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Bomb Crater Fish Ponds

Fish pond at Dong Set, south of Hanoi, made deeper and more productive by American bombing. (Thomas J. Campanella)

Thomas J. Campanella

One of the great ironies of the Vietnam War is that the bomb craters left in the wake of American B-52s now provide sustenance to the Vietnamese people. These relics have become part of the agrarian landscape, transformed from a symbol of death into one of life.

The U.S. waged one of history's most devastating campaigns of ecological destruction in Vietnam. Landscapes were bombed, burned and soaked with defoliants in an effort to deprive the Vietnamese of food, to flush the rural population into cities and to eliminate the village and woodland sanctuary of Vietcong forces. An agrarian culture, Vietnam did not offer concentrated industrial targets; instead, saturation bombing of "soft" rural areas was pursued, to little strategic avail. Thousand-pound bombs, designed to take out munitions factories, were used to blow apart buffaloes and rice paddies.

These scars are still very much a part of the Vietnamese landscape. In Quang Binh and Vinh Linh provinces (just north and south of the former demilitarized zone) the landscape resembles the face of the moon, with craters 30 to 50 feet in diameter and several yards deep.



Villagers have transformed the bomb craters into ponds for growing fish, a staple of the Vietnamese diet. In the south, bomb craters are favored sites for houses, with a replenishable source of protein at the doorstep.

Several kilometers south of Hanoi are the rice fields and fish farms of Thanh Tri. Aquaculture here is highly productive, providing the city its principal source of fish. Such productivity is partly attributed to the 1972 "Christmas bombing" of Hanoi, when bombers pounded the Hanoi region for several days. At Dong Set a large load of bombs fell into shallow lakes used for rice and fish culture. According to local farmers, the explosions significantly deepened the lake beds. Because carrying capacity increased, fish harvests more than doubled after

the war. Today Dong Set produces some 500 tons of *ca me trang*, *ca troi an do* and other fish annually.

The contrasts are striking at Dong Set. Several net-filled punts bask in the sun, water trickles over a small spillway; it is a peaceful scene. Yet beneath the waters are reminders of war; some distance out from this shore a downed B-52 lies at rest. The waters are high today, but one fisherman offers to take me out there. With a stick, he tells me, I may touch the submerged tail of the bomber, home now to schools of fish.