

## Tourism, tribes and tribulations in Andaman Islands

India's offshore islands, the Andaman and Nicobar constitute an important biodiversity hotspot supported by a range of marine and terrestrial biota. These islands harbour the last remaining tribes, namely the Great Andamanese, Sentinelese, Onge, Jarawa and Shom Pen, who struggle to maintain their hunter-gatherer lifestyle in the midst of globalization<sup>1</sup>. According to recent census records, the overall population in Andaman has increased by 6.86%. In contrast, the population of native tribes has declined by 3.19%, from 29,469 in 2001 to 28,530 in 2011 (ref. 2). The Government has attributed the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, as a reason for the decline. But a report warns that increasing contact through tourism may make the native tribals more vulnerable to diseases<sup>2</sup>. For example, the Jarawa tribe was affected by measles outbreak in the 1990s (ref. 3). Therefore, the potential health risks to tribal communities through tourism do exist.

Tourism has been reported to protect biodiversity<sup>4</sup>, but some argue that it has only limited potential towards nature conservation<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the tourism sector came under scrutiny last year, when videos popped up on-line, depicting poorly dressed women from the Jarawa tribe dancing for tourists. The incident

not only insulted human dignity, but also showed the harsh reality of the unreliable tourism. Consequently, the Government decided to limit the number of vehicles crossing the Andaman trunk road. The 340 km long route is the only major highway that connects many islands. It also cuts through the territory of the Jarawa tribe. We travelled through the highway recently, escorted by soldiers in army trucks and had a glimpse of a Jarawa tribe family of five standing along roadside staring at the passing vehicles.

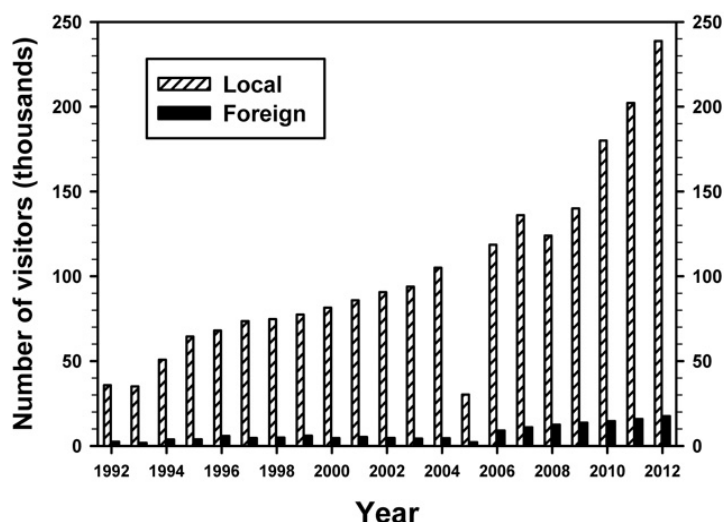
The number of tourists visiting Andaman has increased 6.7 times over the last two decades (Figure 1). The after-effects of the destructive 2004 tsunami apparently affected the tourist flow for a year, but the number increased again reaching the highest in 2012 (Figure 1). The percentage of foreign visitors relative to total visitors ranged from the lowest of 4.18% in 2004 to the highest of 9.17% in 2008. The touristic footprint was visible from the plastic waste floating along the shore lines (Figure 2). The negative impact of mass tourism on Andaman's biodiversity has been discussed previously<sup>6,7</sup>.

Now the question is whether the ecologically fragile Andaman handle the influx of tourism in the coming years while



**Figure 2.** (Above) Growing domestic tourism along the coastal areas of Port Blair, Andaman. (Below) Plastic garbage left behind by the tourists seen floating along the pier.

safeguarding forest tribes alongside. It is therefore time for policy makers to review the looming dilemma involving biodiversity protection, biosafety of tribes and booming tourism, so that appropriate long-term strategies can be put in place to benefit nature and also to nurture the indigenous culture, before it is too late.



**Figure 1.** Number of visitors to Andaman and Nicobar Islands from 1992 to 2012.

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3. Kumar, S., *Lancet*, 1999, **354**, 1624.
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5. Kruger, O., *Biodivers. Conserv.*, 2005, **14**, 579–600.
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