

Spring 4-2023

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Recommended Citation

Truong, Hanna, "Water pollution and environmental justice in Vietnam: A look into the 2016 Formosa Ha Tinh steel pollution incident" (2023). *EJAV Student Research*. 2.
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Water Pollution and Environmental Justice in Vietnam

A Look into the 2016 Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Pollution Incident

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Abstract

The Vietnamese regime has had a history of silencing its citizens. With increasing economic growth, laws have been passed to further censor Vietnamese people from speaking out against the government. The Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation plant poured industrial waste into surrounding oceans killing millions of marine life. This impacted Vietnamese people who rely on fishing for businesses and food. With both the company and the government denying allegations, nationwide protests took place while social media became a center of influence. Such initiatives, not only prompted a proper investigation by the government but also measures to protect Vietnam waters. Demonstrating the power of social activism in the wake of environmental injustice, this incident serves as a clear example of the influential power held by the people

Introduction

In recent years, Vietnam's economic growth rate has proved to be one of the highest in the world. However, issues concerning basic human freedoms such as speech and assembly, have wrongfully affected Vietnamese citizens.

These concerns stem from the Vietnam War in the late 20th century. By the end of the war, a state-controlled civil society was enforced by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). Over the past decades, the growing economy invited external funding from Western donors and foreign investors. This allowed for the rise of antagonistic groups to the state and structured Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). However, as a result, actions to repress human rights in Vietnam ensued

In 1992, the Vietnamese constitution circumscribed the right to freedom of speech, press, and peaceful assembly. Recently, the government passed Article 88 of Vietnam's Penal Code which prohibits propaganda against the state. Because of this, social activism, especially promoting environmental justice, has been scarce.



An illustration published in a Vietnamese magazine demonstrates the severity of Article 88

However, recent events concerning water pollution have brought about a new age of social movements despite the government's censorship laws. **This poster will highlight the 2016 Formosa Ha Tinh Steel disaster along with its pivotal environmental movement.**

Causes

The Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation (FHS) is a plant located in Ha Tinh province in Vietnam's North Central Coast, and it is operated by the Taiwanese Formosa Plastic Group. The FHS is also placed in the Vung Ang Economic Zone, allowing the plant to take advantage of local tax policies and preferences in tariffs with other countries.

Once dead fish began appearing on coasts, the FHS plant became the main culprit as strong odors were present in nearby pipes the plant connected to the ocean. Residents accused the FHS of dumping toxic chemical substances such as phenol, cyanide, and iron hydroxides into the nearby ocean. However, the company denied such allegations. The Vietnamese government also attempted to cover the truth by suggesting that the disaster by due to natural occurrences and never conducting a thorough investigation.



The image shows Vietnam and its affected regions. Orange represents Formosa-affected provinces, and the red line shows the 20-mile near-shore fishing-restricted zone after Formosa, while the blue line corresponds to Vietnam's Exclusive Maritime Economic Zone

Effects

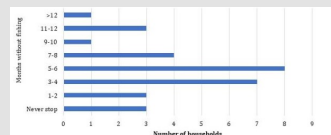
In April 2016, around 100 tons of dead fish washed up on the coast near the plant in Ha Tinh, as well as in three other provinces: Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien Huu. The image below depicts fish washing up on Vietnamese shores following the pollution.

"The sea has three colors – black, red, and purple. When I pulled out the fishing net, it had sticky toxins, yellow toxins, and muddy toxins. My hands touched those toxins and became cankered and itched when I came back home. It has been one month since the fish death accident happened, and we still cannot go fishing"
- Local Fisher



Thousands of Vietnamese families and businesses were also profoundly affected. Around 44,000 families, many living off fish farming became direct victims of the pollution. Many had to halt operations which created unemployment for around 3,000 workers. By November 2016, the four provinces saw a drastic peak in unemployment with 83% of residents' incomes falling.

A survey of surrounding households found that many went months without fishing because of the toxic waters. See figure below



Fighting Back

In response to the accusations, an FHS company spokesperson suggested that the Vietnamese need to decide whether they want a modern steel industry or fish. This comment, along with the unresponsive government, was met with public outrage which spread across the country. Mass protests were held in not only the main affected provinces but also the largest cities in Vietnam including Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. "I choose fish", was the core message uttered by thousands of protestors in the streets and social media. Facebook became the primary platform used to spread information regarding upcoming protests and resources or fundraising efforts for those affected by the pollution.



Examples of common Facebook profile pictures. Left: "I am Vietnamese. I choose fish." Middle: "Fish need clean water. Citizens need transparency." Right: "When I was alive, I only wanted peace, and took care of my family, didn't want to clash, was too lazy to fight. Now I understand, injustice does not spare me... Today me. Tomorrow you?"

While the first protests were generally peaceful, police forces eventually began using violent attack tactics on protestors. In fact, police were often seen dressing up as civilians in such attacks. While images and videos of the violence were spread through Facebook, many phones were confiscated, and Facebook access became fragmented. However, the Vietnamese didn't stop. In October 2016, thousands of protestors overran police at a Formosa compound but chose not to vandalize or cause harm in a peaceful demonstration as seen below



The Catholic Church in Vietnam played a critical role in not only assisting victims but also supporting the movement and encouraging Catholics to peacefully protest. This is mostly due to religious leaders in Vietnam building alliances and networking with Taiwanese NGOs

"It seems the government tries to cover up for the culprit. We will protest until the government says what caused the spill."
- Catholic priest in Nghe An

Conclusion



After two months of investigations by the Vietnamese government because of public outrage, it was concluded that the FHS did indeed cause serious pollution to its surrounding waters. Additionally, the plant committed 53 violations during construction and in their lack of wastewater treatment. The FHS agreed to pay \$500 million for its damages.

Being the worst environmental disaster Vietnam has ever seen, measures were enforced to prevent a similar incident from occurring again. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment set up a council to monitor remedial measures for the plant, and the company was required to set up biological indicator ponds to monitor the quality of wastewater.

Vietnam's marine economy accounts for 53-55% of the country's GDP. Additionally, millions of Vietnamese people rely on fish and seafood as their main food source. While the sea has been slowly recovering from this pollution, the number of fish caught by fishermen has been limited. Given its large influence on Vietnam's economy and people, waters need to be protected to ensure the well-being of millions living in the country.

The rare widespread protests demonstrate the power of civic activism even against an authoritarian regime. This incident has proven to be a perfect example of how citizens can call for change when environmental injustice is taking place. A main takeaway from this event is the potential outcomes of collective activism. **Especially in a society with increasing technology, individuals across the globe can learn from these protests and provide the change needed for a healthy environment across all aspects**

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