

Two Miles Below the Waves, The Titanic Is Decaying Fast

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

In the 34 years since the R.M.S. Titanic was discovered on the seafloor south of Newfoundland, it has become the world's most famous shipwreck — a rusting hulk assailed by hundreds of explorers and moviemakers, salvors and tourists, scientists and federal watchdogs.

All agree that the once-grand ship is rapidly falling apart. Resting on the icy North Atlantic seabed more than two miles down, upright but split in two, the fragile mass is slowly succumbing to rust, corrosive salts, microbes and colonies of deep-sea creatures.

This month, a team from Triton Submarines captured video of the iconic wreck with human-occupied submersibles, in order to assess its status and anticipate the trajectory of its deterioration. The company called it the first such visit in nearly 14 years.

"It was kind of a cool thing to see the ocean reclaiming it," said Patrick Lahey, the president of Triton, who surveyed the

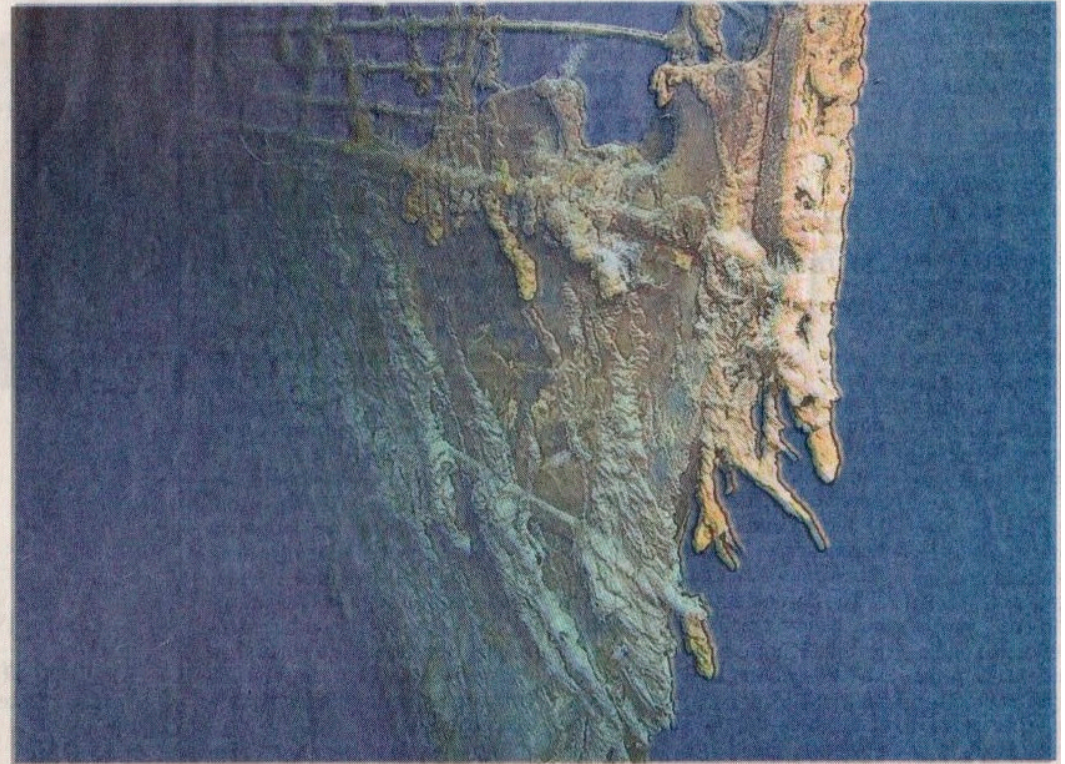
wreck himself during one of the dives.

The grand ocean liner, where the Astors and the Strauses played and dined, sank on April 15, 1912, taking more than 1,500 lives. Since then, the ship's remains have become a diminishing aspect of the dark abyss, the new images revealed.

The crow's nest, where a lookout once shouted an infamous warning — "Iceberg right ahead!" — has vanished. The forward mast has crumpled. The captain's cabin, where the British naval officer Edward John Smith was resting when his ship struck the iceberg, has collapsed, as has the poop deck where passengers gathered as the liner sank.

In an interview, Mr. Lahey said that viewing the historic luxury liner was less compelling than seeing "the massive shipwreck being consumed by the ocean and returned to its elemental state."

He called the disorderly remains a refuge for "a large number of interesting animals," including fish and sea anemones. "It's unusual to find a shipwreck two miles down that's so active."



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