

# Andaman unearths new earthworm

Pointing to the rich biodiversity of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, a team of researchers from the city has identified a new species of earthworm. Jaya Manazhy and Aja Manazhy, senior research scholars in the Department of Zoology, Mar Ivanios College, under the guidance of K. Vijayakumaran Nair, identified the species from samples collected from Port Blair by CSIR Emeritus scientist Oommen V. Oommen and Assistant Professor K. Ramachandran.

The species has been named *Moniligaster ivaniosi*, after the name of the college. The taxonomic finding was authenticated by earthworm researcher John Warren Reynolds. A scientific paper on the new species has been published in the Canadian journal, *Megadrilologica*, dedicated to the taxonomy and biology of earthworms.

A taxonomic key to the tropical species of *Moniligaster* is also included in the article. More than 15 species of *Moniligaster* have so far been reported from India. The unique features of the new species include three pairs of genital apertures and a black line running along the middle region. The authors attribute the unique morphological features of the worm, especially the reproductive structures, to the geographical isolation of the islands in the Indian Ocean.

According to them, the new species shows distinct differences from the nearest related species, *M. sapphirinaoides*, *M. ophidioides* and *M. grandis*. The specimen of the new species has been deposited at the Zoological Survey of India, Kozhikode.

Located in the south-eastern part of the Bay of Bengal, the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar comprises 572 islands that are blessed with a luxuriant evergreen tropical rainforest canopy. The islands shelter a rich biodiversity comprising Indian, Myanmar, Malaysian, and endemic floral strain.

The earthworm samples for the study were obtained during an expedition to the islands in 2009 to collect cecilian amphibians. The researchers collected three earthworm samples from an area bordering a forest belt in Port Blair. The worms were preserved in alcohol to study the taxonomic features. The identification was made using updated taxonomic keys. The researchers conclude that the species is probably endemic to the Andaman and Nicobar islands (The Hindu 11-1-12).