

# NEWS RELEASE

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## Campaign to Declare Gulf of Mannar a World Heritage Site Holds First International Meeting in London, UK

**HOUSTON, TX (Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2008)** - An unprecedented international campaign to protect the Gulf of Mannar from destruction by the planned Sethusamudram Ship Channel Project (SSCP) is to be launched in London, UK, next month. The Gulf of Mannar, which separates the south eastern tip of India from the west coast of Sri Lanka, is one of South Asia's largest biosphere reserves and a site of recognised scientific, environmental, religious and cultural importance. In 2006, when dredging commenced for the SSCP, in order to provide a navigation route for large vessels around the whole of the Indian peninsula, there was a chorus of disapproval from environmental, humanitarian and religious and cultural organisations worldwide. Now, for the first time, many of these organisations are to meet to provide compelling multi-disciplinary evidence encouraging the Governments of India and Sri Lanka to ask UNESCO to designate the Gulf as a World Heritage Site. This would effectively end plans for the SSCP and ensure the Gulf - home for many endangered plant and animal species as well as being the site of the world-famous Adam's Bridge, or Ram Sethu, a structure sacred for Hindus - is protected.

The first international meeting to call for a permanent cancellation of the Sethusamudram Ship Channel Project (SSCP) and for the Gulf to be designated a World Heritage Site will be held at the London headquarters of the world's oldest biological society, The Linnean Society, on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> November. It will be attended by scientists, biologists, environmentalists, economists, NGOs, religious leaders and civic authorities worldwide. Chairing the meeting will be: -

- Peter Bunyard, a fellow of The Linnean Society, co-founder of The ecologist magazine, and a respected worldwide authority on climate change
- Dr. Ranil Senanayake, a leading systems ecologist who has worked with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank on matters of biodiversity and forest rehabilitation
- Maaike Hendriks, of Both ENDS in Amsterdam. Both ENDS strives for a more sustainable and fairer world by supporting organisation in developing

countries to fight poverty and to work towards sustainable environmental management.

The meeting has been championed by Kusum Vyas of the Living Planet Foundation. She says many leading environmentalists and scientists recognise that the SSCP is a flawed venture which has been inaugurated without any detailed review of devastating impacts to the invaluable biodiversity of the Gulf of Mannar. She also argues the SSCP ignores critical environmental and humanitarian issues - including the impact on the livelihood of thousands of fishermen in the area - and that the project has not taken into sufficient account views expressed by environmentalists, seismologists, oceanographers and those living along the coastline.

“As world leaders contemplate ways to save the earth’s environment, all responsible citizens of the global community must recognise that dredging and destroying one of the world’s few remaining hotspots in terms of its exceptional biodiversity, to create a ship channel in the region of the Gulf of Mannar translates into an ecological disaster,” says Kusum Vyas. “If this project goes ahead, more than 100 species of corals and thousands of sea turtles and endangered sea animals such as dolphins and dugongs will be irrevocably harmed. We know the shipping lanes will bring pollution into the area and mankind will lose forever a part of its precious and fragile environment. Such action simply can’t be justified on the grounds it is convenient for people and helps the economy. To do so would be a sin not just against nature, but also against our own children and generations to come. On the other hand, if the governments of India and Sri Lanka work to declare the Gulf of Mannar a World Heritage site, they can leave a lasting legacy for their people and the citizens of the world.”

For further details please see [www.livingplanetfoundation.org](http://www.livingplanetfoundation.org)

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