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# At the edge: Heritage and tourism development in Vietnam's Con Dao archipelago



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**Abstract** This article outlines the development of Vietnam's Con Dao archipelago (and Con Son island in particular) as tourism destinations since the formal reunification of Vietnam in 1975. In particular it examines the nature of the area's two main tourism attractions, Con Son's prison sites and memorials and the archipelago's natural environment, and how these have been marketed to and experienced by national and international tourists. This discussion also involves considerations of the concept of thanatourism and how the latter might be understood to operate in a Vietnamese context. The final sections of the article consider development plans and options for the archipelago; how these can be understood within national political contexts; and what problems there might be with their implementation.

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### Introduction

The Con Dao archipelago is situated off the south eastern tip of Vietnam, 230 kilometres south of Ho Chi Minh city, between 106°54 East and 8°34 and 8°49 North (Fig. 1). The archipelago has a total landmass of 75 square kilometres, distributed across 16 islands. The largest and only inhabited island is Con Son (51.5 square kilometres), which has a population of 6800. The majority of the island's population resides on the south east coast, with smaller settlements on the south coast. The archipelago has a long history of habitation, with recent archaeological finds indicating that humans have visited and/or lived on the islands for over 4000 years (Nguyen et al.,

2010). The archipelago's location on a crucial marine route between East Asia and (present-day) Malaysia and Indonesia has resulted in frequent contact with mariners from various nations. A number of early European travellers to eastern Asia visited the area, with Marco Polo sheltering out a storm in the islands in 1294 (noting in his memoirs that the archipelago was a beautiful and bounteous place). Later, in the 15th and 16th centuries, other European ships visited to obtain fresh water, fruit and meat from the local community. As European powers intensified their interest in East Asia in the 17th and early 18th centuries, they began to seek more a permanent presence in the region. An early manifestation of the latter impulse occurred when the British East India Company established a base on Con Son in 1702. The base operated until 1705, when it was severely damaged during an uprising by Malay soldiers in the Company's employ and local villagers. Following this incident, the Vietnamese government re-asserted their control over the islands. While historical documentation on the population

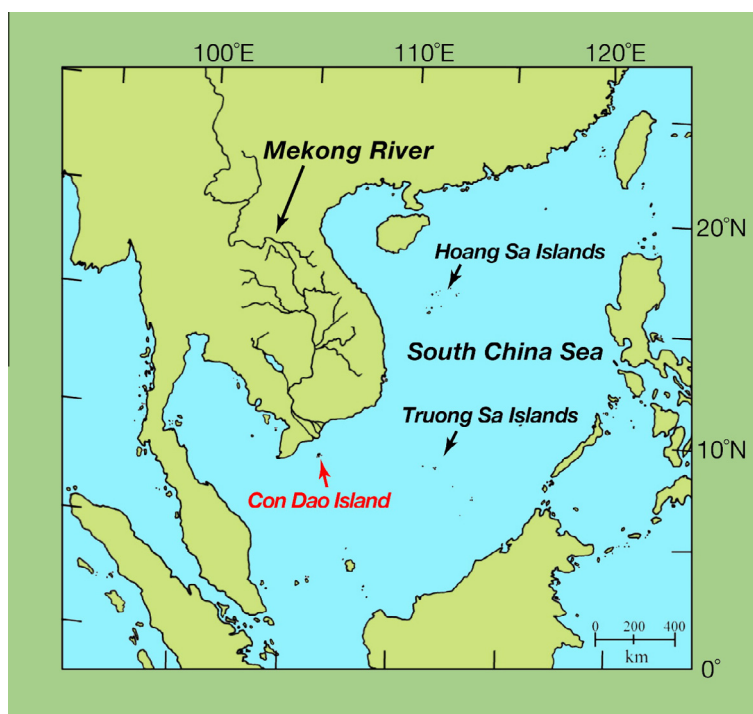
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**Figure 1** Map of Con Dao islands. Map permission of Takehiro Mitsuguchi – from (<http://www.geocities.jp/asianpaleoclimate/>).

of the archipelago in the 18th and 19th centuries is scant, an imperial ordinance issued by the Vietnamese King in 1821 noted that two hundred individuals lived on Con Son at this time (including a number of criminals deported from the mainland) and announced incentives for mainlanders to migrate there in order to sustain the settlement (Minh Mang, 1821).

Despite the archipelago's isolated location at the south eastern extremity of the nation, it played a significant role in the introduction of French influence into Vietnam in the 18th Century and, thereby, to the political upheaval that consumed the region in the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1770 a period of intense conflict commenced between factions in support of the traditional ruling family of Vietnam, the Nguyen Lords, and their rivals, the Tay Son brothers. In 1783 the Nguyen leader Anh negotiated with a French missionary, Pigneau de Behaine, to secure French military assistance to help Anh to regain control over the nation. As part of treaty negotiations signed at Versailles in 1787, Anh promised to cede Con Son to the French and to give them a trading concession in (present-day) Da Nang in return for their support. While the upheavals of the French Revolution disrupted the intended state support for Anh's cause, de Behaine persuaded a number of French merchants to fund the provision of supplies and mercenaries that began to arrive in 1789. This support aided Anh's attempts to regain control in a series of campaigns that were successfully completed in 1802. Aside from Con Son's assignment to France in recognition of its support for the Nguyen cause, some historical accounts identify that the archipelago played another role during the period in that Anh and his retinue took refuge on Hon Ba island (off the south coast of Con Son) in the mid 1770s. There is also a further embellishment to this account that plays a prominent role in local folklore. Legend has it that Anh undertook to send one of his sons to Versailles as a guarantee of good faith in negotiations with

France. When his wife, Phi Yen, refused to acquiesce to this he abandoned her. Remaining in the archipelago, she remained true to her husband and, when courted by another man, committed suicide by throwing herself into the sea. In marked contrast to her husband's reckless engagement with a foreign power, Yen's steadfast devotion to both son and husband is commemorated in a temple on Con Son island and the story is commemorated in an annual festival, held in October.

The French went on to use their presence and influence in Vietnam to begin a colonial enterprise that intensified in the 1850s, as they took control of the southern third of Vietnam, before going on to colonise the whole country in the following twenty years. French settlement of Con Son occurred in 1861, partly in response to fears that the British would establish a presence there (as the islands were close to the British sphere of influence in [present-day] Malaysia) (Nguyen et al., 2010). Following the arrival of a French warship in the archipelago in late 1861, personnel were dispatched to survey and to subsequently construct basic buildings on Con Son's south east coast. The arrival of French forces precipitated an uprising by locals and defecting Vietnamese soldiers employed by the French that was eventually defeated, with many locals killed in the conflict. As a result of this, and related food shortages, many Vietnamese left the island soon after, with the population dropping to just over 300 (Nguyen et al., 2010). As conflict and political repression on the mainland intensified, the French used the island to house Vietnamese nationalist prisoners and built facilities that became operational in 1862. These were maintained by the French until their withdrawal from Vietnam in 1954, when the facilities were taken over by the South Vietnamese government and, subsequently, the US military. The prisons operated until 1975, closing shortly before the end of national conflict.

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