



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

[Home](#) > Protecting the South China Sea

Friday, June 9, 2017

Protecting the South China Sea

Chinese Island-Building and the Environment

Clint Carroll

CLINT CARROLL is Captain in the U.S. Navy and Military Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. The views expressed are his own and do not reflect the official position of the U.S. government.

Since 2013, China has been engaged in an [ambitious program of island building](#) ^[1] on the coral reefs and atolls of the Spratly Islands, a disputed island chain in the [South China Sea](#) ^[2]. The program is part of an effort to bolster Chinese claims of sovereignty in the region, which overlap with those of five other countries—Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—plus Taiwan.

So far, global attention has been focused almost exclusively on the security implications of China's island building. Over the last few years, the U.S. Navy has conducted [freedom of navigation operations](#) ^[1] in the South China Sea in order to [challenge Beijing's control of the waterways](#) ^[3]. And in July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague [ruled unanimously against](#) ^[4] China's extensive territorial claims—a decision that the other claimants (and Washington) applauded and Beijing immediately rejected.

Yet while the political implications of Chinese actions have been put front and center, [the environmental consequences](#) ^[5] have often been overlooked. The island building has wreaked havoc on the fragile coral reefs and endangered marine life in the South China Sea. In fact, this environmental angle may present an opportunity to place further international pressure on Beijing: the PCA, in addition to rejecting China's ownership claims, ruled that it had caused irreversible [environmental damage](#) ^[6] through its island building, which was in clear violation of Articles 192 and 194 the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). [The court declared](#) ^[7] that China "has caused severe harm to the coral reef environment" and "violated its obligation . . . to preserve and protect fragile ecosystems and the habitat of depleted, threatened, or endangered species."

The Chinese government has nonetheless sought to defend its environmental record. In May 2016, before the PCA ruling, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei [announced](#) ^[8] that "as owners of the Nansha Islands (the Chinese name for the Spratlys), China cares about protecting the ecological environment of [the] relevant islands, reefs, and waters more than any other country, organization, or people in the world." Hong

argued that China had been constructing islands in an ecological manner, and Chinese officials have also claimed that their island building campaign is intended only for peaceful purposes, including ecological tourism.

Others are more skeptical. The head of the U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, recently told Congress ^[9] that “despite its claims to the contrary, China has militarized the South China Sea through the building of seven military bases on artificial islands,” which were “constructed through the large-scale damage of a fragile environment.” Harris added that China’s ecological tourism claim was “especially problematic, as China’s land creation effort over the past a few years has destroyed the once vibrant marine ecosystem surrounding the features.”

Harris’ observations are well founded. According to Dr. John McManus, professor of marine biology and ecology at the University of Miami, Chinese overfishing and island building has already devastated the South China Sea ecosystem. In each reef, there is a consistent sequence of destruction: Chinese fishermen harvest giant clams from vibrant reefs, causing damage to the coral that would take roughly twenty years to heal on its own. Chinese authorities then declare the reefs dead and begin dredging and filling operations to construct islands on the damaged reefs. Once concrete is poured and dredged, sand is added, making the damage irreversible. “It is as if instead of helping a sick patient, they simply chose to bury him alive,” McManus told me in an interview. So far, Chinese actions in the Spratly Islands have damaged an area of over 30 square miles, roughly 1.5 times the size of Manhattan.

Scholars and political leaders have floated a few proposals for protecting the South China Sea’s remaining biodiversity. As early as 1992, McManus proposed designating the Spratly Islands ^[10] as an international ecological marine park, collectively administered by all countries with territorial claims in the area. And in late November 2016, the Philippines suggested that President Rodrigo Duterte intends to unilaterally declare Scarborough Shoal ^[11], another disputed South China Sea feature, a marine sanctuary.

The proposals to preserve parts of the South China Sea are noble but likely to fail, thanks to the myriad of overlapping territorial claims and the difficulty of enforcing environmental rules. There is, however, precedent for a country damaging a coral reef in the region—albeit unintentionally—and then taking corrective actions to make amends. On January 17, 2013, the *USS Guardian* ran aground on the Tubbataha Reef near the Philippines, damaging roughly 25,240 square feet of coral reef. The reef is a UN World Heritage Site and home to approximately 500 species of animals, including dolphins, fish, sharks, turtles, whales, and seabirds, as well as 350 species of coral. The ship, worth an estimated \$61 million, was cut up and removed in pieces rather than risking further damage to this sensitive ecosystem. In addition, the United States paid about \$2 million to the Philippines to help rehabilitate and protect the reef and enhance monitoring to prevent a repeat of the incident. The U.S. Navy and the American ambassador publicly apologized for the grounding and later assisted the Philippine Coast Guard in upgrading the latter’s station at the reef. Although this event and follow-on actions represent the right thing to do with regards to protecting the environment, much work remains to be done by all parties.

The Chinese government could still be encouraged to take similar corrective action in the South China Sea. Clearly international law will be ineffective here, since China has been unwilling to adhere to the PCA’s ruling and has sought to influence other nations to ignore

it. Furthermore, traditional environmental NGOs like Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International are all politically and financially intertwined with Chinese interests [12] and have remained mute on the state-sponsored destruction of the reefs. Other forms of pressure will therefore need to be exerted.

In the past, one of the most effective means of getting China to act on environmental issues has been by rallying public opinion. In 2006, Yao Ming, the former professional basketball player, together with the international wildlife conservation NGO WildAid, led a public social media campaign—from Yao’s @YaoMing [13] Twitter account and WildAid’s Twitter and Weibo accounts—against shark fin soup, a traditional Chinese delicacy. The campaign reduced consumption of the soup, forced Disneyland Hong Kong to drop it from its wedding banquet menu, and ultimately led Chinese President Xi Jinping to ban it from being served at state dinners [14]. Yao, along with WildAid, subsequently took on the ivory trade [15], which played a part in China’s decision to ban all trade in ivory by the end of 2017. [16] Bringing continued international pressure to bear via the United Nations and regional governments, as well as environmentally conscious NGOs and influence-wielding celebrities, could influence Chinese public opinion and—as was the case with both shark fin soup and ivory—halt the Chinese government’s destruction of coral reefs in the South China Sea.

Claims over sovereignty may not resonate with non-state actors, the international public, and countries that are not directly involved in the dispute. Turning the South China Sea into an international environmental issue, however, may prove effective in influencing China’s island building. If the United States can take responsibility and corrective action in the wake of 25,240 square feet of accidental damage to a reef, surely China can do so for intentionally damaging nearly 43,000 times that area by ceasing its island building and taking measures to restore some of the ecosystems it has destroyed.

Copyright © 2017 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.

All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please fill out and submit a Permissions Request Form. If you plan to use this article in a coursepack or academic website, visit Copyright Clearance Center to clear permission.

Source URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-06-09/protecting-south-china-sea>

Links

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/30/world/asia/what-china-has-been-building-in-the-south-china-sea.html?_r=0

[2] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-03-21/chinas-short-term-victory-south-china-sea>

[3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-02-08/confronting-china-south-china-sea>

[4] <https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf>

[5] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-06-10/pollution-without-revolution>

[6] <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/06/south-china-sea-coral-reef-destruction/>

[7] <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1801>

[8] <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/984745.shtml>

[9] <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20170426/105870/HHRG-115-AS00-Wstate-HarrisH-20170426.PDF>

[10] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-12-22/coverup-in-the-south-china-sea>

[11] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/world/asia/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-scarborough-shoal-china.html?_r=0

[12] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-tamed-the-green-watchdogs-1496075092>

[13] <https://twitter.com/YaoMing>

[14] <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/09/world/asia/china-ban-shark-fin/index.html>

[15] https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/12/a-plea-to-shun-the-ivory-trade-from-yao-ming/?_r=1

[16] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/asia/china-ivory-ban-elephants.html?_r=0