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Standing on the shoulders of science above the South China Sea fray

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The waters of the South China Sea face environmental peril that is [‘inseparable from the territorial disputes that plague it’](#). As claimants solidify their positions through artificial island construction, with China driving the most ambitious builds, habitats with wide-ranging ecological and economic value are being destroyed.



Calls for regional science-based cooperation to overcome these environmental threats were recently taken to task in an [article](#) in the *Eurasia Review*. The positions outlined misunderstand the case for scientific cooperation in several ways.

According to the author, this [call for action](#) was a polemic screed that romantically ignores the nationalist realities that define policymaking in the South China Sea. The author contends that while environmental cooperation is potentially laudable, it may be a pipedream and is a distraction from the [realpolitik game](#) being played in the South China Sea.

The author goes on to point out (correctly) that the causes of environmental destruction in the maritime zone are due to actions by many other claimants and actors in addition to the Chinese, challenge the wider importance of the affected habitats, and pillory previous environmental cooperation efforts to the point of saying, ‘why bother?’

First, the multiple causes of environmental decline in the South China Sea are no reason to abandon multilateral marine cooperation. Quite the contrary — overfishing, destructive fishing practices, littoral coastal pollution and transportation effluents combine with artificial island construction and habitat destruction to create a toxic and interconnected causal mix.

Science-based cooperation that seeks to understand relationships among these drivers and bring voices from the multiple claimants to shape resulting research is the apt response.

Second, there is ample evidence for the importance that these habitats have for maritime resources across and beyond the disputed territories. It is through environmental cooperation that this evidence can expand and gain traction throughout claimant communities. Relationships among multiple habitats and organisms [are complex](#) and multidirectional, but the core consideration is simple and indisputable: fish, nutrients and other aquatic resources often originate in one jurisdiction — disputed or not — and move to others. Environmental destruction at any point in the chain disrupts ecosystems and the people who depend on them across wider geographies.

Third, environmental cooperation remains the only viable pathway for addressing maritime environmental decline. Despite the author's suggestions to the contrary, it is not too late. Leading marine scientists focussed on the South China Sea [measure](#) current irreversible damage, including dredging and filling, at an area of approximately 57 square kilometres. There are at least 3821 square kilometres of reef visible in satellite imagery within the Spratly Islands and nearly 481 square kilometres in the Paracel Islands. Much damage has been done, but that makes the cooperative action more important in the near-term — not a non-starter.

There are lessons from the past in how such cooperation might be pursued. From 2002–2008 the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) deployed Global Environment Facility (GEF) funding to spearhead an intergovernmental project inclusive of all of the major South China Sea claimants. Resulting work fostered cooperation among regional scientists, marine experts and policymakers to determine the South China Sea's greatest environmental challenges and map out potential responses.

Efforts to develop cooperative tools and approaches created a space in which trusting [working relationships](#) could exist among countries concurrently embroiled in territorial disputes. For Southeast Asian claimants, environmental protection and scientific research were viewed as pathways for engaging China and developing person-to-person connections that could be impactful both for marine ecosystems and wider regional issues. For China, staying attached to the project ensured it remained at the table and created lasting relationships with the GEF and UNEP.

The results varied. Regional networks of environmental institutions, professionals and policymakers developed small-scale projects and agreed to broad principles. Some key issues remained off limits, ultimately leading to contested areas being removed from cooperative efforts and China abstaining from multilateral fishery management efforts. Increasing geopolitical tensions, including that stemming from growing US involvement, curbed project momentum and contributed to its sunset. Environmental destruction and fishery stresses have since amplified, particularly in disputed areas.

Even so, the potential for environmental cooperation to have a material impact and serve as a confidence-building measure remains. The UNEP leveraged this by expressly seeking

to de-politicise environmental issues and build a policy network that could work together despite some discord. The modest successes that it enjoyed offers indicators of how environmental issues could again be promoted. Its failures show that sustained efforts will require a level of policy and resource prioritisation far greater than that brought to bear in the past. As with security, the environmental stakes are higher now.

In this sea of opportunities, uncertainties and threats, environmental degradation remains at the centre of scientific conversation as an increasing number of marine scientists sound the alarm about how to address issues of acidification, biodiversity loss, climate change, destruction of coral reefs and fishery collapses.

On 11–12 April, for instance, a multilateral marine environment workshop was hosted by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the China Institute of International Studies in Beijing, indicating the potential for scientific cooperation. Bringing together scientists, academics and senior government officials at the track 1.5 level, the meeting aimed to devise cooperative strategies to protect the region's ecosystems and promote sustainable management of its living resources.

The author's core message that states will continue to act in their own self-interest in the South China Sea is well-supported empirically. The elucidation of the difficulties of environmental cooperation provided by the author are welcome and insightful. But these difficulties should not lead to claimant countries shirking vital responsibilities to manage regional marine resources.

Scientific cooperation is an action without legitimate substitute in the South China Sea and can offer a chart for protecting marine environments while enjoying their bounty sustainably. It is not a *fait accompli* that such cooperation cannot exist alongside territorial posturing.

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