

Rare find: Andes is convinced there's more to be found

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"We haven't found what we would call 'The Wreck,'" Williams said. "We don't know if something like 'The Wreck' exists."

In the meantime, Williams hopes the timbers taken from the cave can reveal more specifics about how the Manila galleons were constructed, a process about which very little is known.

A strange moment

For Andes, it's a strange moment.

It turns out officially finding bits of a shipwreck is complicated, especially when those pieces are found in a protected area controlled by the state and still claimed by the Spanish government, which takes a protective stance over the wrecks of its old galleons.

Though groups had been hunting for the Beeswax for decades and pieces of the wreck's cargo had been washing up since the ship ran aground, it seems no one was prepared for a discovery quite this big.

There was immediate interest in retrieving the timbers, but considerations like securing a permit, the coronavirus pandemic and the logistics of doing a retrieval in caves that are difficult to reach, in an area popular with tourists, slowed the project's momentum. The retrieval date was moved multiple times and was finally put off until this spring.

Oregon State Parks remains deeply concerned about what the discovery will mean for the state park area near where the timbers were found, which already sees a high number of visitors throughout the year.

This week, the goal was to remove most, if not all, of the timbers from the cave so officials could say with confidence, "There's nothing else there," Delgado said.

The galleon has long captured people's imagination. At one point, the tragedy of the shipwreck was conflated with a story about men rowing ashore and burying a box — of gold, obviously — near Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain. Treasure seekers descended at various times on the mountain. Their activities once gave the mountain the nickname "mountain of a thousand holes."

For the record, Delgado said the only gold he's seen on shipwrecks is in the movies. The beeswax, porcelain and textiles would have been just as valuable as gold to people at the time.

Still, interest in the "lost Spanish gold" surges from time to time and park rangers sometimes catch people with shovels, said Ben Cox, the park manager of the Nehalem Bay Management Unit that includes Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain.

Such activities can harm resources and also violate park and ocean shore rules, said Chris Havel, associate director for the state parks department.

"Even the chance of an important historical find can challenge a person's judgment," he added. "There's a thrill in knowing and a nearly irresistible urge to discover more as quickly as possible."

He said, "We don't want to miss the chance at answering some long-standing questions about contact between European and tribal communities. We also don't want to harm these possible artifacts, the ocean shore or see people get hurt trying to chase the mystery."

But Andes feels conflicted. A former treasure hunter himself, he is now more intrigued by the history of the items he finds.

Over the past two years, he has been the person keeping a regular eye on the Beeswax timbers, making the tricky journey across slippery rocks and into caves he has begun to think won't withstand the pounding of ocean waves and the sliding of the cliffs above much longer.

As the retrieval date kept getting pushed back, he tried to keep the timbers in place. He tied up one with rope —

it got washed out to sea anyway last year — and partially reburied others, setting rocks on top of them.

At the same time, Andes said he has been asked by some people — including state parks officials — not to go out to the caves. And throughout the whole process, he has been told to keep quiet about his discovery.

It is a tricky balance, said state archaeologist John Pouley, who was on hand when the timbers were brought in this week. There is the need to keep archaeological sites and artifacts safe while at the same time educating the public about such discoveries.

Andes doesn't want hundreds of people rummaging around in cliffs and on the beaches, but he also thinks people should know about what was found.

'PEOPLE WALK DOWN HERE EVERY DAY AND WALK OFF WITH STUFF.'

Craig Andes | commercial fisherman and avid beachcomber

'Just looking for agates'

Oregon's beaches are public and the story of the Beeswax has been a community interest for decades. It's how Andes found the pieces of the wreck that have everyone so excited and concerned now.

By trying to keep word of the timbers quiet, he worries that parks and other groups involved missed an opportunity to better protect the resources. He knows he is not the only one roaming the beaches and hillside, curious about what is there.

"People walk down here every day and walk off with stuff," Andes said.

He thinks about some of the familiar faces, that instantly recognizable posture of people searching for old stuff, and the pleasant codes they'll exchange: "Looking for agates?"

"Yep, just looking for agates."

Then there are people who may not realize that the bit of porcelain or wood they've found could be important, something different than the usual beach debris, something they should tell someone about.

Andes believes that dis-

cussing more openly what is down there earlier could have boosted funding for recovering the timbers, future interpretation work and efforts to protect the site. He thinks the state missed an opportunity to get ahead of the public.

To which Havel noted in a statement: "It would be great if just explaining a problem and asking for public help would work in a situation like this. Our experience has been, it doesn't."

The state parks department doesn't see a way to get ahead of interest without identifying the location and inadvertently increasing interest.

"We already constantly say: stay away from cliff edges and bases, know the tides so you don't get trapped, stay away from logs in reach of the surf, and all the other beach safety messages," Havel said.

"Our additional message when people pay attention to this story will be, 'If you find anything unusual, old, and human-made on the ocean shore, report it.' Our view is doing that now for this specific location, or even without any context, would either put an unwanted spotlight on this spot or simply be confusing."

Andes is convinced there's more to be found that could help solve the mystery of the Beeswax — a mystery that has intrigued him since he was a kid.

Over the years, he studied photos and other historic documents. He explored beaches and cliffsides, expanding his own understanding of the landscape around the wreck, the places where evidence has washed up.

Andes discovered the first timber piece in the sea caves several years ago. It looked like nothing more than a bit of buried log, one end sticking out. At first, he wasn't sure what he was looking at. Then, in the spring of 2019, more of the wood was exposed and he began to suspect it wasn't just driftwood.

In fact, he said, he knew what it was the minute he saw more of it. The wood was exceptionally hard and dotted with small square holes. He was convinced it was from a shipwreck and one wreck in particular: the Beeswax.

"You can't tell all the treasure hunters in the world about it," he said, "but you kind of have to because they're going to find out about it anyway."

This story is part of a collaboration between The Astorian and Coast Community Radio.



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

Nehalem Fire Chief Chris Beswick, left, Oregon State Parks employee Justin Parker, right, and others in the Beeswax shipwreck recovery party guided a large piece of the wreck onto the beach.

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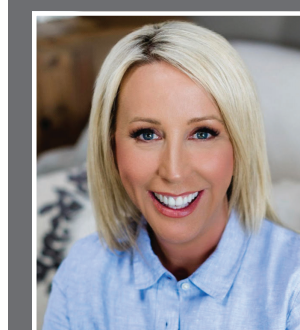
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