an increase in inquiries to Norwegian maritime museums and ship registers concerning ships lost outside territorial waters, especially in connection with World Wars I and II.

These conclusions are made with the reservation that the data of the Cultural Heritage Management³ on these subjects outside territorial waters is very fragmentary.

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¹ Before Present, i.e. 1950.
² N.C. Flemming ‘The scope of Strategic Environmental Assessment of North Sea areas SEA3 and SEA2 in regard to prehistoric archaeological remains’ in Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (ed.) Strategic Environmental Assessment: SEA 3, DTI Consultation Document (London, 2002) SEA3_TR014.
³ The term ‘Cultural Heritage Management’ is used in several Norwegian acts as a standard expression. Depending on the context, the term may encompass the Ministry of Environment, the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, the regional offices in the county administration and the five museums appointed as underwater archaeological centres of expertise. See further below.