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**Journal of
Threatened
Taxa**

10.11609/jott.2026.18.2.28262-28454
www.threatenedtaxa.org

26 February 2026 (Online & Print)
18(2): 28262-28454
ISSN 0974-7907 (Online)
ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)



ISSN 0974-7907 (Online); ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

Publisher
Wildlife Information Liaison Development Society
www.wild.zooreach.org

Host
Zoo Outreach Organization
www.zooreach.org

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Cover: Digital illustration of *Impatiens chamchumroonii* in Krita by Dupati Poojitha.



At the Point of No Return? – Reading Pankaj Sekhsaria’s *Island on Edge: The Great Nicobar Crisis*

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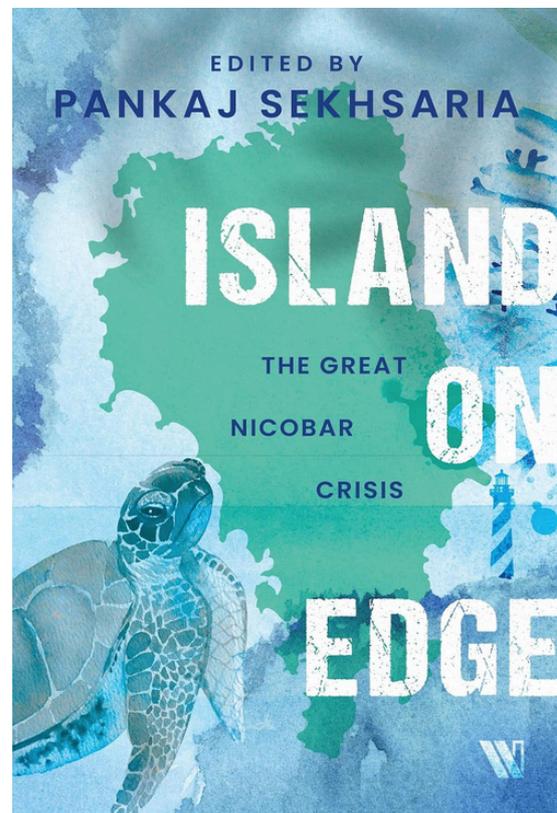
When I first began writing this review, there was still a cautious sense of anticipation. The matter of the Great Nicobar project was before the National Green Tribunal (NGT). There remained hope that judicial scrutiny might reassess the ecological and social implications of the proposed development. Despite widespread recognition of the project’s deleterious impacts, the evidence remained scattered and environmental concerns were often dismissed as emotive and ideological rather than empirical. What was urgently needed was consolidation, an arsenal of credible, structured evidence. *Island on Edge* edited by Pankaj Sekhsaria, accomplishes precisely this, transforming dispersed documentation into a coherent and rigorous case. The essays in the book felt like an intervention unfolding in real time. It assembles ecological evidence, procedural irregularities, legal scrutiny, and social concerns with great clarity at a moment when institutional pause still seemed possible.

On 16 February 2026, however, the NGT upheld the environmental clearance granted to the Great Nicobar ‘Holistic’ Development Project, now amounting to almost INR 92,000 crore, observing that adequate safeguards had been incorporated and declining to interfere in what it termed a project of “strategic importance.” The tone in which this book must now be read has shifted. What might have functioned as a preventive critique now stands as a record, an archive of warnings at a developmental threshold.

Framing the Crisis

At a time when environmental governance in India is increasingly reframed through the vocabulary of “strategic importance,” “national interest,” and “sustainable development”, *Island on Edge* intervenes with clarity. The Foreword by Vaishna Roy underscores the seismic and ecological precarity of Great Nicobar, and outlines both the island’s ecological significance and the scale of the proposed transformation. It offers

Island on Edge: The Great Nicobar Crisis Kindle Edition
ASIN: B0DD49NN6D
First Edition 2025, 263 pages
Publisher: Westland Non-Fiction



Date of publication: 26 February 2026 (online & print)

Citation: Kalita, H. (2026). At the Point of No Return? – Reading Pankaj Sekhsaria’s *Island on Edge: The Great Nicobar Crisis*. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 18(2): 28451–28454. <https://doi.org/10.11609/jott.10481.18.2.28451-28454>

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readers, particularly those unfamiliar with the unfolding crisis, a grounded understanding of what is at stake. Importantly, it situates the project within its social and ethical context, noting that it unfolds within a tribal reserve and UNESCO-recognized biosphere reserve. Further anchored by Sekhsaria's Editor's Note, the volume positions itself as a continuation of an ongoing effort to document what he calls the multiple "betrayals" unfolding in Great Nicobar. Drawing from investigative journalism, scientific analysis, creative expression, and expert testimony, the volume assembles what might be called a counter-archive of the Great Nicobar project. By invoking the metaphor of being "closer to the precipice," he signals both the accelerating pace of decision-making and the narrowing space for institutional reconsideration.

Structuring the Crisis

One of the book's major strengths lies in its deliberate structural design, which allows the argument to unfold cumulatively rather than episodically. Organized into thematic sections, the book traces a movement from infrastructural promise and administrative claims to lived realities, ecological vulnerability, and long-term consequences.

The volume's strength also lies in the focus on facts and figures. Statistical tables, demographic projections, land diversion figures, and mapped representations provide readers with concrete reference points that anchor the analysis. The annexures — including timelines, legal correspondence, official notifications, and excerpts from impact assessments — enhance transparency and allow readers to trace how regulatory decisions evolved over the years.

The opening section "*An Imperilled Future*" interrogates the foundational assumptions of the megaproject. It examines feasibility projections, financial rationales, and strategic justifications. It brings together four essays to systematically dismantle the ecological, economic, and institutional premises. This section foregrounds large-scale forest diversion, seismic vulnerability, and regulatory dilution; while interrogating the arithmetic of the trans-shipment port, exposing optimistic projections and escalating costs that challenge financial viability. The examination of ANIIDCO, the primary project proponent, raises deeper concerns about governance capacity, conflicts of interest, and the concentration of regulatory authority within the project's own institutional architecture. The section reframes the megaproject as an infrastructural ambition advancing through layered ambiguities.

The focus then shifts to land and indigeneity in *Indigenous Landscapes*, probably my favourite section. Rishika Pardikar's "*Tribal Lands Don't Show Up on Maps*" is perhaps one of the most politically unsettling chapters. At the core is a deceptively simple question: how does one assess the impact of land acquisition when the land itself does not officially exist in state maps? The implications are simple yet profound. If tribal lands are not mapped, they are not counted; if not counted, they are not considered affected. And if they are not considered affected, procedural requirements such as meaningful consultation, consent, and rehabilitation become diluted or symbolic. The essays further show how cartographic abstractions and policy categories marginalize the indigenous Shompen and Nicobarese people. This cartographic invisibility reflects a longer history of extractive governance in Indigenous regions. The section further foregrounds the vulnerability of indigenous languages and raises concerns regarding how tribal rights and consultation processes have been addressed within the project's administrative framework. It recalls the haunting story of Boa Sr, the last speaker of the Great Andamanese language Bo, who — displaced from her ancestral lands — was often described as speaking to birds, believed to be the only beings who still understood her tongue. The episode serves as a stark reminder that the erosion of indigenous rights and habitats can carry irreversible consequences. It also implicitly raises a deeper tension: in contemporary development policy, land increasingly appears as a strategic asset to be mobilized, rather than as a lived landscape embedded in community.

The section "*Two Decades After a Tsunami*" anchors the volume in temporal depth. It reminds the readers that Great Nicobar is not an untouched frontier awaiting development, but a landscape already marked by catastrophe, relocation, and unresolved grief. Through Leesha K. Nair's "*20 Christmases After the Tsunami*" and Ajay Saini's "*The Death of Life*" — the book shifts from infrastructural critique to intimate histories of loss. Nair's essay traces the prolonged afterlife of the 2004 tsunami in the lives of the Nicobarese. Relocated from ancestral coastal villages to state-designed settlements, survivors inhabit spaces that never quite became home. The shift unsettled kinship patterns, gender roles, subsistence practices, and cultural rhythms. Two decades later, demands to return to ancestral lands persist, revealing that displacement was not temporary but structural. Saini extends this argument beyond material loss. The forest is not a resource but an animate presence — foundation of identity, memory, and moral order.

When a survivor describes the proposed deforestation as “the death of life,” it signals not only environmental damage but the severing of bonds that sustain collective identity. The tensions documented here are not new. From colonial forest laws to movements such as Chipko and Silent Valley, conflicts over forest governance have long revealed a divide between state-led developmental visions and community-rooted relationships to land. In India, forests have never been merely resource frontiers; they are entwined with livelihood, memory, and identity. The Great Nicobar debate reflects the persistence of this historical tension — between land as strategic infrastructure and land as lived landscape — making the crisis not only ecological, but reflective of competing visions of development and belonging. The section also reveals how the island’s communities are still living in the shadow of one rupture even as another looms.

The volume then returns to ecological vulnerability in “*Fragile Ecologies*”. It foregrounds the risks of habitat alteration in seismically active, biodiversity-rich island systems where mitigation and compensatory measures offer limited assurance of restoration. It also provides a list of the species, mostly endemic to the region, which are at direct risk of extinction. The inclusion of creative expressions, with poems and art, alongside scientific analysis, underscores that ecological loss has both dimensions - measurable and affective. Among the most analytically compelling contributions is Rohan Arthur and T.R. Shankar Raman’s “*An Obit for Patai Takaru*,” (Patai Takaru meaning ‘the big island’ in the southern Nicobarese language). It interrogates the ecological logic underpinning compensatory afforestation and coral translocation. Drawing a provocative parallel with **Lysenkoism** — the Soviet-era belief that ecological systems could be engineered into compliance through ideological certainty — the authors question whether large-scale “restoration” can meaningfully substitute for the destruction of intact, old-growth ecosystems. They demonstrate with empirical evidence that restoration projects are typically small in scale, uncertain in outcome, and incapable of recreating the structural complexity, species interactions, and ecological functions of mature tropical systems. Translocating thousands of coral colonies or planting trees in distant biogeographic regions, they argue, risks producing ecological ‘simulacra’ rather than functioning ecosystems. Their central caution is stark: once destroyed, the rainforests and reefs of Great Nicobar are not recoverable through engineering fixes, simply put - “There is no turning back from here”. In this sense, the chapter challenges not only the project’s mitigation claims but also a broader

developmental faith that environmental damage can always be offset through technical intervention.

Finally, the sections gathered under “*Expert Speak*”, along with the Afterword and annexures, consolidate the book’s critical engagement with regulatory processes. By examining official claims, legal correspondence, and documentary evidence, these contributions illuminate how environmental safeguards are articulated, contested, and institutionalised. The annexures, in particular, reinforce the book’s value as an evidentiary archive, preserving records that may shape future scrutiny and evaluation.

After the Not-So ‘Green’ Signal

If anything, the National Green Tribunal’s decision to allow the project to proceed has only sharpened the relevance of *Island on Edge*. What might once have been read as a timely intervention in an unfolding debate now reads as a documentary record of how environmental governance, scientific scrutiny, and democratic consultation are negotiated — and often diluted — in real time. The book’s importance has not diminished with the Tribunal’s green signal; it has increased. It stands as both evidence and counter-record: a compilation of data, correspondence, expert testimony, and lived accounts that complicate official narratives of inevitability and national interest.

The relevance of this documentation extends beyond Great Nicobar. Across biodiversity-rich regions, large-scale infrastructure projects are increasingly justified through the language of national interest and economic acceleration. Recent episodes from proposed oil exploration near Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary in Assam to coal mining in the forests of Hasdeo Aranya in Chhattisgarh illustrate how ecologically sensitive landscapes continue to be positioned as development frontiers. In many such contexts, environmental safeguards, impact assessments, and consultation processes become central sites of negotiation. *Island on Edge* provides a framework through which similar projects may be examined, reminding readers that precaution, transparency, and ecological thresholds must remain central to conservation discourse. It offers scholars, policymakers, conservation practitioners, and concerned citizens a way to ask harder questions about cost, consent, competence, and consequence. The book’s readability is highly appreciated. It will appeal not only to conservation scholars but also to a wider readership concerned with India’s development pathway.

The book demonstrates how ecology and conservation are embedded within broader governance

systems that define habitat boundaries, interpret safeguards, and authorize transformation. It clearly states how conversion is not only ecological; it is social, political, and institutional as well. Species, habitats, and ecological processes are shaped by decisions taken in boardrooms, tribunals, and ministries as much as in forests and reefs. By assembling ecological science alongside legal critique, economic analysis, and indigenous testimony, *Island on Edge* models the kind of interdisciplinary engagement that contemporary conservation demands.

Although the book excels in assembling an evidentiary archive, and meaningfully incorporating lived narratives and testimonies, it offers comparatively little exploration of grassroots protest or collective resistance—if any, leaving open questions about how affected communities are actively negotiating or challenging the project.

At times, the recurrence of similar arguments across chapters creates a sense of redundancy. While this reinforces urgency, tighter editorial integration could have improved cohesion.

The story of Great Nicobar is far from over. Construction may proceed; forests may fall; ports and runways may rise. Yet the questions it raises — about accountability, ecological limits, and the rights of Indigenous communities — will persist. In documenting this moment with clarity and conviction, *Island on Edge* ensures that the record will not consist solely of official clearances and press releases. It leaves us with a deeper, more unsettling inquiry: not whether development will come to Great Nicobar, but what kind of future is being built, at whose cost and who is expected to bear the burdens of that transformation.



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Journal of Threatened Taxa is indexed/abstracted in Bibliography of Systematic Mycology, Biological Abstracts, BIOSIS Previews, CAB Abstracts, EBSCO, Google Scholar, Index Copernicus, Index Fungorum, JournalSeek, National Academy of Agricultural Sciences, NewJour, OCLC WorldCat, SCOPUS, Stanford University Libraries, Virtual Library of Biology, Zoological Records.

NAAS rating (India) 5.64

Print copies of the Journal are available at cost. Write to:
The Managing Editor, JoTT,
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3A2 Varadarajulu Nagar, FCI Road, Ganapathy, Coimbatore,
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ISSN 0974-7907 (Online) | ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

February 2026 | Vol. 18 | No. 2 | Pages: 28262–28454

Date of Publication: 26 February 2026 (Online & Print)

DOI: 10.11609/jott.2026.18.2.28262-28454

www.threatenedtaxa.org

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