
[The Sentinelese - the world's most isolated tribe?](#)

Photo: Survival International

Living on their own small island, only 72 km², the Sentinelese are probably the most isolated tribe in the world. They are thought to be directly descended from the first human populations to emerge from Africa, and have lived in the Andaman Islands for up to 55,000 years.

They attracted international attention after the 2004 Asian tsunami, when a member of the tribe was photographed firing arrows at a coastguard helicopter that was checking they were safe.

The tribe continues to resist all contact with outsiders, attacking anyone who comes near. In 2006, two Indian fishermen, who had moored their boat near North Sentinel to sleep after poaching in the waters around the island, were killed when their boat broke loose and drifted onto the shore. Poachers are known to fish illegally, catch turtles and dive for lobsters and sea cucumbers in the waters around the island.

Most of what is known about the Sentinelese has been gathered by viewing them from boats moored more than an arrow's distance from the shore and from a few brief periods where the Sentinelese allowed the authorities to get close enough to hand over some coconuts. The name 'Sentinelese' is not theirs, but comes from their island, named by the British who colonised the island archipelago in the 1850s. No one knows what they call themselves.

The Sentinelese hunt and gather in the forest, and fish in the coastal waters. They make narrow outrigger canoes. These can only be used in shallow waters as they are steered and propelled with a pole like a punt.

It is thought that the Sentinelese live in three small bands. They have two different types of houses; large communal huts with several hearths for a number of families, and more temporary shelters, with no sides, with space for one nuclear family.

No one knows how many Sentinelese there are – the official population is put at 39, but that figure is based on how many could be seen through binoculars when the census officials came close to the island. Officials have counted 91 people from a distance, but it's probable that the number is significantly higher than that.

The women wear fibre strings tied around their waists, necks and heads. The men also wear necklaces and headbands, but with a thicker waist belt, which may also act as armour. The men carry spears, bows and arrows.

From what can be seen from a distance, the Sentinelese islanders appear to be proud, strong and healthy and at any one time observers have noted many children and pregnant women. This is in marked contrast to the Great Andamanese tribes to whom the British attempted to bring 'civilization'. Contact and attempts to 'mainstream' them were devastating. In 1800 the Great Andamanese's

population was estimated to be more than 6,000, it is now only 53. The tribes were robbed of their lands and decimated by disease; they are now completely dependent on the government. Alcoholism and diseases such as TB are rife.

In 1879 the British led a large team to North Sentinel Island in the hope of contacting the Sentinelese. They found recently abandoned villages and paths but the Sentinelese were nowhere to be seen. After a few days they came across an elderly couple and some children who, 'in the interest of science' were taken to the islands' capital. Predictably they soon fell ill and the adults died. The children were taken back to their island with a number of gifts. It is not known how many Sentinelese became ill as a result of this 'science' but it's likely that the children would have passed on their diseases and the results would have been devastating

During the 1970s the Indian authorities made occasional trips to North Sentinel in an attempt to befriend the tribe, often for the amusement of dignitaries. On one of these trips two pigs and a doll were left on the beach. The Sentinelese speared the pigs and buried them, along with the doll. Such visits became more regular in the 1980s; the teams would try to land, at a place out of the reach of arrows, and leave gifts such as coconuts, bananas and bits of iron. Sometimes the Sentinelese seemed to make friendly gestures; at others they would take the gifts into the forest and fire arrows at the contact party.

In 1991 there appeared to be a breakthrough. When the officials arrived the tribe gestured for them to bring gifts and then, for the first time, approached without their weapons. They even waded into the sea towards the boat to collect more coconuts. However, this friendly contact was not to last, although gift dropping trips continued for some years, encounters were not always friendly. At times the Sentinelese aimed their arrows at the contact team and once they attacked a wooden boat with their adzes. The officials had not managed to get beyond handing out coconuts and now even this did not seem welcome. No one knows why the Sentinelese first dropped, and then resumed their hostility to the contact missions, nor if any died as a result of diseases caught during these visits.

In 1996 the regular gift dropping missions stopped. Many officials were beginning to question the wisdom of attempting to contact a people who were healthy and content and who had thrived on their own for up to 55,000 years. Friendly contact had had only a devastating impact on the Great Andamanese tribes. The Sentinelese's extreme isolation makes them very vulnerable to diseases to which they have no immunity; meaning contact would almost certainly have tragic consequences for them.

Following a campaign by Survival International and local organisations, the government's policy is now that no further attempts should be made to contact the tribe. Periodic checks, from boats anchored at a distance from shore, are made to ensure that the Sentinelese appear well and have not chosen to seek contact.

Article based on: "Andaman Islands tribe threatened by lure of mass tourism", Gethin Chamberlain, The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/07/andaman-islands-tribe-tourism-threat>; "Miles de personas se unen al boicot de las islas Andamán de la India", Survival, <http://www.survival.es/noticias/9244>

