

Thi Mai sells fish at a market in Hue, Vietnam, on Apr. 4, 2026. She echoes a sentiment common among locals who believe the chemical alteration of the water after the Formosa marine disaster has stunted the growth and quality of the catch. (Photo: Reporter in Vietnam)

by Reporter in Vietnam

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Quang Tri, Vietnam — April 17, 2026

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For Bartholomeo Truong Dinh Nhuan, the memory of April 7, 2016, does not fade with the tides.

It is anchored in the predawn stillness of 3 a.m., when he and his crew prepared to head out into the Gulf of Tonkin, only to find the shoreline of Ha Tinh province choked with silver.

"There were too many to count," Nhuan recalled, his eyes fixed on the horizon where he once found his livelihood.

At first, like other fishermen, they hauled the drifting fish in, thinking it a windfall. "But just a few hours later, we were stunned. Local authorities announced the fish and seawater were heavily contaminated," he said.

That morning marked the beginning of the Formosa marine disaster — one of the most devastating human-caused environmental catastrophes in Vietnam's history.

Ten years later, for the Catholic communities spanning 200 km of coastline, the "common home" described by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* remains a place of profound brokenness. While the government claims the waters have recovered, the families who live by the rhythms of the sea say the environmental penance is far from over.

The disaster was precipitated by the Taiwanese-owned Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation, which admitted to illegally discharging a cocktail of phenol, cyanide and iron hydroxides into the ocean. The toxins formed dense compounds that settled on the seabed, suffocating the marine ecosystem.

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The numbers remain staggering: 300 tons of dead fish washed ashore across four provinces — Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue. This included 115 tons of wild species and 67 tons of clams. The company eventually paid $500 million in compensation, roughly 65% of which was distributed directly to affected coastal households.

For the 510,000 people whose lives were upended, the money was a mere bandage on a gaping wound.

Nhuan, who has four children and five grandchildren from Dong Yen Parish in Ha Tinh province, received 23.5 million dong (US$900). It was a pittance compared to his losses. "I fell into 160 million dong [US$6,073] in debt after borrowing to buy fishing equipment," said the 55-year-old, whose family has fished for generations.

The financial strain rippled through his family with lethal consequences. "My wife died a year later because we had no money for her medicine."

Nhuan said his family only began fishing again in 2020 but the catch was so small they had to sell boats to repay debts.



Fishermen in Cua Viet, Quang Tri, Vietnam, untangle herring from their nets after a catch on April 2, 2026. (Photo: Reporter in Vietnam)

The economic exodus that followed has hollowed out these faith communities. In Nhuan's village, 72 households once lived off the sea; today, only 28 remain. The young flee to cities or abroad to escape the debt that lingers like the toxins in the sediment.

Nhuan now works for a cobia fish farm and still carries 10 million dong (US$360) in debt.

Further south in Thua Thien Hue province, Thi Mai, in her 60s, spends her days selling fish at a local market. She earns roughly 150,000 dong (US$5.70) a day to support her five-member family.

For her, the disaster didn't just kill the fish; it changed their very essence.

"The squid meat is no longer fatty and sweet," she said, echoing a sentiment common among locals who believe the chemical alteration of the water has stunted the growth and quality of the catch.

Her husband, a lifelong fisherman, lost his spirit along with his livelihood and died five years later as his health collapsed.

In Quang Tri, the traditional fish sauce industry — a staple of local Catholic culture — was badly affected. This industry is centered in Catholic parishes where making fish sauce is a multigenerational vocation. It provides a vital protein source during religious fasting periods and became a symbol of the community's identity, moral craft and economic survival.



Tran Dinh Mien (right) talks with his friend at his home on Apr. 2, 2026 in Quang Tri province, Vietnam. (Photo: Reporter in Vietnam)

Tran Dinh Mien, 65, and his wife, Nguyen Thi Hoa, were forced to destroy 600 kilograms of contaminated fish and 200 liters of fish sauce, suffering losses of 45 million dong (US$1,730). The 10 million dong (US$384) they received in compensation didn't cover a fraction of their losses. The stress led Mien into deep depression and memory loss.

To keep the family afloat, they had to look into alternative ways to survive. Hoa eventually borrowed money to restart production in 2020, but the yields are ghosts of their former selves. "Before, we earned about 1 million dong [US$38] a day," she said. "Now we earn only 200,000 [US$7.60] because fish are so scarce."

She added that seven families in their village had abandoned the trade after losses linked to the disaster.

> 'We have learned that destroying the environment means destroying ourselves.'
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> —Paul Pham Cong Oanh
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If there is a silver lining in the dark waters, it is what Paul Pham Cong Oanh calls a change in the "human heart."

Oanh, 50, from Quang Binh province, lost his seafood distribution business in the disaster and later saw a ton of farmed cobia die in 2020 due to toxic algae blooms.

"We cried until we had no tears left," he said. "We felt the cruelty of environmental destruction."

However, the father of five believes that the community has undergone an "ecological conversion."

Realizing that the government's oversight was insufficient, local Catholics have taken the protection of the "common home" into their own hands.



Residents from Vinh Hien Commune in Hue, Vietnam, collect trash along the beach on Apr. 5, 2026. (Photo: Reporter in Vietnam)

They have planted coastal trees and use technology to monitor and stop destructive trawling boats that further deplete the fragile stocks. Oanh and his neighbors have successfully blocked 31 such vessels from operating in their waters by intercepting the intruder with their boats and pushing the trawler out of the protected area.

People from Dong Yen and four other neighboring parishes now gather on the weekend to collect trash along 14 km of coastline.

Backed by Catholic donors, many families are transitioning to sustainable aquaculture, raising crabs and grouper in ways that respect the natural limits of the sea. This process tries to minimize environmental impact by keeping fewer fish in a given space, raising high-value fish in floating cages and placing crabs or clams below those cages to eat the solid waste.



Paul Pham Cong Oanh in September 2025 (Photo: Reporter in Vietnam)

Nhuan said they realize that continuing to use industrial extraction methods such as dragging heavy nets across the seafloor or packing thousands of fish into small cages would be misguided if they wish to see the sea truly heal.

Ten years on, the sea may appear serene to a casual observer, but the Catholic communities along its edge know that it has a long memory. The "scars" mentioned by the faithful are not just economic; they are spiritual and communal.

The disaster forced a reckoning with the cost of industrial progress and the vulnerability of the poor who pay the highest price for it.

For those who remain, the lesson is written in the salt and the silt.

Oanh, standing on the shore where he now sells drinks to beachgoers to pay off his remaining debts, looks out at the water with a gaze that is both weary and vigilant.

"It takes a long time for marine life to return to normal," he said, his voice level against the sound of the surf.

"We have learned that destroying the environment means destroying ourselves. Even if the sea looks calm today, the memory of 2016 remains a turning point that reshaped our livelihoods and our bond with the world. We must care more about the sea and protect it, for when people dump waste into the ocean, the waves eventually return it to us as death and disease."