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Outrage over 'lack of respect' sl shipwreck

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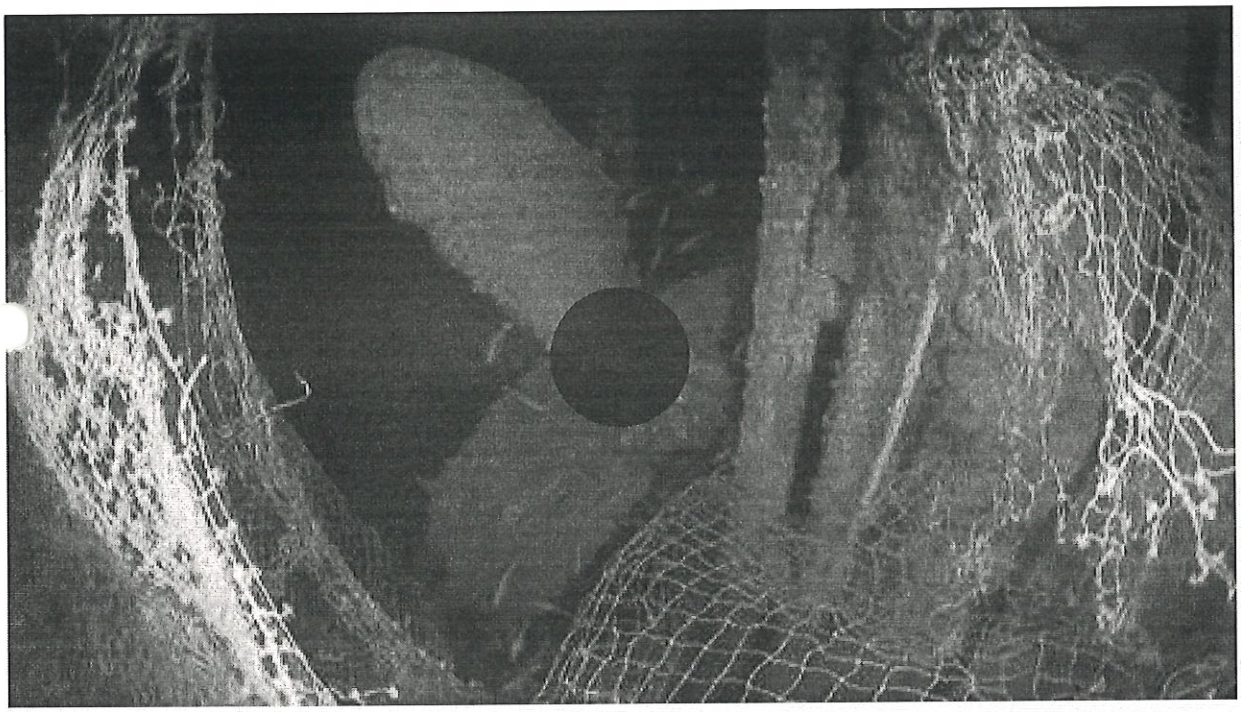

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New Zealand's Chinese community is outraged at a "lack of respect" shown to the wreck of a ship which sank more than 100 years ago with 499 Chinese bodies on board.

e Race Relations Commissioner has also jumped on board, accusing the team who traced the 112-year-old wreck to its resting place off the coast of Hokianga Harbour as trying "to turn a shipwreck into a money making venture".

The row follows the announcement last week of the discovery of the SS Ventnor, which struck a reef and sank two days after leaving Wellington on a repatriation mission to China in 1902. The remains of 499 Chinese citizens, who had worked and died in New Zealand, were on board to be returned to their homeland in accordance with Chinese tradition.

Documentary maker John Albert led a team which traced the sunken vessel to around 20km west of Hokianga Harbour at a depth of 150m. They brought up a number of items from the ship, which were displayed last week, in order to confirm it was the SS Ventnor.

However, a growing uneasiness in the Chinese community was revealed in a state[illegible]from the New Zealand Chinese Association which said it was "outraged" th[illegible]ad been disturbed.

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Kirsten Wong from the association said there was "genuine dismay felt across the NZ Chinese early settler community for the lack of respect being shown towards their ancestral remains and the disregard for the communities - Chinese and Maori - whose story it is".

"The community is also distressed about suggestions that historic artefacts be shipped to China, when they say the artefacts are not only significant for them, but are an important part of all New Zealanders' social and cultural heritage," she said.

The Chinese community would prefer the shipwreck was left untouched and treated as a graveyard.

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Race Relations Commissioner Dame Susan Devoy supported the call, saying "this is much more than a mere shipwreck" and slammed those she said were trying to turn it into a "money making venture" and tourist attraction.

"The voices of Chinese New Zealanders - many of whom are descended from men whose remains are still with the wreck of the SS Ventnor - are missing amid very public plans to turn their final resting place into a tourism venture," Dame Susan said.

The story of the Ventnor and what happened to some of the remains which washed up on shore was "a touchstone of race relations, dignity and mana", she said. A number of bodies which washed inland were recovered by local Te Roroa and Te Rarawa Maori who buried them in their ancestral burial grounds and cared for their graves.

Last year the descendants of both peoples gathered in the remote Hokianga graveyard to unveil special memorials honouring both sets of ancestors. A Chinese arch, which looks out over the water where the ship sank, has also been erected in honour of those buried there.

Calling for the wreck site to be protected, Dame Susan said: "Just as we would never consider turning Pike River [Mine] into a tourist attraction, so too should we respect the men of the SS Ventnor and their descendants and communities. The SS Ventnor is a site of significance for all New Zealanders."

- NZME.

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