



Andaman & Nicobar Islands

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Andaman & Nicobar Islands: home to a tenth of India's fauna species- The islands, comprising only 0.25% of country's geographical area, has 11,009 species, according to a publication by the Zoological Survey of India

- The Narcondam hornbill, its habitat restricted to a lone island; the Nicobar megapode, a bird that builds nests on the ground; the Nicobar treeshrew, a small mole-like mammal; the Long-tailed Nicobar macaque, and the Andaman day gecko, are among the 1,067 endemic faunal species found only on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and nowhere else.
- A recent publication by the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) titled Faunal Diversity of Biogeographic Zones: Islands of India has for the first time come up with a database of all faunal species found on the island, putting the number at 11,009.
- The documentation proves that the islands, comprising only 0.25% of India's geographical area, are home to more than 10% of the country's fauna species.

Note of caution

- The publication, however, also cautions that tourism, illegal construction and mining are posing a threat to the islands' biodiversity, which is already vulnerable to volatile climatic factors.
- The total area of the A&N Islands, which comprises of 572 islands, islets and rocky outcrops, is about 8,249 sq. km.
- The population of the islands, which includes six particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) — Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, Sentinelese, Nicobarese and Shompens — is not more than 4 lakh.
- The number of tourists visiting the islands has crossed the number of people residing in them, with latest data showing 4.87 lakh tourists visiting the islands annually.
- In a recent development, the Government of India relaxed the Restricted

Area Permit (RAP) norms for some foreign nationalities notified under the Foreigners (Restricted Areas) Order, 1963, to visit 29 of its inhabited islands, till December 31, 2022.

- This has triggered further concerns of increased anthropogenic pressures over the islands' ecosystem.
- Of the ten species of marine fauna found on the islands, the dugong/sea cow, and the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin, are both classified as Vulnerable under the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species.
- Among the 46 terrestrial mammalian species found, three species have been categorised as Critically Endangered — Andaman shrew (*Crocidura andamanensis*), Jenkin's shrew (*C. jenkinsi*) and Nicobar shrew (*C. nicobarica*).
- Five species are listed as Endangered, nine species as Vulnerable, and one species as Near Threatened, according to the IUCN.
- Among birds, endemism is quite high, with 36 among 344 species of birds found only on the islands. Many of these bird species are placed in the IUCN Red List of threatened species under the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA).

Marine diversity

- Similarly, eight species of amphibians and 23 species of reptiles are endemic to the islands, and thus are at high risk of being threatened.
- Another unique feature of the islands' ecosystem is its marine faunal diversity, which includes coral reefs and its associated fauna.
- In all, 555 species of scleractinian corals (hard or stony corals) are found in the island ecosystem, all which are placed under Schedule I of the WPA.

