



**CONSERVATION
VOLUNTEERS
INTERNATIONAL
PROGRAM**

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A Non-Profit 501c3 Tax Exempt Organization

**PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
November 6—12, 2016**



Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP) organized and led a volunteer trip to Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) on St. Thomas and St. John in the US Virgin Islands from November 6—12, 2016. Fifteen volunteers and two ConservationVIP leader-volunteers participated, along with Mark Gestwicki, the Volunteer Coordinator for The Friends of Virgin Islands National Park. Jeff Chabot 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 Lameshur Bay, Reef Bay, Leinster Bay, and Johnny Horn Trails and at the historic sites at Reef Bay Sugar Mill, the Petroglyphs (off Reef Bay Trail), and the Murphy Great House. The ConservationVIP volunteers, leaders, and Mark Gestwicki, the Friends' Volunteer Coordinator, completed approximately 348 hours of volunteer work; maintained approximately 3.3 miles of trails; repaired and reconstructed 1,000 ft of badly damaged trail, including moving 38 cubic yards of gravel and mud mixed trail material; cleared two trail vistas, approximately 0.25 acres; assisted with the set-up of the Friends of VINP volunteer/intern campsite; and maintained approximately 2.0 acres of historical sites and cultural landscapes.

Detailed Trip Report

The environment of St. John and Virgin Islands National Park is tropical and ranges from very arid (desert like) along the south coast to tropical forest only a short distance inland. After a long drought, the rains have returned and along with them the vivacious vegetation growth that is characteristic for much of the region. 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), Tan Tan, Sensiveria (also called mother-in-law tongue an invasive species), cactuses and brush. As a result, volunteers worked 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.

Lameshur 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 re-cleared two beautiful vistas that provided views of Little and Great Lameshur Bays and Reef Bay.

Reef Bay Trail and Sugar Mill: The volunteers cleared about 10 cubic yards of Tan Tan growth that was growing out of the masonry of the mill. While working on the mill, we discovered a steam boiler obscured by jungle growth. Trip Leader, Jeff Chabot, had never seen the boiler in his many previous trips to this site, which made this an exciting project for the group. The volunteers cut back the surrounding forest overgrowth, thereby making it viewable to visitors and in the process, removing another 30 cubic yards of Catch and Keep, Tan Tan and Sensiveria (also called mother-in-law tongue an invasive species).



Petroglyphs: The volunteers arrived at the Petroglyphs and found its waterfall cascading in spectacular fashion due to the recent rains. Trip leaders, Jeff Chabot and Damien Hardgrove couldn't recall a time when they had witnessed them looking so beautiful. Due to heavy vegetative growth, the volunteers removed several recently dislodged trees that had grown into and blocked the prime viewing/picture area of the falls. The volunteers hiked approximately 5 cubic yards of debris well down the trail and out of sight of any visitors. The volunteers were then able to spend some time viewing the petroglyphs. The trick to viewing the petroglyphs is to splash some water from the adjacent pool over them to better see and photograph them.



Leinster Bay Trail, Johnny Horn Trail, and Murphy Great House Ruins: The volunteers hiked the Leinster Bay and Johnny Horn Trails to the well-known Murphy's Great House ruins clearing vegetation on our way. The team removed numerous trees falling into the trail, but were not prepared to remove the huge mounds of rocky debris blocking the trail in some spots. The group bypassed these and planned to return later, because we did not have the appropriate tools to repair them. The group stopped briefly for a history presentation at the Danish Guard House ruins and continued up to the bluff where the Murphy Great House foundations and patios are situated. The team was given another history presentation on what they would be working on and why. The team cleared the overgrowth from the patios, then cut back the Tan Tan along the outer walls making them more visible to visiting tourists. The group had to avoid numerous Jack-Spaniard Wasp nests during their work on the site. An estimated 40 to 50 cubic yards of vegetation was removed from the patios and areas along the outer wall. This site encompasses about 1 acre.



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 set-up 8 tents and tarps.



Leinster Bay Trail – Trail Rebuild: After having traversed five large landslides earlier in the week that had heavily damaged sections of the Leinster Bay Trail, we decided to return to the trail and do what we could to reopen it. The landslides had made the original trail impassable and forced visitors to walk the boulders at the edge of Leinster Bay.

Upon arrival at the first damaged section of trail, trip leader, Jeff Chabot, described the task at hand and how to deal with it. With some continual coaching by both trip leaders and the Friends' Volunteer Coordinator, Mark Gestwicki, it did not take long for these significant landslides to just dwindle away. The excited volunteers and leaders moved about a 10 yard dump-truck load of gravel and dirt in less than 2 hours. The volunteers continued on to the second slide, which was somewhat smaller, and moved an additional 7 or 8 cubic yards of material. Then, the third slide was tackled, and required moving another 6 cubic yards of gravel. The final two landslides required moving an additional 15 cubic yards of sticky gravel/mud that the volunteers likened to wet concrete, which made the job that much harder. Over the course of the two days to complete this project, the volunteers moved approximately 38 cubic yards of material over 1000ft of trail and made the popular Leinster Bay Trail passable and safer for the many visitors and locals that frequent the trail.

The team and leaders were exhausted by the completion of each day's work on this project and were excited to stop at the Smoothie Shack on Centerline Drive where all unanimously agreed on some refreshments, "which were delicious."



Before

Leinster Bay Trail Repair



Before



During Work



After



After

General Information



Social Interaction: The team of volunteers worked well together from the start and friendships were quickly formed. The volunteers also expressed that they had met their expectations and accomplished a significant volume of work for the Virgin Islands National Park and island. We ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together each day and we washed and dried our own dishes together after each meal.

Safety: The group agreed that safety was paramount. The volunteers embraced the safety guidelines provided during daily safety briefings and through 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 proper carry techniques for transport. All personnel wore required safety gear while working on the historic sites and trails. Volunteers cordially and occasionally reminded each other to adhere to safety guidelines throughout the week.

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. 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 to purchase special treats or the beverage 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 manager and an assistant with the help of 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: Everything worked well 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 \$254 and included seven new loppers, two ratcheting loppers, and seven hand pruners. Mark Gestwicki, the Volunteer Coordinator for the Friends graciously received the donation. 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 only a brief shower during the day on Monday. Most of the rainstorms came with thunderous downpours at 4am during the first several nights and tapered off for the remainder of the week. The trip leaders provided extra snacks, sports drink mix, and water to help ensure the volunteers were fed and hydrated. On average, the weather was normal for Caribbean weather in this season.

Free Time: The volunteers were provided with a day to rest and experience St. John. Most of the volunteers chose to go on a Rams Head hike and to snorkel at Salt Pond Bay followed by a visit to Cruz Bay for additional rest time. Four volunteers and Jeff Chabot, one of the ConservationVIP trip leaders, assisted 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. After they completed this work, they visited Cruz Bay for some rest time. 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, along with presentations provided by trip leaders Jeff Chabot and Damien Hardgrove, to provide context for their work and appreciation for Virgin Islands National Park:

- The campsite set-up team toured the Archaeology Lab at Cinnamon Bay with trip leader Jeff Chabot.
- The volunteers 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.
- The volunteers were also given overview presentations by the trip leaders when arriving at:
 - Lameshur Bay Plantation Ruins
 - Reef Bay Sugar Mill
 - Petroglyphs
 - Murphy Great House Ruins
 - Catherineburg Mill

Summary

The trip was a success with 348 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. We would also like to thank the Friends of VINP and their team including, Joe Kessler, President, Karen Jarvis, Program Manager, and Mark Gestwicki, Volunteer Coordinator. We are deeply grateful to Asya and Robert 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.

