

Title

On a remote volcanic island in the Andaman Sea, surrounded by coral reefs and carpeted in thick forest, Narcondam Hornbill *Aceros narcondami* makes its home. In fact, the tropical evergreen forest on the 12km² Narcondam Island is the only place this species is found, giving it one of the smallest natural ranges of any bird species in the world.

With a population of just 50-249 mature individuals, this small, distinctive, dark hornbill is classified as Endangered. The island, which is situated within the Andaman and Nicobar Island group, has been a recognised wildlife sanctuary since 1977 and is an Important Bird Area. Due to conservation efforts and limited threats, the population is stable at the moment, but it is extremely susceptible to new threats and natural disasters because of its size and range.

Narcondam Hornbill saved

So it comes as great news that a proposal from the Indian Coast Guard to build a RADAR surveillance station has recently been rejected by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (Government of India). The plan included removing virgin forest to build a large RADAR installation, diesel power generator and wide 2km access road. Dr Asad Rahmani, Director of the Bombay Natural History Society (BirdLife in India), was invited by the Indian Government to assess the impact of the development. His strong rejection and a public campaign led to the successful protection of Narcondam Hornbill.

The creation of a small police outpost in 1969 and subsequent forest loss, firewood collection, hunting and goat introduction (which prevents natural forest regeneration) has already greatly affected the population. A larger-scale project, with considerable tree felling, additional human presence and exploitation would have caused major devastation to the species and quite possibly extinction.

Committed mothers

The hornbills use mature, undisturbed forest with large trees for nesting and roosting. For the duration of egg-laying and chick-rearing, the female hornbills devote complete care to their chicks- so much so that they shed their flight feathers and are incapable of flight. This means that, on top of the existing habitat degradation, any disturbance associated with building and regular functioning of a RADAR system would have likely caused irreversible adverse impacts on this species.



The Ministry has highlighted that other options are available for the Indian Coast Guard, through technology choice or alternative off-shore locations. No such option is available for Narcondam Hornbill, so this proposal rejection is a great success for the species. Future conservation work proposed includes enforcing the existing hunting ban and protecting this remote habitat by encouraging regeneration of the existing forest through the

removal of all remaining goats from the island, and by providing cooking fuel to the occupiers of the police outpost.

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