

## **Nova Scotia**

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Shipwrecks are an enigma. On one hand they are a tragedy, often associated with suffering, loss of life and, in many cases, horrible environmental damage. But shipwrecks that were once seen as catastrophes have now become a wonderful boon to the environment, providing a base for a rich marine ecosystem and a magnet for diving tourism.

In 1970, while approaching the Strait of Canso, the narrow passage between the Nova Scotia mainland and Cape Breton, the 11,000 ton tanker Arrow struck a submerged reef and spilled 50,000 barrels of oil into Chedabucto Bay, creating one of the worst ecological disasters in Canadian waters. The environmental damage was enormous as the oil spread out and covered miles of beaches and destroyed local fisheries. But oil, although it does an incredible amount of immediate and horrible damage, is a natural product and, as history has shown, will over time, absorb and dissipate. The oceans have a great ability to recuperate from such disasters.

Chedabucto Bay has recovered and today is an area where fish, birds and marine mammals thrive and people can once again come to admire the area's natural beauty and abundance of wildlife. The Arrow itself is a testament to the resiliency and recuperative powers of Mother Nature.

The Arrow broke in two shortly after the accident and the remains of the bow section are strewn about the base of Cerberus Rock, the reef that caused the damage. Divers occasionally visit the remains of the bow section but mostly it is left to the several dozen grey seals that congregate around the reef. The real attraction of the Arrow is its large stern section, which lies about a hundred metres away, resting intact and upright, covered in a lush tapestry of marine life.

At a depth of forty feet we settled onto her main deck which was bathed in filtered sunlight. The deck superstructure around us showed signs of its battle against the elements. Sections of walls and roofs have been eaten away by time, storms and wave action. Penetration is not recommended and the abundance of marine life soon stole our attention. The superstructure, railings, stairways and hatches are shrouded in a thick growth of kelp which acts as home and haven to a variety of fish such as the ever-present and inquisitive cunners, wary pollock and cryptic sea ravens. Closer examination also revealed small blennies and delicate nudibranchs. The sheer walls of the hull drew us over the side where the vertical surface is covered in a forest of finger sponges and clumps of encrusting sponges, interspersed by plumose anemones and tunicates. At 90 feet, on the sandy bottom, small, and seemingly insignificant pieces of wreckage are strewn about but they should not be overlooked. Lurking beneath a particular piece of sheet metal we discovered one of the resident wolffish.

In areas where the bottom cannot support a great diversity of life, either due to composition or topography, ships, whether there by accident or not, are the nucleus for a burgeoning ecosystem and a safe nursery for propagation of many species. Over the past decade the advantages of shipwrecks have been recognized and groups of environmentally aware people have been deliberately sinking vessels as artificial reefs in an attempt to benefit the marine environment. And the results have been spectacular.

In 1994, nearly twenty five years after the Arrow tragedy a 366' destroyer escort, the HMCS Saguenay, which had been thoroughly cleaned of all contaminants, was towed into position off the picturesque town of Lunenburg and deliberately sunk on a featureless sandy bottom. Today she is an oasis of marine life on an otherwise barren plain. At first glance many parts of her are indistinguishable as sections of a ship, so thick is her blanket of algae. But the kelp is a sanctuary that has attracted a wide assortment of marine flora and fauna. Gently brushing aside the kelp fronds reveals crabs, several varieties of shrimps, longhorn and shorthorn sculpins, colourful rock gunnels, anemones, nudibranchs and starfish. Lobsters have also been found taking refuge on the Saguenay. And because of the Saguenay's pre sinking preparation, the ship is as diver-safe

as common sense and training will allow. Divers can explore the Bridge Deck, Operations and swim through the cavernous helicopter hangar.

Whether caused by disaster or design, the sinking of a ship, given time, often has a positive impact on the environment. Today the wrecks of Nova Scotia are a healthy progenitor to the marine environment and also provide some excellent diving which in turn has fostered a popular diving tourism industry, a win win situation all around.

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