

## New island rules make green activists worried

ANDAMANS allows eco-tourism projects 20 metres from high tide line

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The notification, published on March 8, relaxes development norms in the islands compared to the ID7 notification of 2011, which stipulated a

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The union environment ministry has notified island protection zone (IPZ) 2019 for Andaman and Nicobar, which allows eco-tourism projects 20 metres from the high tide line (HTL) in smaller islands like Baratang, Havelock and Car Nicobar, and at 50 metres in larger ones, and relaxed other norms, triggering concern among some green activists.

The notification, published on March 8, relaxes development norms in the islands compared to the IPZ notification of 2011, which stipulated a no-development zone (NDZ) of 200 metres from the HTL for all islands.

This brings the norms for Andaman and Nicobar at par with coastal regulation zone (CRZ) norms for other islands close to the mainland and backwater islands where an NDZ only 20 metres from HTL has been stipulated. The Union cabinet had approved the CRZ notification 2018 in December, which relaxed a number of provisions in the CRZ 2011 to facilitate infrastructure development and construction on the coast, including easing floor area ratio (FAR) in coastal urban areas and slashing the NDZ in densely populated coastal rural areas to 50 metres from HTL as compared to 200 metres earlier.

The IPZ 2019 notification, which was issued a day before the model code of conduct for the duration of the general elections came into force on March 10, makes way for many other relaxations. It allows for eco-tourism activities like mangrove walks, tree huts and nature trails in island coastal regulation zone IA (classified as the most eco-sensitive region of the islands which includes turtle nesting grounds, marshes, coral reefs etc).

The notification also allows for construction of roads, roads on stilts by reclaiming land in exceptional cases for defence installations, public utilities or strategic purposes in eco-sensitive zones. It states that in case construction of such roads pass through mangroves, a minimum three times the mangrove area destroyed during the construction process shall be taken up for compensatory plantation of mangroves elsewhere.

These were not allowed under the IPZ 2011 notification which only permitted pipelines, transmission lines, trans-harbor links to be laid in the eco-sensitive zone. The new notification also allows a number of new activities in the inter-tidal zone between low tide line and HTL This includes land reclamation and bunding for foreshore facilities like ports, harbours, jetties, wharves, quays, sea links etc, transfer of hazardous substances from ships to ports, manual mining of atomic minerals, and mining of sand for construction purposes with permission from local authorities in non-eco-sensitive sites. The 2011 notification allowed a few activities in the inter-tidal zone like construction of huts for fisher folk and other public facilities required for traditional inhabitants. “These amendments are dangerous. There was no public hearing here before this notification was drafted. There are three luxury tourism projects also coming up on Long Island, Smith Island and Aves Island. Obviously these will have an impact on the fragile ecology of this region like our marine

biodiversity including corals and turtle nesting sites. More importantly, how can we be sure that checks and balances will be introduced,” said Zubair Ahmed, Port Blair-based environmental researcher.

Experts said the new notification was in line with the government’s plans of opening up the “blue economy.” Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu last week urged sustainable harnessing of ocean resources, including deep sea mining, at a meeting with National Institute of Oceanography scientists.

“The legal changes in the IPZ are aligned with the Niti Ayog’s proposal for holistic development in the Islands which is being taken forward under the guidance of the Island Development Agency. The first phase of this proposal involves creation of jetties and other infrastructure for eco-tourism projects in ecologically fragile islands,” said Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher with the Centre for Policy Research think tank.

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