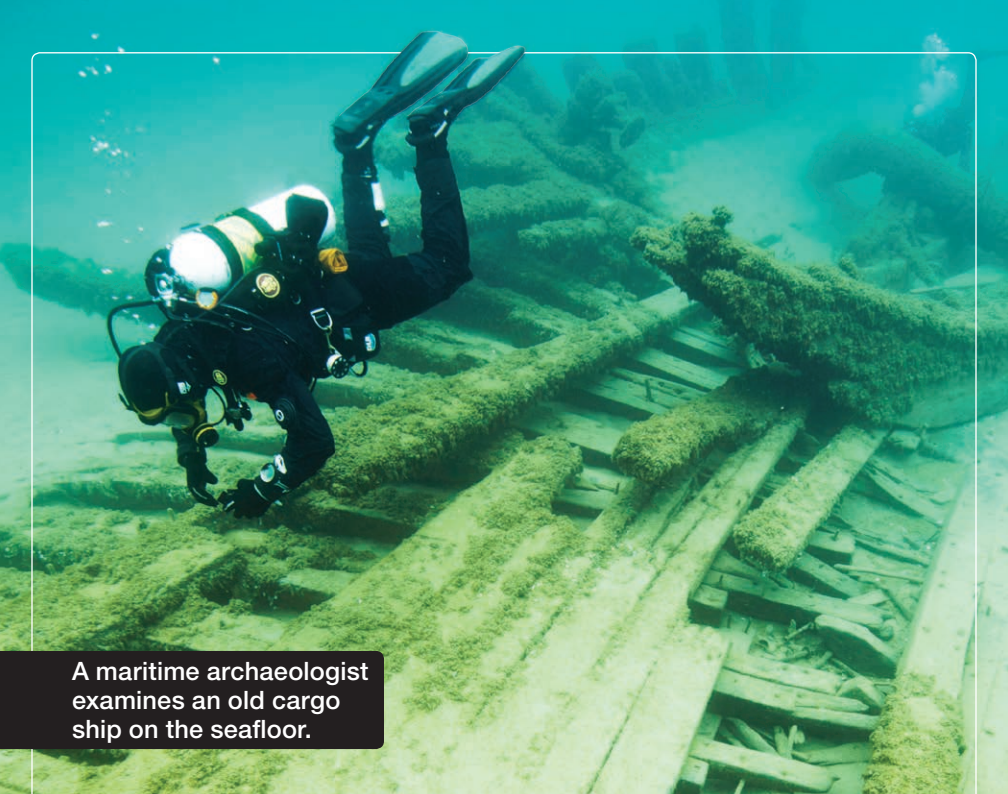

A maritime archaeologist examines an old cargo ship on the seafloor.

Shipwreck Explorer

Dive to the ocean floor with a maritime archaeologist to learn what it's like to explore underwater wrecks.

By Inez Prieto

Archaeologists are like history detectives. They explore ruins left behind by people and civilizations that no longer exist. By studying these artifacts, archaeologists can learn what life was like in the past.

Maritime archaeologists do the same kind of work, but with one difference: While other archaeologists work on land, maritime archaeologists conduct their explorations underwater. In this interview, maritime archaeologist Frank Cantelas talks about this job and one of his most exciting discoveries.

What does a maritime archaeologist do?
I search for shipwrecks in rivers, lakes, and oceans. Maritime archaeologists also look for remains of prehistoric civilizations buried in the seafloor. I use many of the same skills as an archaeologist who works on land. For instance, I research historical records and try to understand the geography of long ago. Then I compare my findings to present-day geography. This helps me to target sites to search.

What discoveries have you made?
I was involved in excavating the *Maple Leaf*, a ship that carried cargo during the American Civil War. In 1864, the ship sank after hitting an underwater mine. The ship was buried beneath eight feet of mud . . . so the remains were well preserved. The find was very exciting because it contained the largest number of Civil War artifacts ever discovered at a single site.

Why is it important to study shipwrecks?
Shipwrecks and other underwater sites are like time capsules. They represent a snapshot of cultures lost to history. Preserving and protecting those artifacts on the seafloor will ultimately tell us more about ourselves. There's more history hidden on the seafloor than in all the museums of the world.

Frank Cantelas (right) and a fellow scientist return from a dive.

How does one become a maritime archaeologist?
Your local library and the Internet are great resources! Do as much research as you can about archaeology and ocean exploration. When you become a teenager, you can volunteer for projects being conducted at local universities. In college, study all of the sciences, as well as math, history, and anthropology. Try to get an internship at an archaeological site on land. Also, earn a scuba certification and become a scientific diver.

How much money does a maritime archaeologist earn?

Salaries can range from $30,000 [when you are starting out] to $80,000 for an archaeologist who is a university professor.

Frank Cantelas is a maritime archaeology program officer for the Office of Exploration and Research. It is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

p. 1: Tane Casserley, NOAA Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary; p. 3tr: Image courtesy of Kad'yak 2004 Exploration, Timothy Runyan, NOAA-OE