

Great Nicobar project raises concerns over environment

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New Delhi: Centre informed the Parliament on Thursday that the potential environmental repercussions of the Great Nicobar Project- the ambitious development plan for the island has raised concerns among environmentalists and conservationists, primarily regarding tree felling, biodiversity loss, and carbon emissions.

While answering queries of Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha member Jawhar Sircar, the Minister of State in the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, Ashwini Kumar Choubey underlined that, the Great Nicobar Project could result in the felling of an estimated 9.64 lakh trees in the earmarked forest area.

However, he reassured that approximately 15 per cent of the development area will be preserved as green and open spaces, potentially reducing the number of trees to be felled. The junior minister of Modi cabinet also claimed that the tree felling is planned to be conducted in phases.

The minister further informed that one of the significant concerns raised is the potential loss of biodiversity. To address this, the Union Territory administration, in collaboration with institutions like the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Botanical Survey of India (BSI), and Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE), will prepare a Biodiversity conservation or management plan.

This plan aims to safeguard critical taxa and their habitats, including species such as Leatherback Turtles, Nicobar Megapodes, Coral Reefs, Saltwater Crocodiles, and Mangroves.

The compensatory afforestation, which aims to mitigate the impact of tree felling, poses a unique challenge due to the limited scope for plantation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

However, the haryana government has agreed to provide an area of 261.5 sq.km for Compensatory Afforestation, contributing to the restoration of green cover in the region.

Another pressing issue is the potential loss of carbon sequestration capacity and its impact on carbon emissions. The development plan allocates 65.99 sq.km of the total proposed area for green development, where no tree felling is envisioned.

Additionally, compensatory afforestation over a degraded forest land double in extent to the diverted area (261.5 sq.km) is planned to be carried out.

Despite these measures, concerns have been raised about the project's potential impact on the government's target to reduce emissions by 2 billion tonnes by 2030. The authorities have not

directly addressed this concern in the statement, raising further questions among environmental advocates.

He also mentioned in his reply to the Upper House that as the Great Nicobar Project moves forward, the delicate balance between development and ecological preservation will be closely monitored.

The government's assurances regarding biodiversity conservation and compensatory afforestation will be under scrutiny, as stakeholders and environmentalists keep a vigilant eye on the project's implementation.