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Report on Visit to Dugong Creek, April 1998

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My general impression of Little Andaman was of deforestation. From the ship the island looks forest-covered, but I soon discovered that this is an illusion created by a thin strip of forest, 50 to 100 meters wide, that runs along the island's periphery. Inside, one finds clear-cut wasteland, dry ricefields, and red-oil palm plantations. I am told there is forest near Jackson Creek, but I did not get to visit the area.

The lack of forest affects the Onge's food supply directly and indirectly. First, there are less of the pigs, tubers and fruit that the forest harbors and which form their traditional foods. Secondly, when rain falls onto the barren ground, it runs off along with the soil, covering the coral reefs with silt. Consequently, as is evident in Hut Bay, many of the reefs are silt-covered and dead, and there are few fish to catch. (I rarely saw fish being sold in Hut Bay, which is surprising for the main market on an island.) Meanwhile, logging continues.

As a result, the Onges are not often able to catch fish or hunt pigs. So they subsist on rice and parathas; from what I saw, their diet is 90 percent starch. (They also drink tea like water.) Given that their earlier diet was largely protein, this imbalance may be harmful. Some of the Onge have skin diseases, ringworm and conjunctivitis.

The Onge are also severely addicted to tobacco leaves, zarda and supari, which is supplied to them and which they demand. All the adults have terribly decayed and red teeth from perpetually chewing these intoxicants. (Tobacco with lime, which they keep in the mouth, can also cause oral cancer.) In the 1960s, Cipriani had praised the whiteness and strength of the Onge's teeth, saying they would bend nails and tear open coconuts. So the contrast with the present condition is sad. (At the same time, Cipriani carried tobacco with him to persuade the Onges to be more friendly, thus fostering the addiction.)

I found Dugong Creek to be extremely hot. It was hard to move about between 9 am and 4 pm on the blazing, shadeless path connecting the staff quarters and guest house with the Onge huts. Fans are available for only a few hours in the evening. Solar power is on at night, but is not hooked up to the fans, and there are mosquitoes. In short, staying at Dugong Creek is challenging.

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