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A diver explores the wreck of the first world war cruiser *SMS Karlsruhe* in Scapa Flow, a body of water in the Orkney Islands, Scotland.

By Paul Kay

Before high quality underwater photography and video, wrecks were often thought of as intact vessels sitting upright on the seabed, looking very much like they did when afloat. In reality, their remains are more likely to be scattered over the seabed and difficult to tell apart from their surroundings. While they can be a fascinating time capsule, with their contents frozen at the point of sinking, much of their structure can be broken into pieces by the marine environment.

Even as the hard surfaces of the wrecks begin to collapse, they quickly become colonised by marine life. In some areas such as sandy seabeds, hard surfaces are rare so creatures which prefer them are drawn to wreckage, making homes in or on them. The type of creatures and plants that settle onto wreckage depends on many factors including depth, current, exposure to wave action and more. In short, the life on wrecks varies.

In really shallow waters where there is a lot of light, kelp and other seaweeds cover wreckage. However, such wreckage often disintegrates quickly as they are pounded by waves during storms. As they break up, they rapidly lose any resemblance to their original shape as ships, unless they happen to be in very sheltered areas indeed. Deeper wreckage is often less affected by the action of waves or storm surges and can last longer.

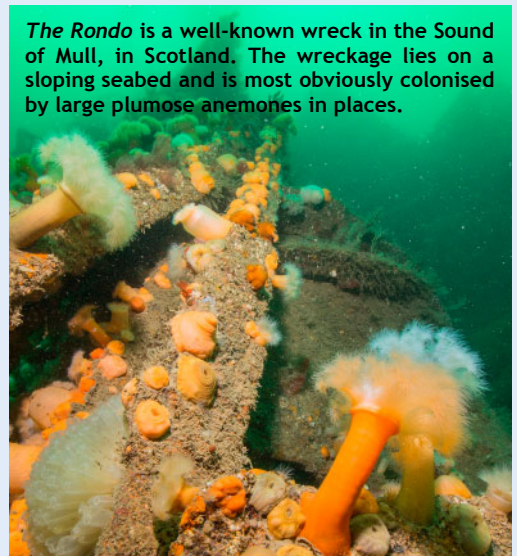


Steel ribs and plating survive for a long time, but as plating gradually disintegrates the ribs collapse too.

Life on Wrecks

In the cool Northern European sea, shallower wrecks become coated in creatures such as plumose anemones which, as they are often all white, can give such wrecks a ghostly appearance. Others become covered in sponges, dead men's fingers, sea stars, sea squirts and much more. Sometimes so much marine life covers the wreckage that it becomes difficult to see the wreck itself, as it blends in so well with the surrounding seabed. When this happens the wreckage becomes almost indistinguishable from its surroundings, except perhaps for just a few obviously man-made parts.

The Rondo is a well-known wreck in the Sound of Mull, in Scotland. The wreckage lies on a sloping seabed and is most obviously colonised by large plumose anemones in places.



Plants and animals which would normally be found on rocky seabeds often find wreckage to their liking. Marine animals such as fish, crabs, lobsters, starfish and others, find shelter in the nooks and crannies of wrecks as these are similar to the ledges and crevices found on rocky seabeds. Large animals, such as conger eels, also like wreckage, especially pipes. These are always an attraction for conger eels and given half the chance, they will live in one. Wrecks on sandy seabed often attract fish, which shoal around them, as they offer shelter in otherwise featureless areas.



See more on Page 11....