



Exploring the Blake Plateau

Chapter 3 People of the Sea



Chapter 3: People of the Sea — Culture, History, and Stewardship

Introduction

Welcome to the **Blake Plateau**, a deep-sea region off the U.S. Southeast coast teeming with **biodiversity**, geologic wonders, and layered human history. The content and activities in this chapter will help learners explore how culture, history, marine science, and stewardship are deeply connected.

The Blake Plateau is home to the world's largest **deep-sea coral** province. From the top of the sea surface to the seafloor, the Blake Plateau is a refuge for elusive seabirds, sea turtles, fish, whales, and more. But beyond its ecological richness, the plateau is also a place of profound cultural meaning.

For the **Gullah/Geechee** people, descendants of West and Central Africans who were enslaved in the southeastern United States, these waters are part of a sacred ancestral landscape. During the Middle Passage—the transatlantic route through which millions of Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas—many lives were lost at sea. Some of those lives were lost in waters above the Blake Plateau, making it a resting place for ancestors and a site of remembrance and reverence.

For centuries, because of the briskly moving **Gulf Stream** current, these same waters have also been major corridors of maritime travel and trade. Ships carrying goods, people, and resources passed over this region along heavily traveled Atlantic shipping routes. Storms, navigational challenges, and war-time conflict led to numerous **shipwrecks**, leaving behind submerged traces of human history on and around the plateau's seafloor.

Today, the Blake Plateau is increasingly recognized as a **maritime cultural landscape**—a place where ocean ecosystems and human history are inseparably linked. Its seafloor holds thriving coral habitats and also the remains of historic vessels, each contributing to a deeper understanding of the history of the southeast.

Dive in to explore this globally significant region and discover how we can safeguard both the Blake Plateau's remarkable marine ecosystems and its cultural and historical legacy.

This is the third in a three-part series, but can be used as a standalone lesson or as part of an extended unit on ocean science, environmental studies, geography, and cultural history.

Overview

How Are People Connected to the Blake Plateau?

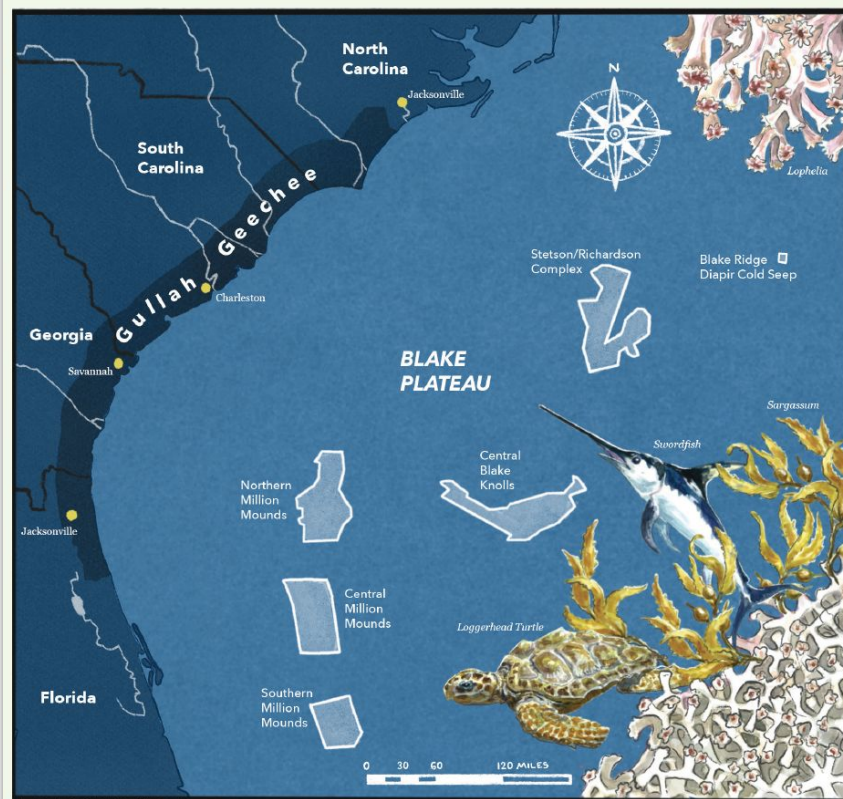
When we picture landscapes, we often imagine forests, mountains, or deserts. But the ocean is also a landscape — one shaped by currents, seafloor features, ecosystems, and human journeys across time.

The Blake Plateau is an extraordinary undersea plain of global importance, roughly 80-200 miles offshore the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, and has been largely undisturbed for millennia. Beneath the surface lies the world's largest known **deep-sea coral** provinces — tens of thousands of **coral mounds** that have grown slowly over thousands of years. These structures provide habitat that supports diverse marine life, from invertebrates to large migratory species like whales and sea turtles.

At the same time, historic Atlantic shipping routes have traversed the Blake Plateau for centuries. During the transatlantic slave trade (1500s–1800s), ships carrying enslaved Africans crossed these waters as part of the Middle Passage. Historical research, combined with oral histories and cultural knowledge, documents this region as part of a broader ancestral seascape.

These waters also contain the remains of vessels lost to time—**shipwrecks** that reflect centuries of exploration, trade, conflict, and migration. Some wrecks are linked to commercial shipping and naval activity, while as yet to be discovered shipwrecks may be associated with the transatlantic slave trade itself.

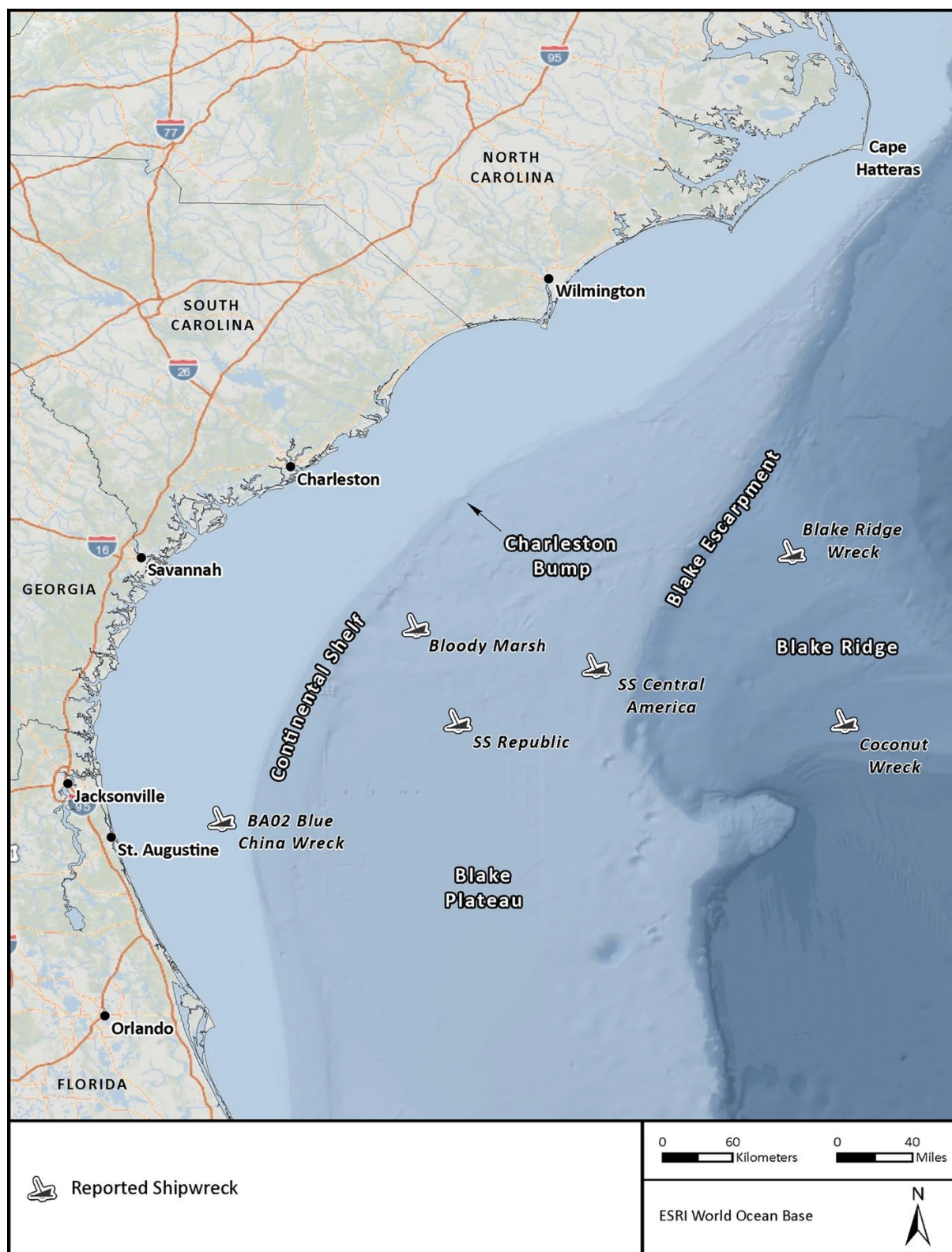
Important Ecological Features of the Blake Plateau



*Please note that while the Blake Plateau stretches from North Carolina to Florida, this map only shows key areas offshore South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Conversations with scientists helped shape the polygons' boundaries.

Map by Jessica Russo; Illustrations by Richard Jones

Map of the Blake Plateau region with associated bathymetric features and known shipwreck sites.



Source: Delgado et al., 2024 (*Journal of Maritime Archaeology*).

Together, these shipwrecks form an underwater archive that helps researchers better understand our maritime and cultural history, while also raising important ethical questions about preservation, memory, and respect. While shipwrecks have been discovered within and around the Blake Plateau, further exploration, and most likely new discoveries, are still happening today.

Leaders from the **Gullah/Geechee** Nation emphasize that ocean spaces are not empty. They hold stories, traditions, and memories. For many coastal communities, the sea is a source of livelihood, identity, spirituality, and resilience.

Scientists and cultural experts describe places like the Blake Plateau as maritime cultural landscapes—areas where ecology, geology, and human history intersect. Understanding the Blake Plateau means recognizing both:

- Its ecological importance as a deep-sea ecosystem
- Its cultural and historical significance as a place of ancestral connection and maritime heritage.

When we consider these dimensions together, stewardship becomes not only about protecting wildlife but also about honoring human history, cultural identity, and community voices.

By exploring this chapter, learners will:

- ✓ Recognize the Blake Plateau as both an ecological and cultural landscape
- ✓ Understand how the Middle Passage connects to southeastern U.S. waters
- ✓ Explore how shipwrecks contribute to our understanding of maritime history
- ✓ Examine how community knowledge and scientific research inform conservation
- ✓ Reflect on the relationship between identity, memory, and the ocean

Exploring the Blake Plateau content was created by EarthEcho International and reviewed for accuracy by science and conservation experts at the Natural Resources Defense Council, and for cultural and historical accuracy by Queen Quet, Chieftess and Head-of-State of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (www.QueenQuet.com).

People & Place

Cultural Connection to the Sea

In this activity, learners explore how culture, history, and ocean ecosystems are deeply connected through the lived experiences of the **Gullah/Geechee** people.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Internet access to watch the following videos (43 mins):
 - [The Will To Survive](#) (15 mins)
 - [Gullah/Geechee Nation Keepers of the Land](#) (10 mins)
 - [A Vanishing Culture, A Vanishing Land - United States of Climate Change - South Carolina](#) (6 mins)
 - [Virtual Session: The Blake Plateau: A Southern Treasure](#) (8 mins)
 - [Yeddi bout de Blake Plateau een de Gullah/Geechee Nation](#) (4 mins)
- People & Place Reflection [Instructions](#) & [Worksheet](#)

INSTRUCTIONS

- I. Using the People & Place Reflection [Instructions](#) & [Worksheet](#), watch the videos and reflect.

BACKGROUND

The Gullah/Geechee Nation stretches along the southeastern coast of the United States, from North Carolina to Florida, including the Sea Islands and nearby mainland communities. Descended from West and Central Africans who were enslaved on coastal plantations, the Gullah/Geechee people have preserved a distinct culture, language, and way of life shaped by the coastal environment.

Water is central to Gullah/Geechee life and identity. It has served as:

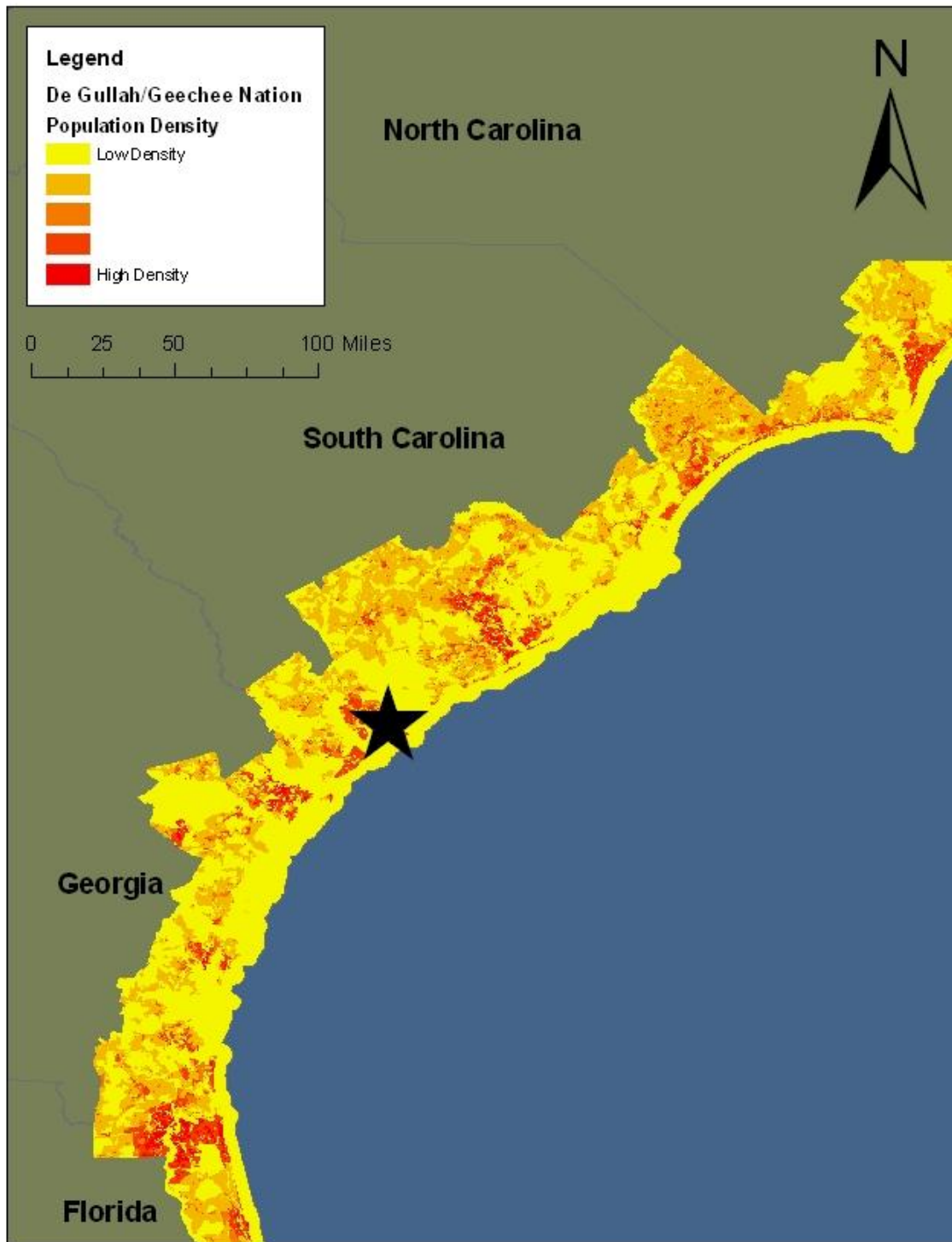
- A source of food and livelihood
- A route of forced migration during the Middle Passage
- A spiritual and cultural symbol
- A carrier of ancestral memory

Fishing, crabbing, farming, and boatbuilding traditions all reflect deep knowledge of coastal ecosystems and a strong relationship with the sea.

The Gullah/Geechee community is a living culture. In 2000, the Gullah/Geechee Nation received international recognition as a “nation within a nation.” In 2006, Congress established the [Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor](#) as a National Heritage Area to help preserve and share the history and traditions of the Gullah/Geechee people.

The Gullah/Geechee Nation spans the southeastern U.S. coast, including the Sea Islands and nearby mainland communities.

De Gullah/Geechee Nation



www.officialgullahgeechee.info

Today, many community leaders describe places like the Blake Plateau as part of a broader ancestral seascape—a living connection between ocean ecosystems and cultural heritage.

Protecting this region means honoring both its **biodiversity** and its cultural significance.



Queen Quet (Marquetta L. Goodwine) serves as the Gullah/Geechee Nation's Chieftess and Head-of-State. As an international spokesperson, she works to protect Gullah/Geechee land, culture, and ocean connections, emphasizing that coastal and ocean spaces are part of a sacred ancestral landscape.

"De land duh we famlee and de wata da we bloodline."

~ Queen Quet (www.QueenQuet.com)

People & Place Reflection - Instructions

In this activity, you will watch a series of videos and explore how culture, history, and the ocean are connected through the experiences of the Gullah/Geechee people. As you watch the videos, focus on:

- Connections between culture and the ocean
- The role of history and memory
- Why these places matter today

 **Part I: Watch & Observe** As you watch each video, record your ideas below.

Gullah/Geechee Traditions and Daily Life



Gullah/Geechee Culture and Environmental Change



Gullah/Geechee Connection to the Ocean



People & Place Reflection Worksheet

Using the Instructions section, watch a series of videos and explore how culture, history, and the ocean are connected through the experiences of the Gullah/Geechee people. As you watch the videos, focus on:

- Connections between culture and the ocean
- The role of history and memory
- Why these places matter today

 **Part I: Watch & Observe** As you view each video, record your ideas below.

Gullah/Geechee Traditions and Daily Life

What cultural traditions are connected to the coastal environment?

How do these traditions show knowledge of nature?

Gullah/Geechee Culture and Environmental Change

What environmental challenges are Gullah/Geechee communities facing today?

How are these environmental changes affecting culture and daily life?



Gullah/Geechee Connection to the Ocean

How is history connected to ocean spaces?

Why is it important to remember these stories?

How do the Gullah/Geechee people describe their relationship with the ocean?

What does the ocean represent beyond a physical place?

 **Part 2: Think & Discuss Respond to the questions below. Be prepared to share your ideas.**

How might culture influence the way people care for the environment?



Why is it important to include community voices in conservation?

How can history change the way we think about protecting the ocean?

Part 3: Reflect & Create

Journal Prompt: How is water connected to your community, culture, or identity?

You may respond by:

- Writing a paragraph
- Drawing an image
- Creating a concept map

Shipwreck Spotlight

Clues from the Seafloor

During this activity, learners will explore how **shipwrecks** connect human history and ocean ecosystems, compare two deep-sea shipwrecks to analyze their historical significance, examine patterns of shipwrecks across the Blake Plateau using a map, and reflect on the ethical, cultural, and scientific importance of preserving underwater sites.

The Blake Plateau's seafloor holds the remains of ships that sailed centuries ago. These shipwrecks are more than lost vessels—they are time capsules that help scientists and historians visualize and better understand the past.

Some wrecks are part of trade and travel history. Many are places where lives were lost at sea. Over time, shipwrecks become part of the ocean ecosystem, providing habitat for corals, fish, and other marine life.

The Blake Plateau is a **maritime cultural landscape**—a place where ocean ecosystems and human history are deeply connected. Shipwrecks are both scientific resources and cultural and historical sites. Preserving this region means preserving:

- Marine life
- Historical knowledge
- Cultural and ancestral memory

Community Spotlight: Diving With a Purpose

Diving With a Purpose is a non-profit organization that trains divers to locate, document, and help protect shipwrecks, especially those connected to the transatlantic slave trade. Their work combines maritime archaeology, ocean conservation, and cultural preservation, ensuring that these sites are treated with respect and dignity.

Why it matters:

- Preserves cultural and historical sites
- Honors lives lost at sea
- Connects descendants to ancestral history
- Trains a new generation of ocean stewards

Learn more: divingwithapurpose.org

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Internet access to watch a segment of [Virtual Session: The Blake Plateau: A Southern Treasure](#) (9 mins) - Dr. James Delgado, Senior Vice President, Search Inc.
- [Shipwreck Map](#)
- [Case Study Worksheet](#)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Start by watching a this video:

Virtual Session: The Blake Plateau: A Southern Treasure



2. As you watch, think about:
 - What can shipwrecks teach us about history?
 - Why might some shipwrecks need to be protected?
3. Next, explore the shipwreck map on the next page.
4. As you explore, look for patterns:
 - Where are the wrecks located?
 - Why might certain areas have more shipwrecks?
5. Now, take a look at two specific shipwrecks and use the [Case Study Worksheet](#) to dive in.

Map of the Blake Plateau region with associated bathymetric features and known shipwreck sites

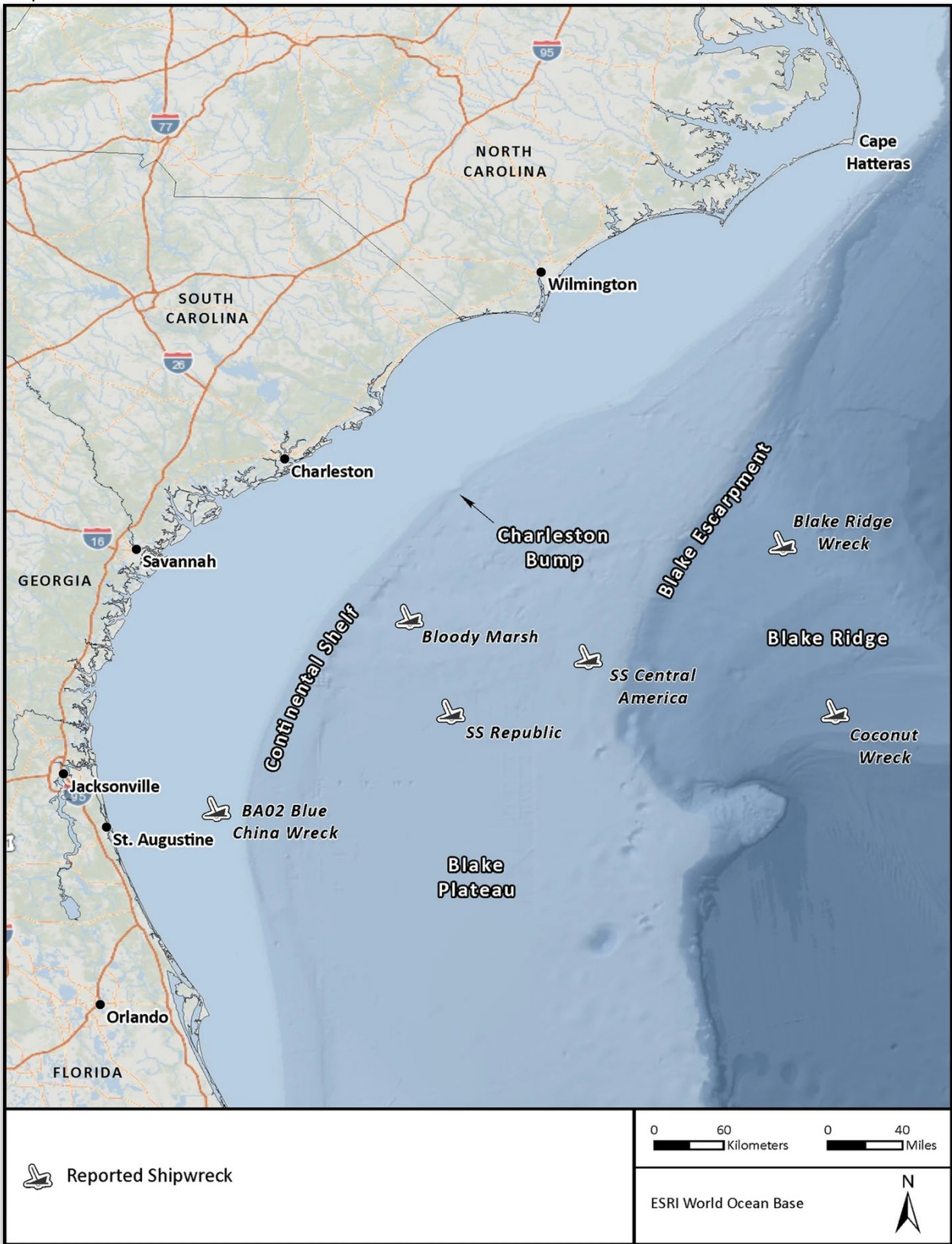


Image courtesy of Journal of Maritime Archeology

Case Study Worksheet – Two Shipwrecks of the Blake Plateau

Choose two shipwrecks that have been discovered in and around the Blake Plateau. Research the wrecks using the provided links and then complete the comparison table and reflection questions using the information from the video, map, and your research.

Choose TWO of the following shipwrecks to compare:

- SS Central America - [Read more here](#)
- Bloody Marsh - [Read more here](#) and [here](#)
- SS Republic - [Read more here](#)
- Blake Ridge Wreck - [Read more here](#), and be sure to watch the video

Shipwreck Comparison Table

	Shipwreck 1:	Shipwreck 2:
Year it sank		
Cause of sinking		
Type of ship		
Purpose of ship		
What was found		
Historical importance		
Loss of Life		
What surprised you		



Connecting to the Blake Plateau

As you can see on the map, these shipwrecks are part of a wider network of wrecks, including:

 BA02 Blue China Wreck

 Blake Ridge Wreck

 Bloody Marsh

 Coconut Wreck

 SS Central America

 SS Republic

Together, these wrecks reveal patterns of:

- Trade and transportation
- Weather hazards and navigation
- Economic and political history

Shipwrecks are still being discovered on the Blake Plateau. For example, the Blake Ridge wreck was discovered by accident by marine geologists on a submarine dive. As an important maritime highway, there are likely more shipwrecks yet to be discovered.

REFLECTION: Think Like a Scientist & Historian

What patterns do you notice about the location and type of wrecks?

What do these shipwrecks reveal about life, trade, and travel in the past?

How are the shipwrecks similar? How are they different?

How might shipwrecks become important habitats for marine life?

How do shipwrecks connect human history to the ocean ecosystem?

How does the work of organizations like Diving With a Purpose change the way we think about shipwrecks—not just as lost objects, but as places of history and memory?

Why is it important to treat some shipwrecks as cultural or memorial sites?

ANSWER KEY - Shipwreck Comparison Table

	<u>Blake Ridge Wreck</u>	<u>Bloody Marsh</u>	<u>SS Central America</u>	<u>SS Republic</u>
Year it sank	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>1943</i>	<i>1857</i>	<i>1865</i>
Cause of sinking	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Torpedo / German U-Boat</i>	<i>Hurricane</i>	<i>Hurricane</i>
Type of ship	<i>Likely a sailing vessel</i>	<i>Oil tanker</i>	<i>Steamship</i>	<i>Civil War Ship</i>
Purpose of ship	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Carrying nearly 4.5 million gallons of oil</i>	<i>Carried passengers, crew cargo, mail, and gold</i>	<i>Carried passengers</i>
What was found	<i>Artifacts and fragments of the wooden vessel</i>	<i>May hold large amounts of oil</i>	<i>Gold coins and personal belongings</i>	<i>Coins, trade goods, and ship parts</i>
Historical importance	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Collaboration and technology used to find the wreck. Wreck can potentially leak oil and pollute waters.</i>	<i>California Gold Rush, technology for deep-sea recovery</i>	<i>Civil War & Reconstruction-era trade, dual military/commercial use</i>
Loss of Life	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Minimal - three crew member deaths reported</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Lower (most passengers survived)</i>
What surprised you	<i>Answers will vary</i>	<i>Answers will vary</i>	<i>Answers will vary</i>	<i>Answers will vary</i>

For Teachers

Learning Objectives, Tips, Standards Alignment, Key Terms, and References

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, learners will be able to:

- Describe the Blake Plateau as a maritime cultural landscape, where ecology, history, and culture intersect.
- Explain the connection between the **Middle Passage** and southeastern U.S. coastal waters.
- Analyze how cultural identity and community knowledge influence conservation and stewardship.
- Recognize the importance of ethical marine archaeology and preserving **underwater cultural heritage**.
- Connect scientific exploration with social, historical, and cultural understanding.

TEACHER TIPS + INSTRUCTIONAL NOTES

1. Approach With Care

- Frame discussions of the Middle Passage, transatlantic slave trade, and shipwrecks with sensitivity, age-appropriate language, and focus on dignity and resilience.
- Emphasize that descendant communities guide interpretation and stewardship.
- Avoid graphic detail; highlight history, memory, and resilience.
- Optional Teacher Resources:
 - Explore the [Trans-Atlantic slave trade voyages database](#)
 - Consider previewing the video "[Middle Passage Overview](#)" before sharing with students. It provides historical context but contains content that may be sensitive; use discretion and provide preparatory guidance if sharing
 - Continue exploring "The Will to Survive" documentary by watching [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#)

2. Emphasize Systems Thinking

- Connect ecology (Ch. 1) → deep-sea exploration (Ch. 2) → cultural heritage and stewardship (Ch. 3).
- Reinforce that the ocean is both a natural ecosystem and a cultural landscape.

TEACHER TIPS + INSTRUCTIONAL NOTES, CONT.

3. Encourage Reflection

- Provide quiet time for personal or ancestral connections to water stories.
- Normalize multiple perspectives and facilitate respectful discussion.
- Prompt reflection with questions such as:
 - “What stood out to you?”
 - “How does culture shape the way people care for the ocean?”

4. Avoid Simplification

- This chapter is not only a history or science lesson; it’s a conversation about stewardship, ethics, and responsibility.
- Encourage students to see ocean spaces as places of memory, culture, and identity, not just resources.

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)

Disciplinary Core Ideas (Grades 6–8, 9–12):

MS-LS2-1: Analyze and interpret data to provide evidence for the interconnections between humans and ecosystems, including how human activities affect marine environments.

HS-ESS3-1: Construct an explanation based on evidence for how human activities impact the Earth’s systems, including the ocean.

HS-ESS3-4: Evaluate or refine a technological or societal solution that reduces impacts of human activities on ocean and coastal ecosystems.

Science & Engineering Practices:

- Analyzing and interpreting data (e.g., shipwreck mapping, historical records, ecosystem observations)
- Asking questions and defining problems (e.g., conservation challenges, ethical considerations)
- Constructing explanations from evidence (e.g., linking history, culture, and ecology)
- Developing and using models (e.g., maritime cultural landscape, ecological-human interactions)

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ADDRESSED, CONT.

Crosscutting Concepts:

- Systems and system models
- Cause and effect
- Stability and change
- Patterns

C3 Framework for Social Studies (Geography Strand)

D2.Geo.5.6-8: Explain how cultural and historical patterns influence human interactions with the environment.

D2.Geo.8.9-12: Evaluate the consequences of human-made and natural changes on ocean and coastal systems.

Common Core ELA Connections

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6-8.7: Integrate information presented in diverse media or formats to develop a coherent understanding of a topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information clearly.

Ocean Literacy Principles

#1: The Earth has one big ocean with many features.

#5: The ocean supports a great diversity of life and ecosystems.

#6: The ocean and humans are inextricably interconnected.

#7: The ocean is largely unexplored.

VOCABULARY + KEY TERMS

Ancestral Waters Ocean spaces that hold historical, cultural, or spiritual meaning for descendant communities.

Bathymetry The study and measurement of the depth and shape of the ocean floor.

Biodiversity The variety of living organisms within a given ecosystem, habitat, or the entire Earth.

Blake Plateau A wide, flat underwater plain about 80–100 miles off the southeastern U.S. coast that is home to the world’s largest deep-sea coral reef system.

Continental Shelf The gently sloping area of the seabed that extends from a continent before dropping into the deep ocean.

Coral Mounds Large, mound-shaped structures built over time by layers of deep-sea coral skeletons.

Deep-Sea Coral Coral species that live in dark, cold waters at depths of 200–1000+ meters, forming complex reef structures without sunlight.

Diving With a Purpose A non-profit organization that trains divers to locate, document, and protect shipwrecks—especially those connected to the transatlantic slave trade—while fostering cultural preservation and marine stewardship.

Ecosystem Services Benefits humans receive from ecosystems, such as oxygen production, food supply, and climate regulation.

Escarpment A long, steep slope, especially one at the edge of a plateau or separating areas of land at different heights.

Exploration Technology Specialized tools, devices, and systems—such as sensors, AI, rovers, and submersibles—developed to investigate, map, and analyze unknown or extreme environments.

Gulf Stream A warm ocean current that flows north along the U.S. East Coast and carries heat and nutrients across the Atlantic Ocean.

Gullah/Geechee Descendants of West and Central Africans who were enslaved and brought to the southeastern U.S. coast; they have a rich cultural heritage linked to the Atlantic Ocean.

VOCABULARY + KEY TERMS, CONT.

Industrialization of the Ocean Expansion of human activities (e.g., mining, drilling, shipping) into previously undisturbed ocean areas.

***Lophelia pertusa* (aka *Desmophyllum pertusum*)** A primary deep-sea coral species found on the Blake Plateau.

Marine Protected Area (MPA) A designated region of the ocean where human activities are regulated to conserve ecosystems and cultural resources.

Marine Snow Tiny bits of organic material, such as dead plankton and waste, that slowly drift from surface waters to the deep sea, providing food for deep-sea life.

Maritime Cultural Landscape A place where human culture, history, and identity are deeply connected to the sea.

Middle Passage The route across the Atlantic Ocean by which enslaved Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas from the 1500s to the 1800s.

Million Mounds The world's largest known continuous deep-sea coral habitat, located off the coasts of Georgia and Florida. Covering roughly 7 million acres, it consists of thousands of massive, ancient mounds built over thousands of years by the stony coral *Lophelia pertusa* (*Desmophyllum pertusum*) at depths of 200–1,000 meters.

Multibeam Sonar A type of active sonar system used to map the seafloor and detect objects in the water column or along the seafloor.

National Marine Sanctuary Special areas that protect important marine ecosystems around the nation. Some sanctuaries are breeding and feeding grounds for endangered whales, others contain thriving coral reefs or kelp forests, and many are home to historic shipwrecks and other archaeological treasures. National Marine Sanctuaries are managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Nitrate A nutrient that contains nitrogen and helps plants and algae grow; too much can cause pollution in marine environments.

Nutrient Cycling The movement and exchange of organic and inorganic matter back into the production of living matter.

Polyp The basic living unit of class Anthozoa (further subdivided into subclass Hexacorallia, which includes stony corals, and subclass Octocorallia, which includes soft corals). Polyps can occur either singularly, as in the case of anemones and some stony corals, or can form colonies, as they do in most stony and all soft corals.

VOCABULARY + KEY TERMS, CONT.

Plateau A large, flat or gently sloping elevated area that stands higher than the surrounding land or seafloor.

Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) An underwater vehicle that is operated and controlled from the surface via a cable, facilitating power and communication.

Ridges Long, narrow raised areas on the ocean floor, often formed by movement of Earth's tectonic plates.

Scarps Steep slopes or cliffs found where the seafloor drops sharply, such as at the edge of the Blake Plateau.

Shallow-Water Coral Reef Coral ecosystems found in shallow and warm subtropical and tropical seas (typically 0–45 meters deep) that rely on symbiotic algae for energy.

Shipwreck A sunken vessel that can provide both historical information and habitat for marine life, while also holding cultural and memorial significance.

Symbiosis A mutually beneficial relationship between different organisms (e.g., corals and zooxanthellae).

Underwater Cultural Heritage Physical remains of human activity located beneath the sea, including shipwrecks and other submerged artifacts.

Zooxanthellae Photosynthetic algae living within coral tissues that provide energy through photosynthesis.

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