

# ***Taiping Island: A Concerto of Marine Life in the South China Sea: An exercise in science, beauty and propaganda***

*Taiping Island: A Concerto of Marine Life in the South China Sea* documents the array of marine life around Taiping Island, part of the Spratly island chain and the largest natural island in the South China Sea. The 18 minute long documentary emerged following a one year research project commissioned by Taiwan's fisheries agency in conjunction with Academia Sinica Biodiversity research centre and underwater film maker Kuo Tao-jen (郭陶堅). The beauty of the filming and natural wonders shown is contrasted with the crudity of the nationalist propaganda underlying the film that serves to justify Taiwan's claim to the Island in the contentious waters of the South China Sea.

The reefs around the island have been called a biodiversity hot spot, so much so that during the survey 90 new species were discovered with 35 new species of seaweed, 46 new species of Coral, and 9 new species of large invertebrates.

The underwater film is very beautiful as it is sumptuously edited so that the fish almost seemed to be dancing in fine choreography to the classical music of Vivaldi's four seasons and the blue Danube by Strauss that accompanies the images. The editing to accentuate the 'dancing' of the marine life is well executed. Our narrator states in the film: "The arena of coral reefs showcase all types of live performances put on by creatures of incredible beauty. Species of all colours, patterns, forms and sizes form a symphony orchestra playing

out the concerto of life. Composed of evolutionary rhythm and melody that transcends through borders, time and space". The outcome is a spectacular foray into the majesty of the reefs surrounding this remote island, it is a visually stunning film.



After the beauty of the reef is revealed and discussed, the tone of the documentary abruptly changes and there is a great degree of self-aggrandisement on the long historical connections between Taiwan and the Island and the role of the Taiwanese military presence in conservation work removing ghost nets from the ocean, and their humanitarian marine rescue operations.

All well and good but one senses that this documentary is little more than a pillar in a charm offensive as the Taiwanese ruling class try create a moral case for their disputed claim in the South China Sea so that they may stake exclusive economic rights over the oceans vast petroleum, mineral and fishing resources along with strategic control over important shipping lanes.

The marine boundaries of the South China Sea are currently contested by China, Taiwan, Phillipines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia as they each seek to re draw national lines in their own interest for control of energy, raw materials and other sources of profit. Taiping Island (known internationally also as Itu Aba Island), even has has its

status as an island disputed. In the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration in the case brought by the Phillipines ruled it was a "rock" under the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea and therefore Taiwan could not claim a 200 nautical mile economic zone around it. Taiwan rejected this ruling but it explains their determination to present themselves as the benign and rightful occupiers of this beautiful location.

Under Washington's long term Pivot to Asia strategy, along with the military encirclement and an economic offensive, there is also a diplomatic 'front' as US intrigues seek to ratchet up regional tensions by stoking long running territorial grievances, supporting opposing claims to weaken Beijing's sphere of influence.

In addition while the Taiwanese ruling class speak highly of the beauty and importance of protecting the reefs around Taiping, we can call them out for their rank hypocrisy. The island has been home to over \$100 million in development in recent years, with the construction of a 1.15 km long airstrip on the tiny island, a large port, lighthouse, hospital, library and perhaps most crucially an array of buildings and roads used to support the permanent basing of a navy garrison. Taiping's construction work has adversely impacted the ecology of the island though land clearing along with the works required to build and maintain the port in this once pristine area. Clearly Taiwan's need to cement its sovereignty trump all environmental concerns.



The reefs of Taiping Island are not only located within a geostrategic hotspot but they are also threatened by other capitalist pressures. According to Jeng Ming-shiou (詹銘猷) project head and researcher at Academia Sinica Biodiversity research centre “Climate Change and increasing human activity pose great threats to Itu Aba’s marine life” (1). While Taiping’s surrounding reefs are said to be in excellent condition with an estimated 60 – 80% coral cover as they are largely not affected by coral bleaching, this happy situation will not last.

The grand beauty of the worlds oceans and reefs could soon be completely lost through the mass bleaching associated with unchecked global warming and climate change (2), or the real possibility of a nuclear winter following the exchange of nuclear weapons in the event of WW3 as the world teters on the brink (3, 4), this madness cannot be allowed to continue. The working class of all countries must intervene and unite on the basis of their independent class interest in a common struggle against war and environmental degradation through the the fight against its ultimate source; the economic foundation of society: the capitalist profit system.

“Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence and enjoy it to the full.”  
– Leon Trotsky. (5)

## References

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