



Interview with James Borton:

## Vietnamese Environmental Nationalism and the Campaign to “Save the East Sea”

Jonathan Spangler and James Borton / *Perspectives*, 8 / 2016

The South China Sea Think Tank interviews James Borton about his experiences in the Chàm Islands, the emerging environmental awareness there, and the campaign to inspire Vietnamese youth to become more involved in national environmental issues.

**James Borton** is an educator and environmental writer. He is working on the book *Dispatches from the South China Sea* about the East Sea and Vietnam’s ancestral fishing grounds, boat builders, and fishers. He recently traveled to the marine protected Cham Islands. He is the editor of *The South China Sea: Challenges and Promises*.

**South China Sea Think Tank:** You’ve been writing about Vietnam for more than a decade, focusing in recent years on the coastal and maritime environment. What sparked your interest in these issues?

**James Borton:** I am long-term waterman, sailor and an ocean steward. Our oceans are under attack from climate change, El Niño weather patterns, sea surges, ocean acidification and the world’s voracious appetite for fish. Access to fish stocks is vital not only for Vietnam’s fishermen but for many coastal nations. The East Sea [as the South China Sea is referred to in Vietnam] is the lifeblood of the nation’s trade and is one of the world’s richest fishing regions. It has always served as Vietnam’s traditional, if not ancestral, fishing grounds. The future will define Vietnam’s dilemma if the present young generation does not

take steps towards conservation and sustainability of the dwindling marine resources.

**SCSTT:** You recently traveled to the Chàm Islands off the coast of Vietnam. Why there?

**JB:** I was invited by Dr. Chu Manh Trinh, who accompanied me to Cu Lao Cham. For the past eleven years, this youthful and engaging 53-year-old marine scientist has been traversing the twenty kilometers of open sea from Cua Dai Harbor in the city of Hoi An to ensure the success of this marine protected area and to preserve this paradise. When he first arrived, the islands were littered with nylon bags, trash, and sea animal carcasses. I learned that he embarked on a long-running mission to improve the environmental awareness of locals and enhance the islands’ allure for tourists. Wherever we strolled on the island, the locals enthusiastically greeted him as



the “professor,” demonstrating respect but also giving the impression that he was part of the family. From crab to fish catches, Trinh has provided a “nautical chart” for their future by educating them about conservation and sustainable practices.

**SCSTT:** Can you tell us some more about this marine protected area?

**JB:** Vietnam has planned and approved many marine protected areas. While many have either failed or only partially achieved their management objectives, I witnessed first hand this successful eco-tourism model revealing a rainbow of tropical life lurking among the hard and soft corals. On this pristine island, which you can get to by boat from the harbor in Hoi An in about 25 minutes, I met with local fishermen who understand and have been practicing sustainable fishing and habitat conservation. All of the island’s residents know that the East Sea and their coastal waters is their safety net for life. Visiting the island, I was reminded of something I read in a book called *The Ocean of Life: The Fate of Man and the Sea* by marine biologist Callum Roberts, where he says, “it is essential for ocean life and our own that we transform ourselves from being a species that uses up its resources to one that cherishes and nurtures them.”

**SCSTT:** What can you tell us about this island and what it represents for Vietnam’s future?

**JB:** In speaking with Kinh fishermen, like sixty-year-old Nguyen Qui Hien, about their cultural

beliefs associated with whales giving protection to fishers, I better understood the term “blue mind.” In a water-based community, people are in daily harmony with the elements and often imbue their environment with magical qualities. Here on this island, there’s not competition among fishers but cooperation. I saw them fixing their fishing nets, working on their boats, and in the market selling their fish. This ancestral fishing village is now a biosphere reserve, conserving and protecting the coral reefs, ecological diversity and cultural heritage. This sense of their ancestral past is reflected in the many pagodas and temples dedicated to honoring whales. In their beliefs and festivals, the islanders reveal their pride in their livelihoods and, more importantly, their community. The Chàm Islands are indeed a breath-taking cluster of granite islands, and the livelihoods of the population depend on fishing and other marine resources.

**SCSTT:** It sounds like the people of the community may have some lessons worth sharing. What kind of things do you feel could be learned from them?

**JB:** I think that they can teach all of us about the need to conserve and to sustain our oceans. Dr. Trinh and others at his marine protected area have taught the Kinh that by protection of their coral reefs, they are saving their seas for more fishing for the future generations. The islands boast 277 coral species and 270 reef fish species as well as a wealth of natural beauty and an abundance of traditional knowledge and customs.

Even though it is becoming a tourist destination, there is no development and no



hotels. The community has brought in a new form of income in the way of homestays for divers and eco-tourism. I have also learned from them how people can truly have a deeper emotional connection to the sea. The East Sea inspires, thrills, and even soothes people. I encourage Vietnam's younger people to visit this magical island so that they can experience how this body of water, the East Sea, casts its spell and holds us in a net of wonder forever. I know that I will return soon.

**SCSTT:** Having worked as an educator, how would you suggest getting youth interested in maritime environmental issues in the area?

**JB:** Why not start a social media-inspired campaign among Vietnam's net-savvy citizens? A few people have suggested calling it "Save the East Sea" or Lu'u giu Bien Dong. It is becoming apparent that Vietnam's maritime history can be seen in every cultural and economic activity found in the nation's ancestral fishing grounds, traditional boat building industry, and marine protected areas. What Vietnamese are witnessing is the continuity of tradition in opposition with rapid cultural changes. Perhaps young people can create a national conversation about some of these issues related to East Sea ancestral traditions and the challenges for sustaining them.

**SCSTT:** Why might this subject or message on social media interest young people?

**JB:** Well, for starters, the contested sovereignty claims are not going away any time soon.

Furthermore, Vietnam's fishing communities are central to any examination of sovereignty and should be placed into the national discourse as part of a nationwide "soft diplomacy" response to China's continued aggressive actions in the East Sea. Finally, overfishing and pollution has an immediate and direct impact on their lives now and tomorrow.

**SCSTT:** Interesting. So, in essence, are you saying that increased interest in the South China Sea disputes might actually inspire people to pay more attention to environmental issues?

**JB:** Yes, the world has seen the startling satellite images. This body of water is one of the most important large marine ecosystems in the world, rich as it is in marine resources from fish species and coral reefs. Hundreds of millions of lives depend on it as a food source, so it's no wonder that more marine scientists are weighing in on the environmental catastrophe associated with China's reclamation since it endangers fish stocks and kills coral reefs.

**SCSTT:** If you could tell people there in Vietnam and elsewhere one last thing about these issues, what would that be?

**JB:** Take charge and control of your future. Start a campaign to conserve and to sustain the East Sea. Plan a ceremony the first week in June 2016 and hold it on Cua Lao Cham. The program might even correspond with a scheduled 2–3 day real time and online writing workshop on



“Understanding Vietnam’s Environmental Challenges in the East Sea” all this could become a grand lead up to World Ocean Day to be held on June 8, 2016. During this week, throughout Vietnam’s coast, young people can engage in a sweeping clean up of the coastal environment and disseminate government-approved information on the environment and how to “save the East Sea.” All these efforts may succeed in mobilizing

and uniting Vietnam’s population to claim and to protect their precious and fragile ancestral fishing grounds. In the best of worlds, a Vietnam social media campaign would encourage a form of environmental nationalism, and maybe it could even inspire other neighboring countries to promote conservation and sustainable development of the maritime environment as well.

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