



## Promoting Eco Tourism in Rameswaram Island

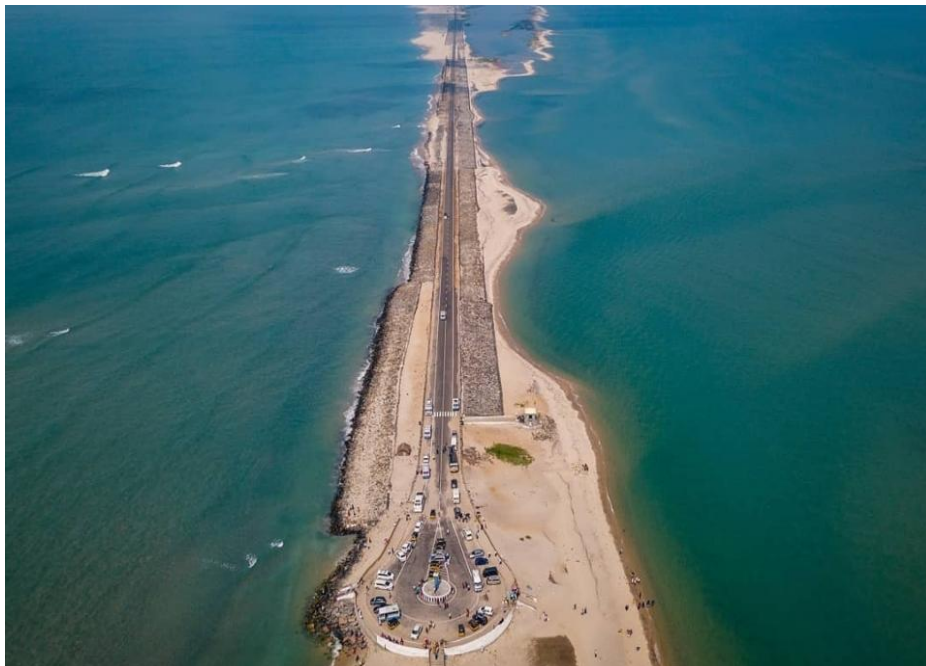
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### Dhanushkodi-a rich ecological destination

Dhanushkodi, a deserted town on the Rameswaram Island or more popularly known as “Ghost Town” has played a significant role in shaping the overall Cultural Landscape of the island. Dhanushkodi, in the past was a flourishing township and a prominent place of pilgrimage; which rivaled Rameshwaram in size and population.



However, the cyclone, which struck the town in 1964, destroyed the town in its entirety claiming over 2,000 lives. Post this, the town was declared unfit for habitation and was never re-built. One can see remnants of the past in ruins: a church, few temples, railway station, post and immigration office being partially covered with sand.

Dhanushkodi has immense natural, ecological, cultural and religious significance, which largely lies buried and lost and under continuous deterioration due to nature. The town has immense natural and ecological significance, mostly unknown to the world.

**Ram Sethu:** The chain formed by the Pamban Island, the shoals of Ram Sethu/Adam’s Bridge and Mannar Island of Sri Lanka separates Palk Bay and the Palk Strait in the northeast from the Gulf of Mannar in the southwest. The tombolo is supposed to be the largest in the world.

**Remains of the old town:** Dhanushkodi, located at the southern tip of the island, it has been the only land border between India and Sri Lanka, which is one of the smallest in the world—just 45 meters in length on a shoal (submerged ridge) in Palk Strait. This historically made the town a strategic transit point between the two countries. There are remains of the archeological and architectural remains of the flourishing town which was destroyed by the rising of the sea and natural disasters.

**Nestling of Olive Ridley:** The 9.5 km-long Mukuntharayar Chathiram – Dhanushkodi – Arichamunai stretch in the eastern tip of Rameswaram Island played host to Olive Ridleys during this nesting season, from December to March months. The Mandapam wildlife and forest range had made record collection of 13,000 Olive Ridley turtle eggs in the last nesting season between December 2016 and March 2017.



**Water bird sanctuary:** The stretch of Mukundarayar Chathiram to Dhanushkodi attracts birds from everywhere. From native birds to a large number of migratory birds, one can spot a wide array of avian fauna here. Most of the native birds come for the purpose of feeding, while migratory birds fly down for breeding. Birds from as far as Europe and Australia visit this sanctuary for breeding.

### **The increasing load of ecological threats in the island**

The Rameswaram Island as a centre for spiritual tourism attracts thousands of visitors every day. In one square kilometre of the main temple area, as many as a hundred thousand tourists can be found on festive days. At least five thousand pilgrims visit the islands every day according to the City Development Plan prepared during 2009. Present estimates put this figure over 1.5 crore per year. The numbers are impressive, but it also indicates the level of exposure of the environment to pollution. As per Swachh Bharat Mission rating of clean cities of March 2017, Rameswaram occupies the lower cardinal order of 262 out of 468 cities in India. Waste generation in domestic, commercial and hospital has increased from 12 MT to 18 MT while population has registered only a marginal increase as per Census Data 2011. Per capita waste generation in Rameswaram is nearly 3,505 gm, which is significantly higher for a town of this size attributable to the higher visiting population in the Islands.

Rameswaram is the focal point for good traffic due to the tourism based activities. There are a large number of two wheeler and four wheeler vehicles running across the Island. There are no mass transportation facilities to other parts of the Islands. The visitors depend only on private vehicles like cars, vans and motor cycles to reach these places. Recently, road, connecting the Rameswaram and Dhanuskodi, was inaugurated by the government and it has considerably increased the traffic and footprints to Dhanushkodi. While it is a good sign of development of

tourism, there are emerging threats to the wildlife in the coastal line. Shortly after opening of the road, there are reports of threats to the nestling of Olive Ridley turtles-an endangered marine species found in Gulf of Mannar. The food wastes thrown by the visitors of Arichalmunai area tend to street dogs to the beach. The dogs, in addition to the food wastes, feed on the eggs of the turtles.

*News coverage by 'The Hindu' Daily on July 10, 2017*

### **Will Dhanushkodi continue to be a nesting hotspot of Olive Ridleys?**

...Mandapam Range of Forest department had collected about 13,000 eggs during the season and released about 12,000 hatchlings into the sea, achieving 90% survival rate in its hatchery at Mukuntharayar Chathiram, a record of sorts in this region.

For the first time after the Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park launched the sea turtle conservation programme a few years ago, the Mandapam range made the stretch Olive Ridley-friendly and recorded the largest collection of eggs. It successfully released the hatchlings in phases in the hatching season, which drew to a close in early June.

The department is, however, not sure of repeating the performance next season as the opening of Mukuntharayar Chathiram– Dhanushkodi– Arichamunai Road would pose a grave threat to the endangered species. “The serenity in the region will be disturbed once the road is opened for traffic and the turtles may hesitate to prefer this stretch,” Sathish, Mandapam Range Officer, said.

The construction of a sea wall abutting the road at Arichamunai, where the Forest personnel located more than 40% of the nests, and the possibility of tourists and pilgrims littering the area with plastic materials would also pose a threat to the turtles, which were known for their synchronised nesting behaviour, he said.

Similarly, the increasing human footprints will cause threat to the water birds found in Arichamunai. Dhanushkodi, being located at the confluence of two seas- the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal is considered sacred; Hindu pilgrims usually bathe in the ocean here before completing the pilgrimage to Rameshwaram. The number of people taking dip in Dhanushkodi will certainly increase multifold thanks to the opening of the road to Dhanushkodi and this will result in increased dumping of garbage, particularly plastic materials.

Given this backdrop, there is an immense need to protect environment in the stretch starting from Rameswaram to Dhanushkodi. The government and civil society organisations need to take appropriate measures. Eco-tourism, an emerging concept, has solutions to address the problems that prevail in the region.

### **What could be done?**

Tourism and environmental protection are closely linked together. Outdoor recreation requires healthy environment. In order to promote eco-tourism in the Rameswaram-Dhanushkodi roadway, the government may take the following actions

1. The areas stretching from Mukundarayachathiram to Dhanushkodi could be declared as 'Ecotourism Zone'. As per this notification
  - a. Petroleum vehicles will be banned in the area
  - b. Plastics will be banned
  - c. Smoking will be banned
2. Electric bus transport could be implemented on the roadway. The e-vehicles will be owned by the public transportation corporation. The vehicles will be procured through special funding arrangements.
3. Eco-friendly private transportation modes such as e-bikes, bicycles, bio-vehicles (bullock cart, horse cart etc.) and pedestrian tourism could be encouraged.
4. On both the sides of the road from Mukundarayachathiram to Dhanushkodi extending for 7.5 km, trees could be planted. Local community groups and civil society organisations could be entrusted to maintain the plants.



5. In the temples, located on sides of the Mukundarayachathiram-Dhanushkodi roadway sacred groves called 'Nandavanams' could be established, to enhance the quality of the micro-climate and attract tourists to the temples.
6. On the banks of the water bodies found on the sides of the roadway tree plantation could be done to enhance the quality of micro-climate and augment the banks.
7. A watch tower could set up near the water bird sanctuary at Arichamunai to encourage bird lovers.
8. Solar street lamps could be set up on the sides of the roadway, beaches, temples, water bodies and important sites at Dhanushkodi.
9. Visitors and local community could be educated on ecotourism through appropriate IEC strategies.

