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## SETHU

# 'Dredging wilopen coastto tsunamis

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**Chennai, Sept. 28:** Whether there was a Ram Sethu or not, the Sethusamudram project had to be opposed as it threatens the marine ecology and fishermen's livelihoods and also lays opens the southern shoreline to the risk of a tsunami, a panel of "experts" said in Chennai on Friday.

The panel included a former director of the Geological Survey of India, an environmental scientist and an ex-captain of the Indian Navy.

They said there was no money to see it through and, besides, ships would not use the channel as its doubtful depth could be risky for heavy vessels. Coming under the umbrella of the "Movement Against Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project", the "experts" argued that the Union shipping ministry under

## Experts on Sethu

Mr T.R. Baalu had rushed through the project without adequate studies on its impact on the environment, livelihoods, disaster management and, above all, acceptance from the shipping industry.

"This project is supposed to serve the shipping industry by reducing time and distance, but till now no shipping company has endorsed it knowing fully well it is fraught with risks," said Capt. H. Balakrishnan (Retd). "The qualitative requirement for the Sethu project is a 12-metre dredged depth. A 30,000 DWT coal-carrying vessel will draw about 10.5 metre draught and that leaves a below-keel clearance of a mere 1.5 metre. If I were the captain, I will move at six knots, probably slower (normal speed is 12-13 knots), to negotiate the 84 nautical miles of the Sethu channel without running aground. That would mean a saving of a mere couple of hours and I would not risk my ship for that," said the sailor, who has 22 years of sea experience, most of it with the Indian Navy.

Interestingly, the project literature admits that only ships up to 32,000 DWT can navigate this dredged canal. The current global shipping scenario has larger ships, of 60,000 DWT and above, to cut operating costs and meet the larger container traffic. None of these large ships will use the Sethu canal, so the projected traffic of 3,417 vessels per year by 2010 and 7,141 by 2025 "will remain a pipe dream", argued Capt. Balakrishnan. That may mean the project might take a longer time to recover its investment, leave alone make a profit.

According to Dr K. Gopalakrishnan, a former director of the Geological Survey of India (GSI), the environment impact assessment (EIA) was done through the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) without involving the GSI even though the latter has far better infrastructure, including planes, ships and scientists.