

Under the Sea: Marine Life in the South China Sea | A Roundtable

CONCEPT NOTE

The South China Sea (SCS) holds immense strategic importance due to its geopolitical significance and abundant marine resources. Consequently, it has evolved into a hotbed for conflicting territorial claims and is currently at the center of Chinese gray zone tactics, particularly targeting the Philippines.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) reported in 2021 that 7%, or over 300,000 metric tons (MT), of fish outputs come from the SCS. However, tensions in the SCS have negatively impacted the livelihood of the fisherfolk community, the health of the coral reef system, the country's food security, and overall biodiversity. In a recent study by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies,¹ alarming findings have revealed the extent of environmental damage caused by China in the South China Sea. China's island-building activities have destroyed approximately 4,650 acres of coral reef, while an additional 16,353 acres have been damaged due to Chinese giant clam harvesting. Furthermore, China's industrial fishing practices not only impact the fish captures of other countries but also cause significant harm to marine life through destructive bottom-trawling, depleting fish populations, and destroying vital marine habitats.² While China remains the biggest culprit in damaging the marine ecosystem, other countries, such as Vietnam, have also been contributing to the problem by building artificial islands in the WPS since 2021 through cutter-suction dredging.³

The SCS suffers from irreparable damage caused by artificial island construction and over-exploitation of marine resources. Home to some 6,500 marine species, the SCS' marine ecosystems are essential to support the biodiversity that supports food security and economic stability, especially for the coastal communities who rely on the SCS for livelihood. According to data from the state fish bureau, over 385,300 fishers benefit from the marine capture in the WPS.⁴

Thus, developing strategies for marine conservation requires a detailed understanding of ecological dynamics, as well as the implementation of robust marine protected areas and

¹ Poling, Monica Sato Harrison Prétat, Tabitha Mallory, Hao Chen, and Gregory. "Deep Blue Scars: Environmental Threats to the South China Sea," n.d. <https://features.csis.org/environmental-threats-to-the-south-china-sea/>

² Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. "Deep Blue Scars: Environmental Threats to the South China Sea | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative," December 18, 2023. <https://amti.csis.org/deep-blue-scars-environmental-threats-to-the-south-china-sea/>

³ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. "Vietnam Ramps up Spratly Island Dredging | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative," November 15, 2023. <https://amti.csis.org/vietnam-ramps-up-spratly-island-dredging/>

⁴ TED CORDERO, GMA Integrated News and TED CORDERO, GMA Integrated News. "Improved Fisheries Output from WPS Seen amid Rotational Deployment of PH Vessels." *GMA News Online*, February 17, 2024. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/897786/improved-fisheries-output-from-wps-seen-amid-rotational-deployment-of-ph-vessels/story/>

sustainable fishing practices. Approaching marine conservation from an international relations and foreign diplomacy perspective is not new. In fact, the ASEAN has drawn up a plan to leverage its unities towards maritime cooperation, outlined in the ASEAN-CHINA Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021 – 2025).⁵ More compelling evidence of the success of science diplomacy is the cooperation between Vietnam and the Philippines through the Joint Oceanographic Marine Scientific Research Expedition (JOMSRE). The joint marine scientific research in the South China Sea in 1996, founded on mutual trust, enabled both countries to enrich scientific knowledge and, more importantly, proved that joint scientific ventures can be a form of “confidence-building measure” that could contribute to de-escalating tensions in the conflict-ridden area.^{6,7} Whether the successes of the PH-Vietnam joint exploration can be replicated in light of the tensions in the SCS is a topic that requires further discussion and clarification.

Thus, we ask the following questions:

1. What is the status of our databases regarding marine life (e.g., fish, corals) in the South China Sea? What do we know/not know (data gaps) on the topic of your expertise?
2. Is there currently a mechanism for data sharing among scientists? If so, what are these mechanisms? Please share your experience of having been part of any mechanism for data sharing.
3. Are there any ongoing joint research efforts among scientists from different countries in the South China Sea? Please share your prior experience if you have been involved or are currently involved in these research efforts. Are there plans to integrate these research efforts into a broader diplomatic strategy?
4. What are the current policies for protecting the marine environment?
5. What are the current programs with higher education institutions to facilitate the study of Philippine waters?

Knowing the state of the marine ecosystem is crucial, but it's equally important to highlight the collaborative efforts of scientists and conservationists to preserve it. It is also imperative that conservation efforts align with strategic decision-making to actively inform the development of effective policies. This alignment ensures that the conservation actions taken are well-informed and have a direct impact on the development of policies that can effectively protect and sustain the marine ecosystem. ###

⁵ Plan of Action can be accessed here: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ASEAN-China-POA-2021-2025_Updated-with-ANNEX.pdf

⁶ Satyawan, I A. “The Diplomacy of Scientific Research in the South China Sea: The Case of Join to Oceanographic Marine Scientific Research Expedition between Vietnam and the Philippines.” *IOP Conference Series. Earth and Environmental Science* 129 (March 1, 2018): 012024. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/129/1/012024>

⁷ “Marine Scientific Research as a Confidence-Building Measure in the West Philippine Sea | FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE,” n.d. <https://fsi.gov.ph/marine-scientific-research-as-a-confidence-building-measure-in-the-west-philippine-sea/#iydegy85hsov>