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Great Nicobar Mega-Project: Jairam Ramesh Warns of Ecological Havoc as Coral Translocation Proceeds

4 June 2026

ENVIRONMENT

POLITY

GS3

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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Great Nicobar Mega-Project: Jairam Ramesh Warns of Ecological Havoc as Coral Translocation Proceeds

4 June 2026 · 4 min read · ·

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WHY IN NEWS

Senior Congress leader and former Environment Minister **Jairam Ramesh** wrote to Union Environment Minister **Bhupender Yadav** in June 2026, warning that the **₹72,000-crore Great Nicobar Island mega-project** risks irreversible ecological damage. Ramesh accused the government of bypassing comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) norms by relying on limited, seasonal survey data. Simultaneously, the government reported that **over 15,000 coral colonies** have been translocated from the Galathea Bay port construction zone under the supervision of the **Zoological Survey of India (ZSI)**, as part of court-mandated ecological mitigation measures.

WHAT IS THE GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT?

The **Great Nicobar Island Development Project** is a ₹72,000-crore (~\$8.6 billion) holistic development initiative for India's southernmost island, strategically located at the **intersection of the Malacca Strait and the Indian Ocean**. It is being implemented by the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO)** under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, with Central support.

Four Core Components

COMPONENT	DETAILS
Transshipment Port	International container transshipment terminal at Galathea Bay; target: 16 million TEUs/year
Greenfield Airport	International airport to support logistics and tourism
Township	Planned urban settlement for project workforce and future residents
Power Plant	450 MW gas-based power plant (later revised to include solar)

WHY IS GREAT NICOBAR STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT?

Great Nicobar Island lies only **150 km from the Malacca Strait** — through which ~80% of India's oil imports and a large share of global trade pass. A deep-water port here would:

- Enable India to compete with **Singapore and Port Klang** as a transshipment hub
- Provide the **Indian Navy** with a strategic forward base in the southern Indian Ocean
- Counter **Chinese String of Pearls** ports (Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan, Kyaukphyu in Myanmar)

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Key Ecological Sensitivities

ISSUE	DETAILS
Forest area	130 sq km of tropical rainforest to be cleared — one of the world's richest biodiversity zones
Leatherback sea turtle	Galathea Bay is India's most important nesting ground for Leatherback turtles (<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>) — IUCN Vulnerable, Schedule I of WPA 1972
Coral reefs	Port construction requires destruction of coral reefs in Galathea Bay; 15,000+ colonies translocated
Nicobar Megapode	Critically endangered endemic bird nesting in the construction zone
Shompen tribe	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) — estimated 200–400 individuals; entirely dependent on the island's forest ecosystem

Jairam Ramesh's Specific Objections

- ❶ **EIA was conducted using only 4 months of survey data** (October–January season), missing the monsoon season when ecological activity peaks
- ❷ **Galathea Bay's coral reef** is a unique ecosystem that translocation cannot replicate
- ❸ **Shompen rights** under Forest Rights Act and PESA not adequately protected
- ❹ **Leatherback nesting** is incompatible with active port construction noise and light pollution

Government's Position

- The **National Green Tribunal** reviewed the project and found the EIA process broadly compliant

- **ZSI** supervises coral translocation; the government designated **no-activity zones** during nesting season (December–March)
- The project has received **all statutory environmental clearances**
- The government argues that strategic national interest and economic benefits outweigh localized ecological concerns

EIA PROCESS IN INDIA

The **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006** governs environmental clearance for major development projects. Key steps:

- 1 **Screening** — determine if EIA is required
- 2 **Scoping** — define the scope of the study
- 3 **EIA Study** — field surveys, impact prediction
- 4 **Public Hearing** — mandatory for affected communities
- 5 **Expert Appraisal** — by Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC), MoEFCC
- 6 **Grant/Rejection of Environmental Clearance (EC)** — by MoEFCC

The critique: EIA Notification 2006 allows post-facto clearances in certain cases, exempts some strategic projects, and does not mandate a minimum survey duration. A new **EIA Draft 2020** — which proposed further dilutions — was withdrawn after protests.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims

- Project cost: ₹72,000 crore
- Location: Great Nicobar Island, Andaman & Nicobar Union Territory
- Key component: International container transshipment terminal at **Galathea Bay**
- Coral colonies translocated: 15,000+ (supervised by ZSI)
- Key turtle species: **Leatherback sea turtle** (*Dermochelys coriacea*) — IUCN Vulnerable
- Indigenous community: **Shompen** (PVTG)
- Distance from Malacca Strait: ~150 km
- Implementing agency: **ANIIDCO**

Mains Angles

- 1 **GS3 — EIA and Environmental Governance:** Critically examine the EIA process in India. Is the Great Nicobar case a failure of the system or its working?
- 2 **GS2 — Tribal Rights:** How do Forest Rights Act 2006 and PESA 1996 protect PVTGs like the Shompen? Are their protections adequate in large infrastructure projects?
- 3 **GS3 — Strategic Infrastructure vs. Environment:** Can India's national security imperatives be pursued without compromising ecological integrity? Use the Great Nicobar case.

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
Project cost	₹72,000 crore
Location	Galathea Bay, Great Nicobar Island
Implementing agency	ANIIDCO
Coral colonies translocated	15,000+ (ZSI supervised)
No-activity zone period	December–March (turtle nesting)
Key turtle species	Leatherback sea turtle (<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>)
Indigenous community	Shompen (PVTG, ~200–400 persons)
Distance from Malacca Strait	~150 km
Critic (Congress)	Jairam Ramesh
Environment Minister	Bhupender Yadav

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