

9th July 2012



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To,  
Smt Jayanthi Natarajan,  
Minister of State for Environment & Forests (Independent Charge)  
Chairperson, Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife  
Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India  
Paryavaran Bhavan, CGO Complex, Lodi Road,  
New Delhi 110 003.

**Sub:** Regarding the coastal surveillance RADAR and power supply installation in Narcondam island.

Ref: File No. 6-73/2011 WL, Agenda item 4.1(3) in 23rd Meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife held on 14 October 2011 and 25th meeting on 13 June 2012

We write to you regarding the impending ecological threat posed by a recent proposal by the Indian Coast Guard for a non-forestry activity of setting up a coastal surveillance RADAR and diesel power generation station within the Narcondam Wildlife Sanctuary. We would like to highlight the negative impacts of this project on the fragile volcanic island ecosystem and to the endemic Narcondam Hornbill (*Aceros narcondami*), an endangered and Schedule I species as per the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

Our specific concerns are enumerated below:

1. The Narcondam Hornbill exists as a single population in the small island (area: 6.81 sq km) with a population of not more than 250 adult birds (Kinnaird and O'Brien 2007). This makes it a species with the smallest geographic range in the entire country, and one of our rarest birds. Therefore, the species is at risk of extinction from natural disasters, as well as human-induced disturbances, such as the one being proposed in the island.
2. Studies on the Narcondam Hornbill and other hornbill species published in peer-reviewed journals show that they have very specific food, dietary and breeding preferences. Hornbills predominantly feed on fruits of large-seeded tree species which are found in undisturbed forests and require mature soft-wooded tree species for nesting and roosting (Vijayan and Sankaran 2000). When the female and hatchlings are holed up in a nest cavity, even the slightest anthropogenic disturbances results in nests being abandoned. The proposed project will involve cutting of mature trees in a 0.6736 ha area as well as along the road approaching the installation which is estimated to be about 2 km long. This will significantly affect feeding, nesting and roosting of the species.
3. The direct effects of the installation and the 2 km road have been grossly underestimated to be about 20 ha. Given that the creation of a road will fragment the island, this will expose species such as the Narcondam Hornbill to the problems of the ecological changes created by an abrupt transition (i.e. road). Such 'edge effects', and their often negative impacts on

wildlife have been extensively quantified in the field of conservation biology. Studies indicate that edges mediate a wide array of alterations, ranging from changes in micro-climatic conditions such as soil moisture, to changes in composition of tree communities and increased bird nest predation. New edges will also make the island vulnerable to the spread of invasive species, a persistent and pervasive threat. In view of these ecological factors, the project is therefore likely to affect about 400 ha of forest, which is about 60% of the island, an extremely significant proportion.

4. The project will negatively affect the coral reefs in the island, which represent one of the few examples of isolated coral reefs in the Andaman chain, through anchor damage and direct dredging.
5. The island's limited resources are already pressurized by the presence of a police outpost established in 1969. This has resulted in loss of over 50 acres of forest. The island is only now recovering from the earlier damage done by the introduction of feral goats, which has severely suppressed natural regeneration patterns of trees.
6. During the construction of the road and installation, the island will face other disturbances by labour and staff present within. Further, it is not clearly mentioned in the proposal how long these activities will take. Since the island is a storm prone area, the relatively longer period of construction likely to be involved and frequent maintenance of the installation, is anticipated to cause more human disturbances than in other places (Rahmani and Singh 2012).

We request the honourable Minister of State for Environment and Forests, as well as Chairperson of the National Board of Wildlife, to consider less ecologically fragile locations as alternative sites for the proposal. The proposal in its present form will have disastrous consequences for this globally important and unique biodiversity area, especially for the endangered and endemic Narcondam Hornbill. We believe the only way forward would be to move the RADAR project away from Narcondam Island altogether. As pointed out by the site inspection report by Dr. Asad Rahmani, the project could be taken up on an ecologically less-sensitive island in the region. With dialogue that factors in the considerations we have mentioned above, we are confident that alternative solutions can be worked out to protect this rare species and its island habitat. We believe that biodiversity conservation and national security of our country are both equally vital issues; that one cannot operate at the expense of the other; and that a compromise can surely be reached to safeguard both.

Thanking You,

Yours Sincerely,

**For Researchers for Wildlife Conservation**



**Authorised Signatory/Trustee**

Copy to:

Mr Jagdish Kishwan, ADG & Director, Wildlife Preservation, Member-Secretary, SC-NBWL

Mr Vivek Saxena, IFS, Deputy Inspector General of Forests (Wildlife)

Members of the National Board for Wildlife and its Standing Committee

**Literature cited:**

Kinnaird, M.F. & O'Brien, T.G. 2007. The ecology and conservation of Asian Hornbills: farmers of the forest. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, USA.

Rahmani, A. R. & Singh, K.B. 2012. Site inspection report of Dr. Asad R. Rahmani, Director, BNHS, and member of the NBWL/Standing Committee and Mr. K. B. Singh, CF (Ecotourism), Andaman & Nicobar Environment & Forest Departments for the proposed installation of coastal surveillance RADAR and Power Supply source in Narcondam Island Sanctuary, Andaman & Nicobar Islands. March 2012.

Vijayan, L. & Sankaran, R. 2000. A study on the ecology, status and conservation perspectives of certain rare endemic avifauna of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Final Report. Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Coimbatore.