

**TAMIL NADU LAUNCHES INDIA'S FIRST MARINE ELITE FORCE TO
PROTECT THE GULF OF MANNAR & PALK BAY**

Tamil Nadu launched India's First Marine Elite Force in Ramanathapuram District to protect the marine resources and marine biodiversity in the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Bay. The launch was done through video conferencing at the secretariat, Chennai. While launching the scheme, the Minister for Forest, Thiru. M. Mathiventhan, said, "This will open a new chapter in the conservation and protection of the precious marine biodiversity such as coral reefs, sea grass, and other marine flora and fauna".

Tmt. Supriya Sahu, Additional Chief Secretary of the Environment, Climate Change and Forest Department remarked, "This unique initiative has been helpful in building a Blue Cadre of specialized forces to deal with marine biodiversity exclusively. This force will enhance the capacity of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department to conserve the marine and coastal ecology in professional manner".

The Tamil Nadu Government had announced to set up a Marine Elite Force during the Budget session 2022. In continuation of the announcement the Tamil Nadu Government issued detailed Government orders allocating Rs. 109.65 lakhs to set up the Marine Elite Force. Two units of Marine Elite Force have been established at Ramanathapuram to combat marine wildlife crimes, including smuggling, prevention, and poaching of marine animals, particularly in the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere and Palk Bay.

12 Marine watchers have been engaged in the Marine Elite Force from the local fishermen community. They have been given extensive training related to marine patrolling including scuba diving, snorkeling, etc. The Marine Watchers have been trained by specialized forces viz. Indian Coast Guard, Navy, and Marine Police, etc. The Marine Elite Force is equipped with two deep water boats with wireless communication system. The force has been training for over a year and has been carrying out pilot operations from April 2023. During this period, they have detected 25 cases with the seizure of 4133 Kg of illegal wildlife articles.

This Force has been doing vigilant patrolling activities to strengthen the protection and sustainable management of the marine area, build capacity, and collect and disseminate information. The coastal zones of Ramanathapuram district, Tamil Nadu are among the richest in the country in terms of biodiversity and are highly sensitive concerning the availability of various fragile ecosystems such as coral reefs; mudflats; salt flats, and mangroves. Because of the proximity to the international maritime boundaries, the coastal area needs to be monitored more closely. Marine Elite Force will play a crucial role in combating illegal Wildlife smuggling in the region.

During the inauguration, Thiru. Subrat Mohapatra, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Head of Forest Force), Thiru. Srinivas R Reddy Principal Chief Conservator of Forests & Chief Wildlife Warden, Dr. V. Naganathan, Addl. Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) and Thiru. Bakan Jagdish Sudhakar, Wildlife Warden, Ramanathapuram were present.

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