

# LEATHERBACK NESTING SITES COULD BE OVERRUN BY ANDAMANS DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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Gentle giant: A Leatherback nesting at West Bay, Little Andaman. Adhith Swaminathan

Proposals for tourism and port development in the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands have conservationists worried over the fate of some of the most important nesting populations of the Giant Leatherback turtle in this part of the Indian Ocean.

The largest of the seven species of sea turtles on the planet and also the most long-ranging, Leatherbacks are found in all oceans except the Arctic and the Antarctic. Within the Indian Ocean, they nest only in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and are also listed in Schedule I of India's Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, according it the highest legal protection.

Surveys conducted in the A&N Islands over the past three decades have shown that the populations here could be among the most important colonies of the Leatherback globally. There is concern now, however, that at least three key nesting beaches — two on Little Andaman Island and one on Great Nicobar Island — are under threat due to mega “development” plans announced in recent months. These include NITI Aayog's ambitious tourism vision for Little Andaman and the proposal for a mega-shipment port at Galathea Bay on Great Nicobar Island.

## Little Andaman in focus

The Little Andaman plan, which proposes phased growth of tourism on this virtually untouched island, has sought the de-reservation of over 200 sq km of pristine rainforest and also of about 140 sq km of the Onge Tribal Reserve. Two sites where key components of the tourism plan are to be implemented are both Leatherback nesting sites — South Bay along the southern coast of the island and West Bay along its western coast. South Bay is proposed to be part of the “Leisure Zone” where a film city, a residential district and a tourism special economic zone are to come up. West Bay is to be part of West Bay Nature Retreat with theme resorts, underwater resorts, beach hotels and high-end residential villas.

The roughly 7-km-long beach at West Bay has been the site of ongoing marine turtle research projects. Set up post-2004 by the Andaman and Nicobar Environment Team (ANET), Dakshin Foundation, the Indian Institute of Science and the A&N Forest Department to monitor how turtle populations have responded after the devastating earthquake and tsunami, it has thrown up new information on turtles and their behaviour. Not only are the numbers of females nesting here significant, satellite telemetry has revealed hitherto unknown migration patterns. Satellite-tagged female turtles have been tracked swimming up to 13,000 km after nesting on West Bay, towards the western coast of Australia and southwest towards the eastern coast of Africa. One of the tagged turtles travelled to Madagascar, covering 12,328 km in 395 days while another travelled 13,237 km in 266 days to the Mozambique coast.

## Waning protection

For the Leatherback, perhaps even more important is Great Nicobar Island, the southernmost of the A&N group. Large numbers have been recorded nesting here — mainly on the long and wide beaches at the mouth of the Dagmar and Alexandira rivers on the west coast and at the

mouth of the Galathea river along its south eastern coast. Galathea Bay was, in fact, proposed as a wildlife sanctuary in 1997 for the protection of turtles and was also the site of a long-term monitoring programme. The monitoring was stopped after the tsunami devastation of 2004, but it provided the first systematic evidence of numbers and importance of these beaches.

The A&N Islands are prominent in the National Marine Turtle Action Plan released on February 1, 2021, by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. The plan notes that “India has identified all its important sea turtle nesting habitats as ‘Important Coastal and Marine Biodiversity Areas’ and included them in the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) - 1”. South Bay and West Bay on Little Andaman and Galathea on Great Nicobar, along with other nesting beaches in the islands, find a specific mention here as “Important Marine Turtle Habitats in India” and the largest Leatherback nesting grounds in India.

The plan identifies coastal development, including construction of ports, jetties, resorts and industries, as major threats to turtle populations. It also asks for assessments of the environmental impact of marine and coastal development that may affect marine turtle populations and their habitats.

Developments in the A&N Islands indicate, however, that even as the action plan was being finalised, decisions were being made in violation of its basic concerns and premises. Not only has the mega-tourism plan in Little Andaman been pushed in spite of serious objections by the A&N Forest Department, a major decision was also made recently on the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. The Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife, at its 60th meeting on January 5 under the chairmanship of the Environment Minister, agreed to its denotification for the “construction as well as operational phases of the International Shipment Project”.

The A&N Port Management Board had in 2019 floated an expression of interest for the container transshipment terminal here, along with that for a free trade warehousing zone, and the Prime Minister announced in August 2020 that a transshipment project would come up here on an investment of Rs. 10,000 crore.

The scale of the project and the investment proposed indicate it could signal the end of a crucial Giant Leatherback nesting site.

*(Pankaj Sekhsaria has been researching issues of the A&N Islands for more than two decades and has authored ve books on the islands.)*

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