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The Black divers excavating slave shipwrecks: 'I'm telling my ancestors: I'm with you'

Members of Diving With a Purpose search out and investigate the vessels' remains, bringing history to light and memorializing lost lives

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Young divers measure artifacts in September 2015. Photograph: Yasmeen Smalley/Courtesy of Erik Denson

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Onboard a boat off the Florida Keys, I witness a group of divers, aged 16 to 20, freeing themselves from the weight of their air tanks and masks before diving back into the waters of Biscayne national park. Where Biscayne Bay meets the Atlantic Ocean, their heads break the surface, bobbing in the open sea like specks of stars in the sky.

It's a breathtaking sight.

A national study conducted by the USA Swimming Foundation estimated that 64% of Black children can't swim. It's an alarming statistic that speaks to years of segregation, a lack of public infrastructure and a fraught history with the water. Yet, despite these challenges, Black divers are reconnecting with the water with the support of non-profit organizations like Diving with a Purpose (DWP).

DWP, led by diving veterans in their 70s and 80s, mentors young divers of color in underwater archaeology. The organization focuses on protecting submerged heritage sites, particularly shipwrecks related to the Atlantic slave trade.

Since 2005, DWP has helped uncover 20 such sites, including the São José Paquete África, a Portuguese slave ship that sank off the coast of South Africa in 1794, killing more than 200 captured Africans on board. By finding the remains of these ships - many lost at sea on their way to the Americas - the divers shed light on the most horrific trade in human history. Confronting a warming ocean, DWP's mission has evolved from preservation to include conservation. Its efforts now include nurturing coral growth; teams have planted more than 2,000 elkhorn corals in bleached, overheated waters.



Kramer Wimberley, left, with youth divers from the US and Honduras during a 2023 exchange program. Photograph: Yarminiah Rosa

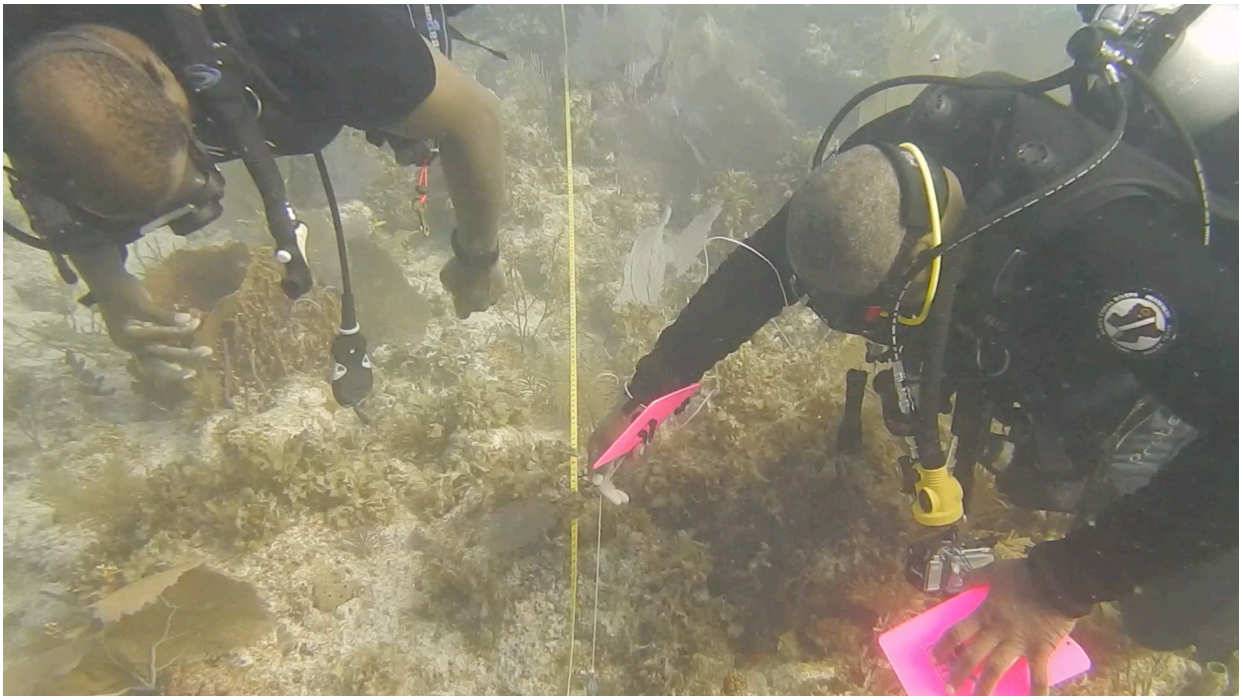
"How do we memorialize an event that is still unfolding?" asks the Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe, referencing the enduring impact of the Atlantic slave trade. These divers do so by caring for gravesites and placing "flowers" - the corals they nurture to full bloom. Here, they tell the Guardian why this work matters.

A 24-year search for a ship

Kenneth Stewart, 79, founder of DWP

Kenneth Stewart sits on the porch of his home in Nashville, Tennessee. It's been a blisteringly hot week for the 79-year-old diver, with temperatures nearing 100F (38C). In these conditions, water is a welcome reprieve.

"I dive because it's peaceful, the weightlessness," he says. "It's spiritual."



Kramer Wimberley, left, and Christopher Powell conduct a substrate survey of Alligator Reef in the Florida Keys this summer. Video: Courtesy of Kramer Wimberley

For 24 years, Stewart has led a team of African American divers in Biscayne national park in search of the Guerrero. The Spanish slave ship, caught by the British Royal Navy in 1827, was found illegally transporting 561 enslaved Africans to Cuba. During an ensuing chase, the ship crashed into a reef, splitting in two and resulting in the deaths of 49 people onboard. The exact location of the wreckage remains unknown.

For Stewart, learning about the Guerrero sparked a desire to find the remains of the ship and others like it. In 2005, he founded DWP to train divers in civilian archaeology and assist in documenting shipwrecks worldwide.

"I've been on several slave ships, and it's an eerie feeling," Stewart says. "Of the 49 who died on the Guerrero, we don't even know their names."

Over the years and through a partnership with the Smithsonian's Slave Wrecks Project, Stewart and his team of divers have contributed to documenting the slave ship the Clotilda, the British steamship Hannah M Bell in Key Largo, and a lost Tuskegee airmen P-39 aircraft in Lake Huron.

In each excavation, the artefacts they find vary - sometimes it's a cannon, a pulley, or wooden fragments - but the feeling remains the same. They are uncovering remnants of history, literally bringing them to light after hours of fieldwork, surveys and sonar scans. As African American divers, they're also uncovering parts of their own heritage with each excavation.



An instrument panel discovered underwater in August 2015. Photograph: Courtesy of Erik Denson

"When I'm in the water with these ships, I'm telling my ancestors: I'm there with you," Stewart says. But despite his best efforts, the Guerrero continues to elude him. "I want to close this chapter," he says. "Twenty-four years is long enough."

A lifeguard who was barred from diving

Ernie Franklin, 72, instructor

Swimming didn't come easily to Ernie Franklin.

"I was raised on the lower east side of Detroit, but I had to travel to the north-west side for swim lessons," says the 72-year-old diver of his childhood. Years later, when Franklin wanted to learn how to dive at the local YMCA, he was turned away - a racist rejection - even though he was the pool's lifeguard.

"Back in the day they had all kinds of discouraging facts, so-called facts, about Black people and diving," he says. "You know, your lung capacity was too small, your bone density was too thick, and being able to really comprehend the physics of the sport would be more of a challenge, plus I wouldn't be able to afford it."

But the water kept calling him back. "The water has always been within me. I don't really know how to explain it, it's just a connection," he says.



Divers documenting the wreck of the Hannah M Bell, a 19th-century steamship in the Florida Keys, in 2014. Photograph: Albert G Dobbins III/Courtesy of Erik Denson

As the youth education coordinator for DWP, Franklin is working to eliminate the barriers to access that he faced when trying to get into the pool as a child, and encourage a new generation of Black divers to develop their own affinity for the water. When he's not diving in Florida, Franklin partners

with the District of Columbia public schools in his home town of DC to teach high school students how to swim and, if they choose, how to dive.

"I think the young people I have the privilege of working with and being exposed to are what keep me moving and grooving," he laughs. "Right now, I think life is a privilege. To use the cliche, I'm going to ride it until the wheels fall off."

'Reminding myself that I am alive'

Ayana Flewellen, 33, instructor

Less than 1% of practicing archaeologists in the United States are Black, says Ayana Flewellen, assistant professor of anthropology at Stanford University and co-founder of the Society of Black Archaeologists. Flewellen joined DWP in 2015 as an instructor.



Ayana Flewellen during a DWP dive. Photograph: Courtesy of Ayana Flewellen

"The reason I get to do maritime archaeology isn't because of anyone in the field of maritime archaeology. It's because of Black divers who took it upon themselves to assert their claim in African diasporic history underwater and create a pathway for us to do this work as well," she says.

While diving at the remains of the Clotilda, one of the last known slave ships to arrive in the US, in 1860 near Mobile, Alabama, Flewellen helped collect and catalog artefacts. The ship's largely intact cargo hold made it extremely rare.

"When I dove into the Clotilda and was in the hull of that ship, the closeness, the intimacy, and the coldness of that space profoundly affected me. Yet I held my breath, reminding myself that I am alive," Flewellen says. "There is something about being in that space that evokes a sense of livability, which, for me, has always been a grounding force amid the heartbreak."

Each artefact that Flewellen touches connects her to the traumas her ancestors endured. There is a deeply personal nature to her work.

"These spaces involved a lot of trauma, harm and death. But they are also where people lived. The fact that people lived – and we know this because we are here as their descendants – helps me hold on to that intimate connection," she says.

Caring for a collapsing ecosystem

Kramer Wimberley, 60, instructor

"One of the first times I went swimming, I almost drowned," Kramer Wimberley says. "I thought everyone knew how to swim." On a family trip to the Jersey shore, sure enough, eight-year-old Wimberley dove headfirst into the ocean. "I thought I would turn into a fish."

He didn't, of course, and a lifeguard had to rescue him – twice. Nevertheless, he was determined to learn. Today, the former firefighter and amateur coral enthusiast leads Collective Approach to Restoring Our Ecosystems (Cares), the coral conservation branch of DWP.

"When you see an area where soft corals are proliferating, it indicates a transition from hard coral to soft coral," Wimberley says. "When currents or surges occur, you see them sway back and forth in the water column. Sea fans, in particular, are lavender or purple, and their colors are beautiful.

"But all I see is a collapsing ecosystem."



Wimberley, left, identifying coral species with a youth participant, Duke Hood, in Guanaja, Honduras, last year. Photograph: Yarminiah Rosa

Soft coral proliferation is associated with rising ocean temperatures. It's just one change brought on by the climate crisis he's witnessed in over 30 years of diving.

Wimberley asks if I'm familiar with the poet Kahlil Gibran before reciting a line from Sand and Foam, in which Gibran describes the infinite sea amid infinite grains of sand.

"Sometimes, when I look at the ocean or while I'm in the water, I think to myself, wow, how insignificant you are in the grand scheme of things," he says. His encounters with fish while diving in Florida's Biscayne waters reinforce this idea.

"When you see a huge school of fish underwater, and if you're at peace and non-threatening, they will allow you into their community. You become just another fish among them. I can slow my breathing and move gently, and though the school is a bit cautious, they eventually decide, 'We don't know

what kind of fish you are, but you're not doing anything too strange. So we'll hang around.'"

"Yes," he says, with a boyish grin. "They've accepted me."

A young diver faces the future

Michaela Strong, 24, youth diver

Michaela Strong is running late after a calculus exam. When I ask her about it, she scrunches her nose. She'd much rather discuss the process of becoming a divemaster, a certification training that will prepare her to be a professional diver.

"I just love being underwater," she says.



Michaela Strong in the Florida Keys, working with coral trees in nurseries in 2019. Video: Courtesy of Michaela Strong.

Strong grew up surrounded by divers. Her father, a certified lifeguard, was part of the Underwater Adventure Seekers, a Washington DC-based group of African American divers.

"They've known me since I was a little girl," she says. As a generation of older divers ages out, Strong and her peers, alumni of Youth Diving With a

Purpose, are stepping up to become instructors for the next cohort of students.

She is particularly invested in DWP’s coral restoration arm, and plans to major in natural science at Delaware State University.

Young divers like Strong find themselves in a precarious position. When they look to the past, they’re confronted by the ailments of history; when they look to the future, they face the impending doom of the climate crisis. It is in this murky middle where they live, contemplating all that is still possible.

“I actually follow some of the [coral] bleach monitoring in the Florida Keys. For the past six months or so, the temperatures have been stable,” Strong says. “I’m hopeful. Very hopeful.”

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