



PEOPLE GROUPS: THE NORTH SENTINELESE

The Sentinelese people live on North Sentinel Island, which is part of India and lies south in the Indian Ocean in the Andaman archipelago. The nearest island is less than 30 km away, but they are over 1200 km from the Indian subcontinent.

They are one of six Aboriginal tribes in the area, but their exact population is unknown because no one has seen more than a few of them since the early 1990s. Estimates range from 40 to 500 people, living on an island which is only 59 square km. It is covered by dense jungle, which even satellite photography cannot penetrate.

The North Sentinelese are considered unreachable because it is illegal to have contact with them. In 1867, a merchant ship lodged on the rocks. The 106 survivors were attacked by the locals, but managed to hold out until they were rescued. Ten years later, the British administrator of the islands landed there and kidnapped six people. The two oldest quickly died of disease, and the four young people were given gifts and returned to North Sentinel. Since that time, the North Sentinelese have been hostile to outsiders.

The exception was Indian anthropologist Triloknath Pandit, who spent 24 years making sporadic visits. In 1991, a member of his team, a woman named Dr. Madhumala Chattopadhyay,

led a group who made personal contact. Soon after, the Indian government banned all contact with the islanders based on past violent history and concerns that they could be infected and wiped out by disease. It was also obvious that the North Sentinelese had no desire for visitors on their island.

Today, a 4.8 km buffer zone surrounds their island, enforced by patrols of the Indian navy. Their language is unknown, though it is thought to be related to the languages of Melanesia, Papua New Guinea, and Tasmania.

In 2018, John Allen Chau, a missionary from the USA, tried to make personal contact with the North Sentinelese, convinced that God had called him to reach them with the Gospel. He was killed shortly after he landed on the island, and his body was never recovered. He had spent many years preparing to go, and there has been a lively debate as to whether he followed the right path. He wrote this in his journal the day before he was killed by the North Sentinelese: *“To you Lord I give all the glory of whatever happens.”*

What should be our response to groups such as the North Sentinelese, who seem completely unreachable? God knows about them, and our prayers do not go unheard. Continue to lift them up, faithfully and with hope.

AT A GLANCE

- Anthropologists believe that the North Sentinelese may have inhabited their island for thousands of years. They are hunter-gatherers; there is no evidence of agriculture.
- Although they live only 50 km from a modern airport, they use stone-age technology and have no contact at all with the outside world.

PRAY

- For a way to reach the North Sentinelese and other groups like them around the world, in a way that is God-honouring, respectful of laws, and sensitive to the risk of disease.
- That God will send dreams and visions of Jesus, and that Christians will pray for them without fail.

Sources: <https://bit.ly/405xIXi> • <https://bit.ly/40B7Wun> • Real Life Lore <https://bit.ly/3YMATSH>



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