

# Praise for Dispatches from the China Sea

“This must-read and eminently readable study takes readers on a voyage through the seemingly intractable problems in the South China Sea to reveal how through environmental collaboration competing nations can adopt trust and science-driven peace building measures that can help reduce the risks of conflict.”

—Carla Freeman, Senior Expert China,  
United States Institute of Peace

“The elegantly written memoir chronicles the gradual erosion of the marine biodiversity of the South China Sea, a victim of the power politics in the region.”

—James Kraska, Chair and Charles H. Stockton  
Professor of International Maritime Law,  
Stockton Center for International Law,  
US Naval War College

“James Borton provides a personal and thoughtful new book about Vietnamese fishermen who are caught in the middle of sovereignty disputes and environmental security issues.”

—Binh Lai (Ph.D.), Deputy-General,  
East Sea (South China Sea) Institute

“A timely book that grapple with some of the biggest issues of our time: finding meaningful solutions to the existential planetary crisis posed by climate change and the intensifying geopolitical competition in the South China Sea. An insightful read for anyone interested in the future of the Indo-Pacific.”

—Dr. Manali Kumar Editor-in-Chief 9Dashline

“This is a book about hope and the future of marine biodiversity and sustainability in the South China Sea. It is a major contribution to an understudied field.”

—Larry Berman, Professor Emeritus,  
University of California, Davis

“Dispatches from the South China Sea is a timely and thought provoking book that explains the intricate relations and exposes the devastating environmental impacts that bring concern to all nations from in the Indo-Pacific region.”

—Rear Admiral Scott Sanders,  
United States Navy (Retired)

“Borton combines his own expert knowledge of the region with a broad range of perspectives. It is an once an arresting yet hopeful book—one that ought to change how even the most informed readers think about the South China Sea.”

—Dr. Peter Harris, Department of Political Science  
at Colorado State University, and editor of  
“Indo-Pacific Perspectives” section of the  
*Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*

“Journalist James Borton’s elegant writing echoes Rachel Carson as he blows the whistle on a powerful environmental and human catastrophe of coral reef destruction, overfishing, illegal fishing and murder on the open sea.”

—Skye Moody, author of  
*Washed Up, The Curious Journeys of Flotsam and Jetsam*

“Maritime protein (fish, squid, and crabs) is a critical and often overlooked element of competition and contention in the South China Sea. In bringing this to the fore, and drawing on the perspective of the fishermen and marine scientists, Borton adds an important component to our understanding of the South China Sea and management of regional tensions.”

—Rodger Baker,  
Senior Vice President Strategic Analysis, Stratfor

“In this bold, personal, and unapologetic narrative, Borton uses compelling stories from fishermen and marine scientists to offer key insights on peace-building through science cooperation.”

—Severine Autesserre, author of *Peaceland*  
and *The Frontlines of Peace*

DISPATCHES FROM  
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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# DISPATCHES FROM THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

NAVIGATING TO COMMON GROUND

**JAMES BORTON**



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*Dispatches from the South China Sea: Navigating to Common Ground*

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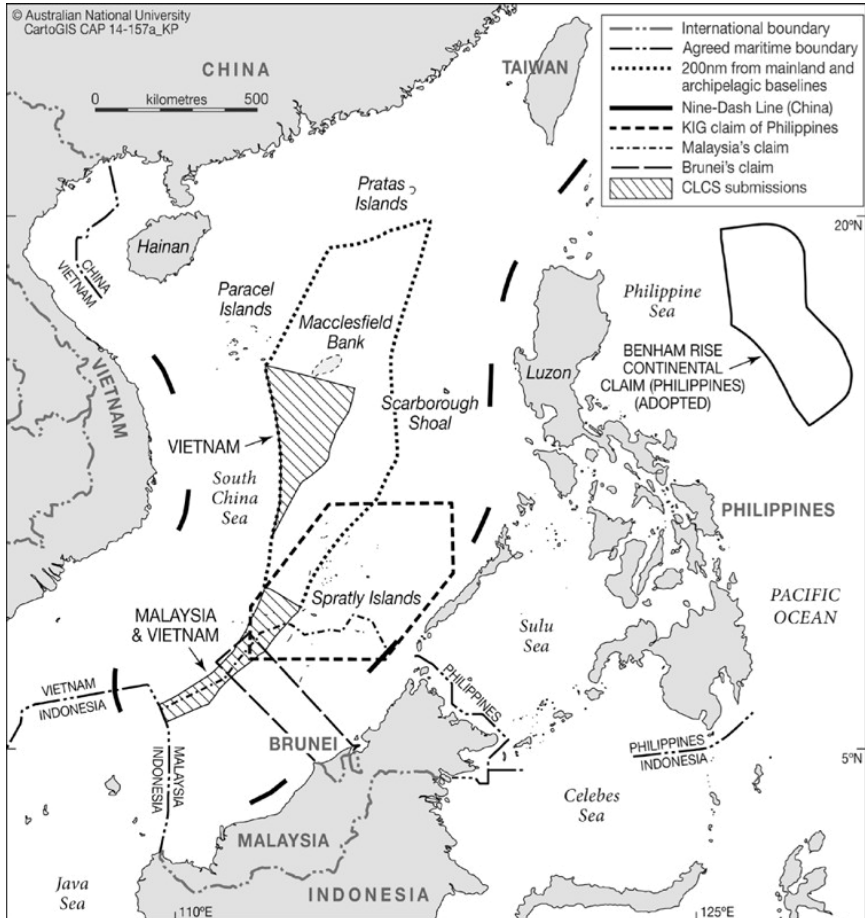
*“Language is a city, to the building of which every human being brought a stone;  
yet he is no more to be credited with the grand result than the aculeph  
which adds a cell to the coral reef which is the basis of a continent.”*

*—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

*“To those devoid of imagination, a blank place on the map is a useless waste;  
to others, the most valuable part.”*

*—Aldo Leopold*

**Map 1.** Maritime Claims in the South China Sea

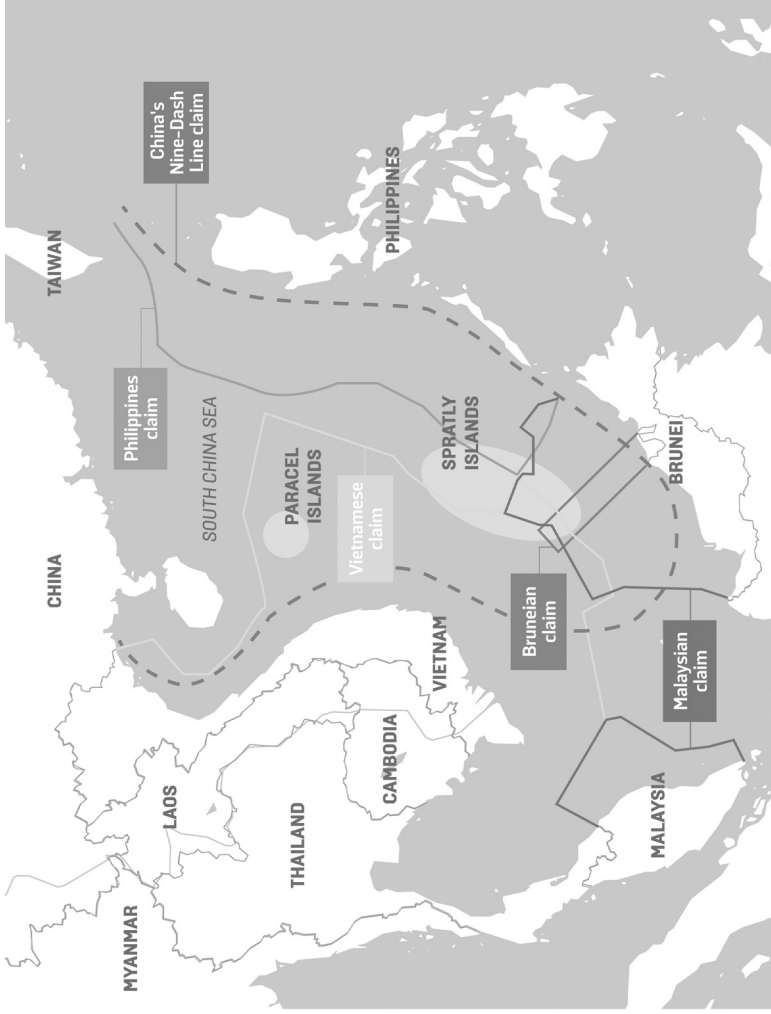


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Note: CLCS stands for Commission of the Limits of the Continental Shelf. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304630611\\_China%27s\\_Ambition\\_in\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea\\_Is\\_a\\_Legitimate\\_Maritime\\_Order\\_Possible/figures?lo=1](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304630611_China%27s_Ambition_in_the_South_China_Sea_Is_a_Legitimate_Maritime_Order_Possible/figures?lo=1).

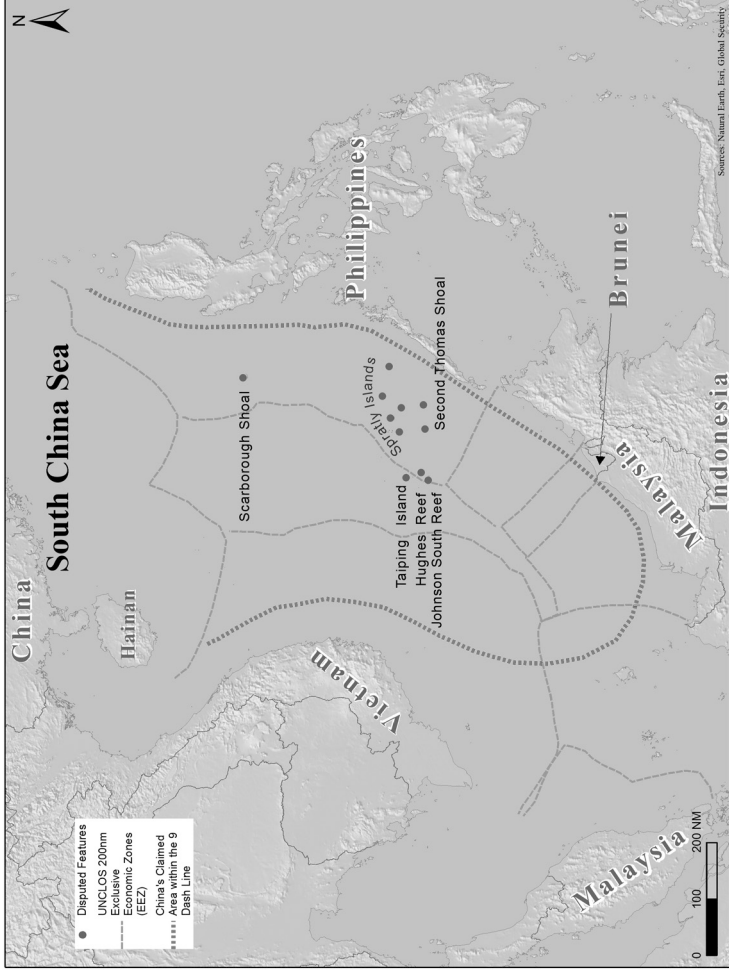


**Map 2.** Competing Claims in the South China Sea

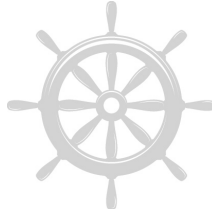


Source: [www.ForeignPolicy.com](http://www.ForeignPolicy.com).  
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Map 3. South China Sea



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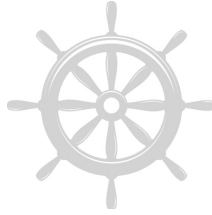
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## Preface

**O**n the world atlas, the South China Sea appears as a speck of blue amid the coil of atolls, islands, peninsulas and rocks that comprise Southeast Asia between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Yet, this 1.4 million-square-mile expanse is the major artery for more than \$5 trillion shipped annual cargo and serves up approximately 12 percent of the world's fish catch. But it is in this unique natural marine laboratory and gateway to deep-sea ambitions that an environmental crime scene remains unsolved. The South China sea faces a serious problem because of the mounting environmental degradation due to climate change, ocean acidification, plastics pollution, reclamations, overfishing, and population pressures from all neighboring states.

It's my hope that this book will raise awareness for the conservation of marine biodiversity and sustainability of fisheries that can no longer be ignored. The impact of continuous coastal development, reclamation, destruction of corals, overfishing and increased maritime traffic places all of us on the front lines. Marine biologists, who share a common language that cuts across political, economic and social differences, recognize that the structure of a coral reef strewn with the detritus of perpetual conflict represents one of nature's cruel battlefields. The sea's remarkable coral reefs, which provide food, jobs and protection against storms and floods, have suffered unprecedented rates of destruction in recent decades.

At a time when the role of science collaboration is most needed to address the Covid-19 pandemic, there's the potential for the virus to trigger quantifiable conservation strategy in the safeguards taken for biodiversity outcomes. For years, experts warned of the dangers of a pandemic and we are now living with it. For years, scientists have warned of a climate catastrophe that will forever change life on planet Earth. Now more than ever, nations and citizens must pay attention to the science and act on lessons learned. My book places faith in science and examines the role for science cooperation and the implementation of science diplomacy as a strategy to quell the rising tensions associated with contested sovereignty claims from Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

The South China Sea contains two major groups of features subject to overlapping sovereignty claims. The Paracel Islands in the northern half of the sea are currently controlled by China, but also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam. The Spratly Islands, to the south, are far smaller, more dispersed, and even more contested. Both island groups, as well as a number of smaller features, have seen their share of violence, and the tangle of disputes appears intractable.

What distinguishes this book from others on the South China Sea is a hybrid of participatory research and field reportage. Since 2014, I have been a panelist and have organized a half dozen programs and podcasts with themes related to environmental security in the South China Sea with informed marine scientists and policy experts in attendance. Furthermore, I have been engaged as an in-the-field reporter for more than two decades in Southeast Asia and traveled aboard fishing boats, sampans and Vietnamese Coast Guard ships in the contested South China Sea.

I have known that fishers are the first to encounter the limits of the sea. This is most certainly true in the South China Sea, where overfishing in the region has emerged as a major threat to food security for populations bordering the churning sea. As a reporter and waterman, I have asked and answered central questions surrounding the patterns of overexploitation of the biological resources in the region, and believe that the environmental perspective can no longer be ignored. For sure, the historical, political and economic territorial claims in the region are mired in a complex and tangled web of nationalism. Perhaps the best marker for the future of these atolls, islands and rocks is examining the country or countries that are most equipped and qualified to sustainably develop and protect the islands' resources and diverse marine ecosystems. The claimant nations actions pose the natural question about how

these patterns either are fostered or constrained by domestic, regional or international environmental politics?

In short, this book explains how conflict and cooperation can co-exist and that competing nations can, through environmental collaboration, adopt trust and science-driven peacebuilding measures that can influence and guide policy. Since the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development formally began in 2021 and calls for a new stakeholder process that will be inclusive, participatory, and global to deliver the science required for meeting sustainable development goals, this writing effort offers recommendations on how we can possibly build new relationships with non-science stakeholders and to embrace a new era of innovation, data sharing and scientific co-creation. The argument is simple: The South China Sea can become a body of water that unites; rather than divides.

The book's division into three parts—field notes, ecological politics, and science diplomacy—will lead the reader to understand that there is common ground that may lead to policy transformation and even resolution of maritime conflicts.

I hope that my introduction will draw you into a sustainable narrative by offering extensive anecdotes, field notes, and unvarnished conversations with fishermen and marine scientists about their responses to the resources in the South China Sea, living and non-living. As a non-scientist, I have always possessed a reporter's curiosity and have sought some modeled imitation of the observed reality. Fortunately, many generous biologists have allowed me the opportunity to see their seascape through a scientific lens. There's marine scientist, Dr. Chu Manh Trinh, a 59-year-old Da Nang University biology professor, who is responsible for mapping out protected areas off of Vietnam's central coast and for educating local fishermen about conservation, and how sustainable practices improve livelihoods in coastal and island communities. Professor John McManus, an American marine biologist and ecologist, has been diving deep into these roiling waters, studying the reefs and fisheries of the region. McManus along with other scientists, have observed the death of too many coral reefs from dredgers and giant clam fishers, which systemically tear up coral to capture their prize rainbow-colored ornamental shells that can reach almost 5 feet across and weigh in excess of 500 pounds.

The conservation and sustainability of fish stocks and maintaining ecological balance of the region require an understanding of how living and non-living South China Sea resources are rapidly being exploited by the people of the region. It's generally acknowledged that overfishing now threatens

the South China Sea fisheries. That's one primary reason that since 1992, McManus and others have championed a clarion call for an international marine peace park. Of course, at the time, the islands were little more than atolls and rocks incapable of maintaining human habitation. He and other scientists, including Chinese marine scientists, have documented how the competition of natural resources, especially fish, have escalated the maritime claims of China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei in the contested Parcel and Spratly Islands. Sadly, all of these nations have viewed the sea as a resource prize.

Taiwanese Shao Kwang-Tsao, has also studied the coral cathedrals in the contested waters of the Spratly Islands, that prompted Taiwan's former President Chen Shui-bian to engage marine scientists through a proposed Spratly Initiative, and to recognize the region as an ecological protection area. Professor Shao, along with other dedicated marine scientists, conducted research around the area of Taiping Island, the largest of the naturally occurring Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, with its elliptical area of 0.87 mile in length, 0.25 mile in width, and an overall area of 110 acres. On this small island, the flora and fauna run riot: swallows, papaya plant, coast oak, lotus leaf tung tree, sea lemon, long stem chrysanthemum, coconut tree, banana tree, white-tailed tropic bird, sparrow hawk, and many kinds of tropical fish. The locale offers a proven dwelling for green sea turtles migrating from the Philippines.

But for these scientists, witnessing the gradual dismantling of life, beauty, and diversity in the South China Sea is a harrowing experience. Through their collective knowledge, the message is clear and certain: we are all in this together and the body of ecological science reminds us that life is interconnected.

The voices of these marine scientists and the fishermen remind us that we must protect all the parts of the systems on which we depend—from the smallest ecosystem to the hermit crabs I have seen on Cu Lao Cham. Rachel Carson's seminal, *The Sea Around Us*, a book that I have taught to Coastal Carolina University marine science students, reminds us that we must be faithful stewards of the sea. The scientist's poignant and prescient words spill over into our consciousness. She wrote,

The little crab alone with the sea became a symbol that stood for life itself—for the delicate, destructive, yet incredibly vital force that somehow holds its place amid the harsh realities of the inorganic world [...] Underlying the beauty of the spectacle there is meaning and significance.



The facts are disturbing for all: in the last 50 years, half of the coral reefs have disappeared, only 10 percent of large fish remain and many species are at the brink of collapse. Unsustainable fishing practices, pollution—including 20 million tons of plastic entering the oceans yearly—and rising temperatures are continued threats.

The South China Sea's ecological collapse has been overshadowed by the current Covid-19 pandemic. We are still very much in the middle of this crisis and any real perspective on when it will end is near impossible to forecast. The chasm between the United States and China grows deeper and wider. The fiercest critics of China within the White House rail against the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, arguing that Beijing cannot be trusted to disclose what all it knows about the virus and especially how the outbreak began in Wuhan. Amid the escalating political tensions, staggering numbers of pandemic deaths, are now reaching in excess of 2.5 million global deaths and more than 520,000 in the US With quarantines and rising number of reported cases, and an untold surge of human suffering, the pain continues to be felt all over the world. That's the reason that an unprovoked sinking of Vietnamese Captain Tran Hong Tho's wooden trawler by a Chinese coast guard vessel in the disputed sea was lost in the storm of the current pandemic. While Tho and his crew of eight survived, there's little time for the world to pay attention to this wreckage against the current background of the global viral threat of the novel coronavirus and the mounting grim statistics of ravaged lives, shuttered stores, schools, and factories everywhere.

It was in the early morning with a red sky on the horizon, that a 33-year old Quang Ngai province fisherman said his goodbye to family and set sail with his crew to earn their livelihood near the Paracel Islands. It's a scene played out every day as these sentinels of the sea raise and lower their nets.

Through my field notes, fishermen share their voices about the sea and the decline of fisheries.

The tide turns daily from overfishing, destruction of coral reefs and deaths of fragile ecosystems. These fights over fishing rights alone represent a little-reported economic and environmental facet of the clash between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors in one of the world's hottest geopolitical trouble spots. But at the center of this sea of opportunities, uncertainties, and threats, environmental degradation, and death remain the scientific conversations. An increasing number of marine scientists, many of them personal friends and fishermen, are all sounding the alarm to address the issues of ocean acidification, loss of biodiversity, climate change and fishery collapse.

The book's middle section on ecological politics serves up the environmental details of Beijing's bullying and brutish behavior in the playground they prefer to call the South China Sea. As China's fishermen scrape every fish from the bottom of the roiling sea in their massive steel-hulled trawlers, destroy coral reefs, and ram competing nations' fishing boats, their offensive actions have immediate and far-reaching impacts. The ongoing fishing vessel skirmishes and continuing provocative Chinese-led actions, have cast long shadows and resulted in economic losses for many fishermen with boats sunk and equipment stolen.

There are an increasing number of challenges facing the sea and its inhabitants, but fish form the backbone of the powerful stories shared in my book. The book's narrative brings to life the challenges of food security from the perspectives of fishers, and marine scientists where the decline of fish is fast becoming a hardscrabble reality for more than just fishermen. In my conversations and reporting among all of them, I have learned about the dwindling fisheries in the region's coastal areas, fishing state subsidies, overlapping exclusive economic zone (EEZ) claims, and mega-commercial fishing trawlers competing in a multi-billion-dollar industry.

The sea offers very few natural partitions. My stories from the Mekong Delta to Ly Son Island, emphasize the interdependence of ocean and coastal land, life and water, atmospheric and oceanic circulation. For the Vietnamese, their identity is closely interwoven with their relationship to the East Sea and especially towards their fishermen. It holds them in a net of community, culture and heritage.

Finally, the book's promise is that scientific cooperation with regional authorities offers an important first step in building trust and confidence among neighbors and in implementing a shared conservation policy. It is time for more citizens and policy strategists to rally around marine scientists so that they can net regional cooperation and ocean stewardship to preserve them before it is too late. Science and diplomacy can and do work together. Science is neither political nor ideological. It is a universal language, because it promotes collaboration and openness.

While diplomacy is characterized by dialogue and negotiation, together, science diplomacy unfolds as a tool for "soft power" as characterized by Joseph S. Nye Jr., the distinguished Professor Emeritus and former Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. While the concept remains a new paradigm, more policy experts concede it contributes to coalition-building and conflict resolution sorely needed in the turbulent South China Sea.

What have I learned and what do I intend to share with readers? It's that the sea's complex and interconnected ecosystems need the voices of not only marine scientists but the families and fishers to quell the degradation wrought by such island reclamation, as well as overfishing and the harvesting of critical species that mars the region. I want to invite you aboard a traditional colorful wooden Vietnamese trawler, where a bone-tired crew, many as old as the leaking barnacle covered vessel, are too often the first casualties, along with truth, in the contested South China Sea. Let me be clear this is not another war story from Southeast Asia. The good news is that more marine scientists, some Chinese included, no longer want to see nations battling one another over these rocks and islands. They believe that it's not too late to chart a navigable policy shift for a sustainable and peaceful future.





Part I

# Field Notes





## The Gathering Storm

Many stories for journalists often begin in bars in Southeast Asia and this one is no different. In 2014, I was seated in a Hanoi café, drinking the locally brewed beer, *bia hoi*, with celebrated Vietnamese writer La Thanh Tung. It was a scorching summer afternoon. Nearby, the Song Hong river swept by. It flows irregularly because of the large amount of silt it carries. Rising in China, its deep and narrow gorge broadens into the river that feeds the fertile, densely populated Vietnamese delta. On a map, the river ends in Vietnam, and the South China Sea begins.

Tung speaks passionately about that East Sea, and the Vietnamese fishermen who depend upon it to feed their families. Men have fished there since before recorded history. Pollution, overfishing, and a dozen violent wars have diminished it, but still the boats return lying heavy in the water, hulls filled with tuna, mackerel, croaker, and shrimp. 50 percent of the animal protein consumed in Southeast Asia comes from the huge ocean shelf off the Vietnamese coast. He slowly sips his beer and says, “I think the sea is large enough for fishermen to earn their livelihood, but there are more challenges for them.”

Two weeks earlier, a mammoth Chinese oil rig was parked in the middle of Vietnam’s traditional fishing grounds. The international media—of which I am a member—is everywhere, its lenses focused on the maritime drama unfolding for Vietnamese fishermen. I learned that the Chinese occupied Vietnam for over a thousand years. They called it Annam, which means “pacified south.” The protests and rioting on the coast, the Chinese warships protecting

the rig, and my very presence here—confirm the irony in the long-forgotten meaning of that name.

I spoke with Tung about my recent interview with a fisherman in Da Nang (known as “China Beach” by the Americans during the Vietnam War), and one of Vietnam’s major port cities. While there, I met Dang Van Nhan, a third-generation local fishing boat captain, who has been casting his long-line nets into the turbulent South China Sea for two decades.

Nhan recalled that on May 26, 2014, dark political clouds suddenly came over his horizon, and his weathered blue painted plank-constructed 50-foot fishing trawler was rammed and sunk by a Chinese naval vessel. As I was recalling my interview with the captain, I could still see the fisherman’s plaintive eyes asking when do these attacks end since we are fishermen and the sea is open.

“The Chinese are plundering the sea with their huge trawlers and this hurts our ability to find the fish like we used to,” says Nhan.

China’s imposed annual seasonal fishing ban exacerbates the tensions for all fishermen in the contested waters. Beijing first announced this ban in 1999, broadly announcing that it would help sustain fishing resources in one of the world’s biggest fishing grounds. The ban historically runs from May 1 to August 16.

The competition for fishing rights is one of the main motivations for the dispute over the waters, and observers warn that the Covid-19 pandemic could prompt a food crisis that would heighten the risk of conflict in the region.

The South China Sea encompasses 1.4 million square miles. It is of critical economic, military, and environmental significance. Over \$5.3 trillion in international trade plies its waters annually. The region is richer in biodiversity than nearly any other marine ecosystem on the planet, and the fish provide food and jobs for millions of people in the ten surrounding countries: Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

In the South China Sea there are approximately 180 features above water at high tide. These rocks, shoals, sandbanks, reefs and cays, plus unnamed shoals, and submerged features are distributed among four geographically different areas of the sea. In turn, these aspects are claimed in whole or in part by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.

My story was making me thirsty, and so I had another draft beer and described as many details as I remembered about Nhan’s boat since I viewed it after it was first pulled out of the roiling sea and brought into Da Nang’s boat yard, where I stood with the forlorn captain examining the wreckage.



The damage was evident when I first climbed an improvised wooden ladder to closely inspect Captain Nhan's boat. It had been salvaged following its sinking and was now on display for foreign media in one of Da Nang's boat yards. The deep gouge inflicted by the steel-hulled Chinese boat on the Vietnamese fishing boat's starboard side revealed the mortal wound that had sunk the once buoyant and colorful traditional fishing vessel.

The hull shape is long and slender, with a high overhanging sharp bow directly derived from the country's traditional sailing vessels, but the stern is not pointed and runs to form a flat transom. The engine is placed directly under the wheelhouse. The fishing appendages are fitted on the foredeck, where sometimes the remnants of a mast serve to hang up lights for squid fishing or a protective tarpaulin. The bow is always festooned with a traditional eye or "oculi" and with a *nga* (cathead). These eyes are long and painted on both sides, distant from the stem or median plank.

Unfortunately, for this fisherman and crew on this fateful morning, their traditional and ceremonial decorative eye failed to protect them from a Chinese vessel that deliberately smashed their livelihoods.

According to Charlotte Pham, an Australian scholar on Vietnamese boats, "Some hulls in a northern tradition have plank edge-joined by nails, on a keel plank that rises fore and aft, and ends with a flat transom. Hull planks in the center and south of Vietnam are edge-joined with dowels and have high sterns and prows overhanging the water. Other hull planks were stitched, and some bamboo rafts were fitted with sails and daggerboards."<sup>1</sup>

Nhan's boat was certainly no match for the mega-ton steel-hulled Chinese boat. Over the last decade, Xi Jinping has promoted the maritime industry and urged mariners to "build bigger ships and venture even farther and catch bigger fish." Some experts claim that China's distant water fishing fleet numbers around 2,500 ships, but one study claimed it could have as many as 17,000 boats trawling and plundering the oceans.<sup>2</sup>

The United Nations confirms that China is a fisheries superpower since it consumes around 36 percent of total fish production, and hauls in more than 15.2 million tons of marine life a year, or 20 percent of the world's entire fish catch.

Tung ordered me another beer since he wanted to hear more of the fisherman's story.

The 56-year-old boat captain and other fishermen, like Bui Ngoc Thanh, have always been aware of the perils of a seaman's life. Squalls capable of upending a trawler spring up quickly and a fast-moving typhoon can easily outrun a ship. Their lives have always been at risk, but this monolithic rig and