

PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
November 1—12, 2015



Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP) organized and led a volunteer expedition to Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) on St. Thomas and St. John in the US Virgin Islands from November 1—12, 2015. Fourteen volunteers and three ConservationVIP leader-volunteers participated, along with Sarah Ford, the Volunteer Coordinator for The Friends of Virgin Islands National Park. Ed Eads, Barbara Kennedy, and Damien Hardgrove were the ConservationVIP trip leaders. Work consisted of trail maintenance and removal of vegetation from plantation ruins and the cultural landscape. Aggressive vegetative growth quickly claims trails and the Virgin Island National Park's cultural resources. Maintenance involves removing trees with a diameter less than six inches; grasses and other vegetation; and catch-and-keep, a thorny vine. The work was completed on the Yawzi Point, Tektite, Ram Head, Brown Bay, Caneel Hill and Leinster Bay Trails, and at the plantation ruins at Lameshur Bay and Cabrite (on Tektite Trail). The ConservationVIP volunteers, leaders, and Sarah Ford, Volunteer Coordinator, completed approximately 859 hours of volunteer work; maintained approximately 5.5 miles of trails; cleaned, repaired or constructed 66 water drains; constructed 4 stone steps and 1 water bar; cleared 0.75 acres of tall vegetation from vistas; assisted with the set-up of the Friends of VINP volunteer/intern campsite; and maintained approximately 3.125 acres of historical sites and cultural landscapes.

Detailed Trip Report

Brushing and Pruning: Many sections of the trails, cultural landscapes, ruins and gravesites had heavily encroaching grasses, vines, catch and keep (a thorny, stick to your clothing plant), cactuses and brush. As a result, volunteers worked every day on pruning back and removing the vegetation so that the trails, ruins, cultural sites and gravesites can be navigated by visitors to the park and hikers without the bush impeding their travel or safety. Where brush growth and/or tree branches encroached upon the trail and cultural landscapes width or height it was cut back and dispersed. Significant quantities of trees, tree limbs and roots on the trails, cultural sites and ruins presented a hazard for tripping and hazards to the cultural sites and were sawed off by hand and discarded from the sites.

These intensive work efforts by the ConservationVIP volunteers greatly improved trail quality and preservation of the cultural landscapes while providing for increased visitor understanding and visitor safety.

Ram Head Trail: The Ram Head trail is a very popular trail that leads to the Ram Head rock formation. The volunteers brushed and pruned the last section of the trail and closed off several social trails on the switchbacks leading to the top of Ram Head. Social trails are created when trail users bypass the properly constructed trail and create shortcuts that can damage vegetation and increase erosion. The volunteers also constructed water drains, rock steps, and a water bar at the base of a heavily eroded section of trail just prior to the cobble beach. Constructing these trail features was a laborious two-day project that was the first step in correcting this heavily eroded section of trail.



Before



After

Lameshur Bay Plantation Ruins, Gravesites, Yawzi Point Trail, and Yawzi Point Ruins: These sites have unofficially been adopted by ConservationVIP and have become a maintenance project on each trip. The Lameshur Bay Plantation Ruins and the Yawzi Point Trail are a short 15-minute walk from Virgin Islands Environmental Resource Station (or VIERS, our home base) and see many visitors. These sites were cleared by ConservationVIP in November 2014, and again in April 2015, and were in very good shape as a result. On this trip, we removed newly grown vegetation, removed additional invasive grasses, and removed vegetation from the top of the sugar factory walls. In total, the volunteers removed vegetation from the Yawzi Point Trail, 2 standing houses, 3 foundations, 1 sugar factory, 1 bay rum still, and the Lameshur Plantation gravesite.

The Lameshur Bay Plantation Ruins are historically significant, because they represent the changing agricultural products that were produced at this site and on St. John. The plantation began by producing sugar, then cotton, then cattle, and finally bay rum at the turn of the 19th Century.



Tektite Trail and Cabrite Plantation Ruins: The volunteers removed brush within the trail corridor that had grown into the trail and impeded safe passage on the trail. Portions of the trail were in great shape from the ConservationVIP's April 2015 trip's maintenance activity. The end of the trail that had not been completed by the April 2015 group was heavily overgrown and required the removal of trees under six inches in diameter, large cactuses, grasses, and vegetation and vines. The volunteers also cleared a building foundation from an 18th century plantation on top of the first hill on the Tektite trail. Interestingly, a single wood beam hewn from Ironwood (lignum vitae) remains standing in the foundation. This was a particularly rewarding project as the volunteers could see the impact of their work in a few hours as a completely overgrown and hidden site became visible.

The Tektite Trail is named after the Tektite Habitat Projects that occurred during the years 1968-1970. There were two iterations of the Tektite project in which scientists lived in an underwater habitat for up to 58 days. Tektite was cosponsored by several government agencies and it left a lasting legacy in psychological research relating to individuals cohabitating confined spaces. The psychological research was utilized as recently as 2010 in the rescue efforts for the mine disaster trapping 33 men at Copiapó, Chile. The Tektite trail roughly follows the bulldozed road that served the project and was later abandoned at the conclusion of the project. The trail is a fantastic hike due to the interesting terrain, ruins and lovely vistas.



Before



After

Friends of VINP Campsite Set-Up: Assist the Friends of VINP and the Archaeology Department of VINP with the set-up of the volunteer/archaeology intern campsite adjacent to Cinnamon Bay Campground. The volunteers cleaned the site; removed old rope from the trees; set-up 7 tents, 24 cots, and 1 tarp; and adjusted an additional 7 tarps.



Brown Bay Trail: The volunteers removed brush within the trail corridor that had grown into the trail and impeded safe passage on the trail. The volunteers also removed built up dirt and debris from water bars/drains or constructed new drains/rolling dips.



Caneel Hill Trail and Caneel Hill Vistas: The volunteers removed brush within the trail corridor that had grown into the trail and impeded safe passage on the trail. Many of the water control features needed cleaning/repair. The volunteers removed built up dirt and debris from water bars/drains or constructed new drains/rolling dips. The volunteers also cut back tall vegetation on top of Caneel Hill using hand saws to remove trees less than 6 inches in diameter, pruners for smaller branches and trees, and shears to remove thick grasses.



Peace Hill Vista: The volunteers removed vegetation from a site on top of Peace Hill using hand saws to remove trees and cactuses less than 6 inches in diameter, pruners for smaller branches and trees, and shears to remove thick grasses. The vegetation at this site had been cut back substantially the prior year and the volunteers work mostly focused on improving the vistas.



Leinster Bay Trail: The volunteers removed brush within the trail corridor that had grown into the trail and impeded safe passage on the trail. A small crew of volunteers repaired an eroded section of trail by removing dirt, rocks, and debris to restore the appropriate bench-cut to a section of trail.



Lameshur Bay Trail: The volunteers removed brush within the trail corridor that had grown into the trail and impeded safe passage on the trail. Many of the water control features also needed cleaning/repair. The volunteers removed built up dirt and debris from water bars/drains/rolling dips.





General Information

Social Interaction: The team of volunteers worked and “played” extremely well together and friendships were quickly formed. We ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together each day and we washed and dried our own dishes after each meal.

Safety: We started each day and each new project with safety briefings and safety reminders. In addition, we worked together to watch each other for dehydration, safe tool use, use of protective equipment and safe work practices.

The team readily adopted all safety guidelines for tool usage and tool transport. All personnel wore required safety gear while working on the trails. Volunteers cordially and occasionally reminded each other to adhere to all safety guidelines throughout the workday.

Transportation: The National Park Service (NPS) provided a government owned van at no charge for transportation during our entire volunteer work program. A second seven-passenger van was rented at the St. Thomas Airport. The vans were driven by the Trip Leaders, which proved to be exciting as the custom is to drive on the left side of the road in the US Virgin Islands. Interestingly, there are no traffic lights on St. John and the average driving speed is

about 25 miles per hour. Each day the vans transported the volunteers to and from the work sites with afternoon stops at the market to provide volunteers an opportunity for special treats or the spirits of their choice. Travel between the islands on the first and last days of the trip was accomplished by using the vehicle ferries that run between Red Hook, St. Thomas and Cruz Bay, St. John.

Virgin Islands Environmental Resource Station (VIERS) Accommodations: VIERS provided rustic and affordable accommodations with clean rooms and facilities. VIERS is run by Clean Islands International and provides one of the most environmentally friendly lodging operations in the Virgin Islands. The camp is operated by a mostly volunteer staff that, like us, clearly love their work. The food, lodging and amenities were basic and welcoming with acceptable bath facilities and sleeping arrangements.

Overall Logistics: Almost everything worked as planned. The ferries were running on-schedule, we ran on schedule with planned buffers built-in to daily events, the rest-day activities went as planned, and the volunteers were prepared for scheduled departures as well (with a few stragglers here and there).

Tools: ConservationVIP brought and donated a selection of tools to the Friends of VINP. Total tool expenditure was \$243 and included two canvas bags for moving rocks, eight bow saw blades, and two Fiskar handsaws that proved invaluable. These were tools identified by Sarah Ford, Volunteer Coordinator for the Friends as being particularly helpful. All other tools were provided by the Friends of VINP and were in good working order.

Weather: The weather on this trip was consistently very warm–hot and humid with average daytime temperatures ranging from 85-90 degrees. Most days were sunny to mostly sunny with showers and several downpours. One day was rainy all-day. The trip leaders carried extra snacks, sports drink mix, and water to help ensure the volunteers were fed and hydrated. On average, the weather was quite lovely and typical for Caribbean weather in this season.

Free Time: The volunteers were provided with two days to rest and enjoy St. John. On the first of the two rest days, Virgin Islands Ecotours operating out of Honeymoon Beach treated the volunteers to a complimentary guided eco-tour. The tour used kayaks to travel to two snorkeling destinations that allowed the volunteers an opportunity to see Green Sea Turtles and myriad corals and tropical fishes. The guides were very good and the volunteers expressed their delight multiple times during and after the tour. The volunteers also enjoyed the beach chairs and stand up paddleboards provided by Virgin Island Ecotours. The volunteers enjoyed this experience so much that some came back to Honeymoon Beach for the second rest day. The volunteers also had time after each workday to snorkel or swim at Little Lameshur Bay or to rest before dinner in their cabins.

Educational Opportunities: The volunteers were provided with several educational opportunities to provide context for their work and appreciation for Virgin Islands National Park:

- The group met with Ken Wild, NPS Archaeologist at the Lameshur Bay Plantation Ruins. Ken provided the group with historical context and recommendations for working within the historical and cultural landscapes of the Lameshur Bay Plantation Ruins and elsewhere in the park.
- Laurel Brannick, NPS Interpreter, led a guided bird walk and historical discussion at Francis Bay.
- The group visited the Archaeology Lab at Cinnamon Bay.
- The group toured the interpretive hike of the Cinnamon Bay Plantation Ruins.
- The group toured the Annaberg Plantation Ruins and learned about the various components of a sugar plantation and sugar factory during the weekly cultural demonstration. They enjoyed a tour of the garden and fresh bread with bush tea.



Summary

The trip was a success with 859 volunteer work hours donated to the Virgin Islands National Park. The volunteers and leadership team greatly enjoyed the trip as measured through overwhelmingly positive feedback and exclamations of appreciation. The trip's success was in large part due to the organizations that hosted ConservationVIP and the volunteers on St. John. We would like to thank the Virgin Islands National Park, including Ken Wild, Archaeologist, and Laurel Brannick, Interpreter. We would also like to thank the Friends of VINP and their team including, Joe Kessler, President, Karen Jarvis, Program Manager, and Sarah Ford, Volunteer Coordinator. We are deeply grateful for both the kindness and generosity that Virgin Islands Ecotours and their staff have shown this and prior ConservationVIP groups. We are also deeply grateful to Tony and Carla at VIERS; they are professional and attentive to every detail, while warmly welcoming and making our group feel at home. We are proud to have worked with so many fine organizations, people, and of course the wonderful volunteers.

