Environmental Impacts of the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project

Sethusamudram project will also adversely affect the Palk Strait between India and Ceylon which is about 75km-wide, with a water depth of 9-13 m, except where local coral reefs rise above the sea level. The Palk Strait is an inlet of the Bay of Bengal. The Palk Strait is 64 km to 137 km wide and 137 km long. The Palk Bay is also considered as one of the five major reef formations in India1. A total of 61 species of algae are distributed among the three major groups and diverse seagrass meadows in the country.

Apart from being ecosystems of high productivity and diversity, they perform vital ecosystem functions, protecting coastal systems, and serving as nursery grounds for fish stocks that sustain local fishing communities. Given the shallow nature of the Palk Bay and the Adam’s Bridge area, it will require considerable dredging of the sea floor to attain this depth. The Palk Bay is considered to be one of the biggest sediment sinks along the east coast (Chandramohan et al,. 2001), and in order to keep the canal open, a certain level of dredging will have to be maintained through the operating life of the canal. These activities will introduce dramatic changes in the marine environment of the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay. This article is aimed at evaluating the project planning and design and explore if it has considered the biological diversity of the region as well as predicted the potential environmental impacts of the project on the region. This involved an analysis of all the SSCP documents and relevant literature to arrive at a multi-pronged assessment of the implications of the SSCP.

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