

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

Southeast Asia region is granted with a geographical advantage for natural resources as well as demographical advantage with significant number of human resources that endows such economic potential for the states that are comprised within the region. People and the communities within the states in Southeast Asia are dependent and directly connected to the management and governance of the natural resources, through economic benefit that sustain the living of the people.

Southeast Asia is comprised of 173.000 km of coastline and intersect directly with the world's coral triangle and world's marine biodiversity<sup>1</sup>. The marine potential and fishing industry have significantly contributed to the economy and livelihood of the people in the region. South China Sea is one of the main features, that becomes the economic powerhouse sea in the region. All ASEAN member states, have depended on the rivers and oceans as the source of economic benefit since even before the independence. Approximately 30 million people across the ASEAN member states are depending on the fishery and marine resources that sustain their living. About 330,000 fishing vessels have operated for

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN. (n.d.). ASEAN Cooperation on Coastal and Marine Environment – ASEAN Cooperation on Environment. Retrieved from <https://environment.asean.org/awgcme/>

years in the region seas, which sustain the livelihood of 3.7 million fishermen of Southeast Asia and China<sup>2</sup>.

However, with abundant of resources, South China Sea remain prone to dispute and conflicts. Issues of ocean territorial border and claimants of islands by sovereign states in among the region proves that clear conduct and implementation of international law is still doubtful. Different perceptions to territorial sea, international waters and exclusive economic zone may bring the Southeast Asian states, that are bound through ASEAN regionalism, to weaker stance and need to have the same perspective regarding the management and halter the negotiation and cooperation for better regulation in the sea. While the conflict and dispute has not come to settlement, not just the benefit of the people are endangered, but also the sustainability of natural resources are under significant threat.

Today, according to World Wildlife Fund (WWF), it is estimated that twenty to fifty three percent of the world's marine fishery resources have been completely depleted or fished to the maximum sustainable level. Another thirty-two percent is currently being overfished, depleted, or recovering from depletion.<sup>3</sup> The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank have alerted people and the governments across the world that the sustainability for the future marine resources stock may have been endangered for the long term due to the high amount catch by multi-nationalities fishermen. Based on analysis provided by Asia

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<sup>2</sup> Jennings, R. (2017, September 12). South China Sea Succumbing to Pollution Due to Political Impasse | Voice of America - English. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/south-china-sea-succumbing-pollution-due-political-impasse>

<sup>3</sup> "South China Sea, between the Philippines, Borneo, Vietnam, and China." WWF. World Wildlife Fund. Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/ecoregions/im0148>.

Maritime Initiative, construction of Chinese artificial island and military base in the South China Sea as one of the efforts to claim the territorial sea and EEZ, have contributed to oil spill and degradation to coral reef in the South China Sea<sup>4</sup>. States' importance on the political discourse of the South China Sea, may distract the concern to relief measures of the marine environmental issues.

United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was established in the beginning not only for the establishment of borders but also for the protection of marine life resources sustainability and conservation<sup>5</sup>. However, UNCLOS implementation has been undermined through violation and non-reference efforts to protect the sea. South China Sea surrounding countries' governments, such as Vietnam, Philippines and Indonesia, urged numbers of fishermen to engage in fishing that may contribute to the overfishing in long term, to compete Chinese's fishing vessels and secure the territorial border.<sup>6</sup>

Different perception on the South China Sea border and the overlapping territorial and exclusive economic zone establishment weakened the stances between the Southeast Asian states<sup>7</sup>. Divide of ASEAN member states causes significant loophole, that China has been using to navigate their national interest in the disputable body of water<sup>8</sup>. The intensify political tension among the South China Sea surrounding states has hampered and ignored the environmental issues

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<sup>4</sup> CSIS. (2019, May 20). China's Most Destructive Boats Return to the South China Sea | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. Retrieved from <https://amti2016.staging.wpengine.com/chinas-most-destructive-boats-return-to-the-south-china-sea/>

<sup>5</sup> James Harrison Saving the Oceans through Law: The International Legal Framework for the Protection of the Marine Environment (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017) at 304

<sup>6</sup> Kembara, Gilang. *Partnership for Peace in the South China Sea* 1 (August 9, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> O'Neill, Daniel. *Dividing ASEAN and Conquering the South China Sea: Chinas Financial Power Projection*. Hong Kong University Press., 2018.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

that arise, which in the long term may cause significant impact to the communities of the surrounding countries and sustainability of the one of the world's largest marine potential that the world and Southeast Asia region in particular, have heavily depend on.

## **1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research aims to focus on the comprehension that South China Sea dispute may contribute to the marine environmental damage that may affect the Southeast Asia communities. Thus, the following question will ensure the course of the research.

1. What are the environmental issues that occurred at the South China Sea?
2. What are consequences of environmental degradation that South China Sea surrounding states will have to face in the long term?
3. What are the efforts that states, or non-state actors have conducted to detect, monitor or to overcome the issue?

## **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The Objective of this research is to map out and briefly explain the environmental issues that occur in South China Sea and to measure the environmental problem of the territorial dispute of South China Sea that has not been handled properly among the claimant states. Coastal communities in Southeast

Asia play significant role in the economics of the countries in the region, as ASEAN, the main regionalism of the region, identifies itself as body of communities.

#### **1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH**

The result of this research proposal will provide insight to the environmental aspect to the South China Sea territorial dispute, and in-depth analysis about three environmental damages, such as the overfishing, coral reef degradation in Spratly and Paracel Islands and detection of oil spill that may affect the South China Sea surrounding States. This research is significant to the International Relations major as the topic discusses the involvement of World Wildlife Fund as international organization that actively monitor and provide data regarding the environmental dispute, as surrounding states have perceived the environmental issue as minor to the political issue and interests that meddle in the disputed waters. The aim of this research is to clarify and develop the understanding and perception of South China Sea issue into deeper and more comprehensive perspective regarding the environmental issue that international communities and governments should also emphasize and concern about. In addition, the research will enrich the field of social sciences, especially regarding the environmental aspect of International Relations. Thus, the author hopes that the research will be beneficial to both IR Scholar and general public.

## **1.5 STRUCTURE OF WRITING**

The first chapter, the introduction, discusses about the background of the thesis topic, research questions which this research will try to answer, the purpose of the research and the importance of the research.

The second chapter consists of literature review and theoretical framework. In literature review, this chapter collects and summarizes previous peer-reviewed scientific journals in relation to South China Sea territorial dispute and the environmental issues that occur in the region. The theoretical framework are being used as framework to help explain and correlate the occurrences environmental issues in South China Sea, amid the territorial dispute.

The third chapter, which is the methodology, elaborates the research approach, research method, data collection technique, and data analysis technique used in gathering data and information for the research.

The fourth chapter, which is the analysis, depicts and analyses all the data gathered from valid and credible sources, regarding the environmental issues that occurred in South China Sea throughout the territorial dispute, through methodically coherent to the theories that are used in the international relations field of study. The result of the analysis is used to address the research question of the thesis.

The fifth chapter, which is the conclusion, summarizes the analysis of the previous chapters and concludes the topics that were analysed.