

## Wildlife Board Okays Rutland Island for DRDO's Missile Testing Project

By Anubhuti Vishnoi & Manu Pubby

*The project has been stuck since 2012 after being red-flagged by environment ministry*

### 49.978 Acre Forests In Eco-Sensitive Island To Be Diverted; Island Once Home To Indigenous Andamanese Group Rutland Jarawa

The country's long-range missile test facility at South Andamans' Rutland Island has finally secured the clearance of the National Board of Wildlife, which has been held up since 2012. The Standing Committee of the National Board of Wildlife in a meeting held on May 15 approved the project, "considering the strategic importance of the project for country's defence".

The proposal involves diversion of 49.978 acres forest of which 0.84 ha falls in the Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park and 49.138 ha reserve forest within 10km of the Eco Sensitive Zone. The island is very rich in marine life and was once home to the indigenous Andamanese group 'Jangil' or Rutland Jarawa. DRDO has been struggling to get its long range missile test facility since 2012 when the proposal was moved across the government. However, it has been consistently stalled due to objections by the environment ministry .

The Proposal for Wildlife clearance for creation of Infrastructure Facilities for Strategic Surveillance System at Rutland Island had been moved by DRDO. Rutland Island is vital to DRDO's long-term plans to have a comprehensive testing facility to identify and track long-range missile tests. The island is located at an ideal distance from the mainland where tests are typically launched from.

As of now, long-range missile tests are being carried out from the Odisha coast and are tracked by naval vessels on a trajectory into the Bay of Bengal. Most of the long-range tests for missiles like Agni IV and V have to be tracked over sea, with specialised vessels noting the 'hit zone' into the water. DRDO requires a land-based test area as well to accurately track its longrange missiles, with the island in the Andamans being ideally located due to its distance from mainland.

DRDO is also looking at setting up tracking stations along the Andaman Islands to track incoming test missiles. Besides, a special purpose vessel for tracking missile launches is currently under construction at the Vizag based Hindustan Shipyard Limited.

The state Chief Wildlife Warden has recommended the project with conditions such as preparation of a specific marine and terrestrial wildlife conservation plan and installation of essential deflectors and anti-radiation screens around satellite antennas to reduce the impact of radiation on biodiversity in the proposed area.

It has also been specified that minimum number of vehicles should be used inside Rutland Island during constructional and operational phase of the project. Vessels/boats used for construction should use the approved route for navigation with larger vessels to enter into the National Park only during high tide.

The project authority has also been asked to take necessary permission from the Chief Wild Life Warden while entering into waters of Marine National Park while approaching Rutland Island.

No forest material of fire wood is to be collected from forest area and no effluent or domestic sewage (liquid or solid waste) shall be disposed into the sea or nearby forest area.