

INDIA'S 1st DUGONG CONSERVATION RESERVE GETS NOTIFIED IN TAMIL NADU

The Government of Tamil Nadu on 3rd September 2021 had made an announcement on the floor of the Assembly that in order to protect the endangered Dugong species and its marine habitats in Tamil Nadu, a "Dugong Conservation Reserve" will be established in Palk Bay. Accordingly, Government had issued orders in G.O.(Ms).No.165, Environment, Climate Change and Forest (FR.5) Department, dated 21.09.2022 to notify 'Dugong Conservation Reserve' in Palk Bay covering the coastal waters of Thanjavur and Pudukkottai Districts with an area of 448 Sq. kilometers.

Dugongs are the largest herbivorous marine mammals in the world thriving primarily on seagrass beds, a major carbon sink of the oceans. Conserving dugongs will help to protect and improve seagrass beds and sequestering more atmospheric carbon. Seagrass beds are also the breeding and feeding grounds for many commercially valuable fishes and marine fauna. Hence, thousands of fisher families directly depend on dugong habitats for their income. The coastal communities along Palk Bay understand the need to conserve dugongs and they have been cooperating with forest department in the conservation efforts ever since.

Dugongs are protected under Schedule 1 of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. However, their population is on the decline due to habitat loss. There are only about 240 individuals estimated to be present in the country and the majority is found in Tamil Nadu coast (Palk Bay). Hence, there is an imminent need to protect Dugongs and their habitat from degradation. To realise these objectives the Government of Tamil Nadu had notified the "Dugong Conservation Reserve" in Palk Bay, after holding extensive consultations with coastal communities especially with the local fishermen. Notification of a Conservation Reserve will not cause any new restrictions or regulations to the communities, rather it focuses on their participation and cooperation for the conservation efforts. The notification of India's first 'Dugong Conservation Reserve' in Palk Bay is a proud moment for Tamil Nadu and the conservationists across the globe. It is a great milestone in the marine conservation history of the country.

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