



**Press Release
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Opportunity to Boost Tourism in Victoria

Victoria is currently competing with other states to secure the ex-HMAS Canberra for scuttling as a new artificial reef. This is a wonderful opportunity to boost tourism by attracting divers from around the world and establishing Victoria as a world class temperate water diving destination.

The HMAS Canberra is long range escort frigate that previously undertook roles including area air-defence, anti-submarine warfare, surveillance, reconnaissance and interdiction as part of Australia's Defence Force. The ship was decommissioned in November 2005 and has been offered by the Federal Government through the Minister for Defence, Dr Brendan Nelson, as a suitable wreck for sinking as an artificial reef. This vessel will make a world class dive site that will attract divers both from interstate and internationally.

The Victorian Artificial Reef Society Inc. is a community group that was formed early in 2006 with the initial objective to secure, prepare, position and scuttle the ex-HMAS Canberra as an artificial reef and scuba dive location in Victorian waters. All major groups in the Victorian Scuba Diving Industry have recognised VARS as the voice on all matters relating to official Artificial Reefs in Victorian waters and are completely in support of the project. VARS is also being actively supported by State and Federal parliamentarians Martin Dixon, Greg Hunt, Stewart McArthur and Lisa Neville.

From an environmental point of view, it is well established that such wrecks greatly enhance the local environment by providing shelter for a large number of organisms and rapidly establishing a viable and diverse marine ecosystem that can be preserved for a very long period of time. Internationally this is now a well accepted practice that is widely viewed as both the most environmentally responsible solution as well as a valuable addition to the local tourist economy.

The waters of Victoria, and in particular around Port Phillip Heads, are home to an amazing diversity of marine life. Many of the species are unique to these waters and are not found anywhere else in the world. The addition of the Canberra as a new artificial reef will add to the recently proclaimed marine parks as a further boost to the environment.

There will be a major boost to tourism if Victoria is successful in its bid. In recent years, a number of ex-naval vessels have been sunk as artificial reefs both in Australia and overseas. In all cases, tourist numbers have increased with the new dive site acting as a magnet for divers both nationally and internationally. And – of course the actual sinking is a great tourist attraction just on its own!

VARS is currently working with the Victorian Government to obtain the ship from the Commonwealth. The decision as to which state will get the Canberra has yet to be made. But VARS is doing its best to make sure that the Canberra will be sunk in Victoria. Once this is achieved VARS, together with the dive industry, will drive to ensure that this great opportunity benefits both Victoria and Australia with significant ongoing tourist development using this ship as the centrepiece to a new world class temperate water dive destination.

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