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Chinese Fishermen at Frontline of Maritime Disputes: An Alternative Explanation

By Zhang Hongzhou

Synopsis

Poaching of endangered marine species could be a key factor which drives the Chinese fishermen to the frontline of the regional maritime disputes.

Commentary

OVER THE past few years, this region has witnessed rising numbers of fishing incidents involving Chinese fishermen, particularly in the disputed South China Sea, and the East China Sea. Mainstream media and academic writings tend to attribute this to China's attempts to militarise its fishermen in the disputed waters. While both China and Vietnam have attempted to strengthen their maritime militia force in the past few years amid rising tensions in the South China Sea, the securitised fishery discourse is too state-centric and fails to answer a key question - what are the fishermen collecting in the disputed waters? The answer is not always fish; instead, it is the high valued and endangered marine species such as red coral, giant clams and sea turtles, which attracts many Chinese fishermen to the disputed and foreign waters.

Parallel to the rising demand for fishery productions for food, the increasingly affluent Chinese are also consuming more rare aquatic products for personal accessories, decoration and collection purposes. Such are the cases for red coral giant clams. In addition to the beautiful appearances, there are religious reasons as well. In Buddhism, there are seven treasures or seven kinds of gems. Commonly in China, the seven are gold, silver, lapis lazuli, giant clams, agate, pearl, and coral. This makes giant clams and red coral products particularly popular among the wealthy Chinese. Driven by high demand and speculation, the price of red coral and giant clams skyrocketed in recent years.

Red Coral in ECS and Beyond

In the East China Sea, Chinese fishermen's harvesting of red corals can be dated back to two decades ago. However, in the past few years, due to rapidly rising demand for red coral in China, more fishermen joined the illegal quest for red corals. Very quickly, red coral stocks in China's territorial waters and EEZs depleted. As a result, Chinese fishermen gradually expanded their operations further, first into the waters controlled by Taiwan and then to disputed waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

For instance, in April 2013, 12 fishermen were arrested by the Chinese Coast Guard for poaching of red coral in waters near the Disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. And in May 2016, the Taiwanese coast guard has arrested 41 Chinese fishermen with possession of coral reef and endangered sea turtles in Taiwanese waters.

Partly due to strengthened patrols in China's coastal areas, the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and Taiwanese waters and partly driven by high-quality red corals, more and more Chinese fishing vessels entered the Japanese waters. The area near Japan's Ogasawara Islands has become a favourite spot for Chinese red coral poachers, and the number of Chinese ships operating in the waters around the Ogasawara islands reached over 200 in October 2014.

Giant Clams and Sea Turtles and SCS Disputes

In the South China Sea, the growing numbers Chinese fishermen, mainly from Hainan, have harvested giant clams and sea turtles in large scale over the past few years. While the Hainan fishermen have long been collecting the high valued species such as oyster, sea cucumber and top shell in the South China Sea, the rise of the giant clams handicraft industry has completely transformed the old fishing town of Tanmen where most of the Hainan fishermen come from, especially since they began to collect giant clams and sea turtles for a living in 2012.

While giant clams are found in shallow coral reefs of the South China Sea, the quality of the giant clams from different areas varies with giant clams from the Scarborough Shoal considered the best, followed by the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. Not surprisingly, fine quality giant clams attracted Tanmen fishermen to the Scarborough Shoal. The Sino-Philippines 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff was triggered when Philippine naval ship attempted to arrest the Tanmen fishermen who were collecting giant clams and other high valued marine species in the waters of the Scarborough Shoal.

Since the incident, Tanmen fishermen have been banned from fishing near waters of the Scarborough Shoal. This forced the Tanmen fishermen to expand their operation outward. More and more Tanmen fishermen operate not only in waters near the reefs controlled by other South China Sea claimants within China's "nine-dash line", but also occasionally cross the nine-dash line and enter other countries' EEZs.

Poaching of endangered marine species is also carried out by fishermen of other countries in the region. In May 2014, eleven Tanmen Chinese fishermen were

arrested by the Philippine authorities for suspected poaching of hundreds of sea turtles in the disputed Half Moon Shoal in the Spratly Islands. In fact, the sea turtles were collected by the Filipino fishermen and then sold to these Tanmen fishermen. Five months later, in October 2014, the Chinese Coast Guard arrested another group of Tanmen fishermen in the disputed Half Moon Shoal for acquiring 24 sea turtles from the Filipino fishermen. In addition, in 2014, dozens of Vietnamese fishermen were detained for poaching giant clams in the waters of Australia and Malaysia.

China's Crackdown on Poaching

In the East China Sea, since late 2014, China has launched a "Blue Sword" operation to crackdown Chinese fishermen's poaching of red corals. In the South China Sea, the Chinese government has also begun to crackdown poaching of giant clams and sea turtles since early 2015 and the authority is striving to find alternative sources of income for the fishermen.

However, with demand for red coral, sea turtles and giant clams products continuing to rise, the restriction on the supply side could further push up the prices, which could attract more poachers. Therefore, the demand-side measures are needed as well. A nationwide campaign on anti-consumption of red coral, giant clams and sea turtle products could be more effective.

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