Speaker delves into his underwater archaeology career

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A marine archaeologist used his unique experiences in the field to share about underwater archaeology and the developments made in tandem with industry that further research from shore to deep oceans last during a speech on campus.

Robert Church, a marine archaeologist for over 20 years, said he has dived into all types of waters to find bits of history, from a river in North Carolina with a confederate gunship, to a sinkhole in Florida.

Church said he has investigated many sites of sunken history during his long career in marine archaeology, the study of past civilizations through the examination of shipwrecks, harbors and other physical remains they left behind underwater.

In recent years, Church said, developments in archaeology have grown in tandem with the oil and gas industry, specifically in the deep sea, which he considers anything beyond scientific diving.

"It is a distinct shift in methodology," said Church. "I am no longer going down and putting my hands on it."

Because of this, machines like Autonomous Underwater Vehicles and Remote Operated Vehicles are both used for archaeology and oil underwater, but were paid to be developed for the industry, he said.

"Each improvement gets us another piece of the puzzle," said Church. "Equipment advancements are mutually beneficial to both (archaeology and industry)."

When his marine archaeology career began, deep water was not an anticipated field for Church, but it has been more and more of what he does with the relationship of his field to the oil and gas industry.

In 2001, Church and his colleague Dan Warren were doing a pipeline survey with C&C Technologies for the oil and gas industry with the special deep sea equipment and made a deep sea archeological discovery that had been searched for for years.

Routine commercial work led to the duo's discovery of the U-166, the only German U-boat that was sunk in the Gulf of Mexico whose circumstances of its sinking were controversial.

"That was what changed everything for me," said Church. "It changed mine and Dan's careers."

"For almost 60 years this U-boat had been missing somewhere out in the Gulf of Mexico. So when we looked at this and (it) really started to sink in that we may have found it, that was a little overwhelming really, and it was exciting," Church told PBS in 2015.

During the speech, Church also talked about cultural resource management, which is the survey for and documentation of archaeological sites instigated by the need to examine sites before they are destroyed by construction or natural disasters, according to Chegg.com.

"Louisiana is probably at the bottom of the list as far as laws in place, said Church. "But Mississippi is behind us," he said with a laugh.

"It's working with physical pieces of the past," said Joseph Giavotella, an English major and president of the Philosophy society. "I came because it was an interesting topic."

Giavotella said what he found most impressive was the everyday items Church said was used to date some wreck sites, such as a fork on one wreckage.

"For us, looking into the past those things seem like artifacts, but today we don’t think about what the future generations will use to learn about us," said Giavotella.

The event was hosted by the the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Archaeology Society, an organization for students and non-students interested in a field or archaeology.

"It was great," said President Kristin Carlene, a junior anthropology major. "It was a higher attendance because it was better promoted by multiple teachers in class."

With the incoming freshmen, diversity within the study of anthropology has entered UL Lafayette and Carlene said they are trying to supply events that interest everyone in the ever-growing major.

"Pretty recently we’ve had an influx of interest in historical archaeology, cultural anthropology, which are thing that haven’t been as highlighted in our meetings," said Carlene. "We have tried hard to adjust to what they’re wanting."

"We’ve has previous interest in underwater archaeology so it’s just really nice to be able to make that shift and satisfy our members," said Carlene.

Currently serving as senior marine archaeologist at Oceaneering International Inc., formerly C&C Technologies, Church directs dives from above now, having done 400 reports since 1998 about sites similar to the ones he used to dive into himself.

"We all have a piece and a process to discover about the human experience," said Giavotella.