



**PROJECT REPORT**  
**Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip**  
**April 2 – 8, 2017**



**Executive Summary**

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP), in partnership with REI, organized and led a volunteer trip to Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) on St. John Island in the US Virgin Islands from April 2-12, 2017. Eight volunteers and two ConservationVIP leaders who are also volunteers participated, along with Mark Gestwicki, the Volunteer Coordinator for The Friends of Virgin Islands National Park. Mark Hardgrove and Marti Marshall were the ConservationVIP trip leaders. Work consisted of trail maintenance and removal of vegetation from plantation ruins, grave sites, and cultural landscapes. 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.

Because this was the end of the season, many of the trails had been brushed and were in reasonably good shape. However, the trail tread needed assistance to reduce erosion and volunteer trail work included some spot brushing and building water bars on the Tamarind Trail. Additionally, litter patrol and trail inspections on the L'Esperance trail and Francis Bay Interpretive Bird Viewing Trail were completed. Vegetation management at the historic sites at Little Lameshur Bay and the three ruins off the Leinster Bay Trail (Waterlemon Bay) and Johnny Horn Trail were cleared. The project most appreciated by the volunteers was walking into Brown Bay for a beach clean-up, where we were met by the Virgin Islands NP Chief Ranger on the Ranger Patrol Boat and they hauled out our bagged trash. The ConservationVIP volunteers, leaders, and Mark Gestwicki, the Friends' Volunteer Coordinator, completed approximately 298 hours of volunteer work in total, which included removing at least 800 pounds of trash at Brown Beach; inspecting and picking up litter along approximately 6 miles of trails; constructing four major water bars to prevent further trail erosion; and clearing and maintaining an estimated 3.0 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. Because it was nearing the end of a successful volunteer season for Friends of Virgin Island National Park, vegetation along trails and viewpoints were in reasonable shape, but the never-ending onslaught of vegetation growth continued. Trails, and cultural landscapes, ruins and gravesites are heavily impacted by encroaching grasses, vines, catch & keep (a thorny, stick-to-your clothing plant), Tan Tan, Sensiveria (also called mother-in-law tongue, an invasive species), cactuses and brush. Thus, volunteers worked on pruning back and removing the vegetation so that the trails, ruins, cultural sites and gravesites can continue to 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, it was cut back and dispersed. Brush and small trees were sawed off or clipped by hand and discarded from the sites.

With 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 impacted the scenic viewing of the sites. These intensive work efforts by the ConservationVIP volunteers at cultural sites and ruins greatly improved both viewing and preservation of the cultural landscapes while providing for increased visitor understanding and visitor safety.

#### **Little Lameshur Bay Ruins and Cultural landscape, and Yawzi Point Trail:**

After a safety and tool orientation, the volunteers headed by foot to the ruins perched above Little Lameshur Bay. All the remains, including the ruins and old school house, were cleared of brush. After lunch, vegetation from the Lameshur grave sites and the Yawzi Point Trail was also removed. The beautiful vistas that provide views of Little and Great Lameshur Bays and Reef Bay can be more greatly appreciated after this effort.



Tamarind Trail: After a short hike in and under the master tutelage of the Friends of VINP coordinator, volunteers learned about the fine art of building water bars that will be effective and last for many years. (Hint: the bigger the rocks, the better). Small teams were formed and four water bars were built to reduce erosion in this steep portion of trail.





Brown Bay Beach Clean Up: We met up at the trailhead with Mark, the Friends volunteer coordinator and two "walk-up" volunteers he brought from Cruz Bay. One of the volunteers worked at the REI store in Framingham, Massachusetts! He and his partner enjoyed seeing the REI sign on our van and working with us. After a pleasant hike into the beach from the Hermitage trailhead, the volunteers spread out and proceeded to root out the flotsam and jetsam (i.e. trash) that has floated in through the years. We piled it all in one place for pick up by the National Park Service boat. Unfortunately, the crew worked so quickly hauling bags to the boat while other volunteers were still bringing in bags that we didn't get a picture of the complete pile. Estimated trash collected was 800-1000 pounds, including a 5-gallon oil can (sans lid) still with fluid in it.





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, first beginning efforts to clear two ruins off the Leinster Bay trail then proceeding up the Johnny Horn Trail to the upper ruins. The Great House Ruins is in a spectacular location and the entire group enjoyed the breeze and views, even without shade. Several mentioned they wished we had worked there all day. The team focused on clearing the overgrowth from the patios and walls, making them more visible to visiting tourists. 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.







*Great House Ruins*

## **General Information**

Social Interaction: This small team of volunteers bonded quickly and worked and played well together from the start. The volunteers expressed enjoyment for the work they accomplished and developing their trail skills. Because it was a short work week, several indicated they wished they could work more!

We ate breakfast and packed our lunches together each morning, and ate lunch at the work site daily together. Upon return to the VIERS camp, people would frequently head to Little Lameshur Bay to enjoy the saltwater before showers and cleaning up for dinner. Most would gather for pre-dinner beverages in the gazebo or around the campfire ring and then proceed to dinner together each day. People were helpful and energetic in the clean up after dinner by washing and drying dishes or gathering firewood and setting up a campfire. Almost all nights, most people gathered around the campfire circle for discussions and sharing. Volunteers seemed happy to stay in camp each night.

Safety: The group agreed that safety was important. All participants arrived with appropriate gear (gloves, safety glasses, sufficient number of water bottles, and proper foot gear). 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 carrying and use, use of protective equipment and safe work practices. All personnel wore required safety gear while working on the historic sites and trails.

Transportation: The National Park Service (NPS) provided a government-owned, 15-passenger van at no charge for transportation during our entire volunteer work program. A second seven-passenger van was rented at the St. Thomas Airport. Each day, because of the size of the group, we only used the fifteen-passenger van which also helped solidify group communication, bonding and dynamics. The vans were driven by the trip leaders. The roads on St. John are curvy and steep and the average driving speed is about 25 miles per hour. It was interesting to drive on the left side of the road in traditional US vehicles with the driver's side and steering wheel on the left side of the vehicle. Passengers were helpful at intersections and any turns!

Each day the vans transported the volunteers to and from the work sites with an occasional afternoon stop at the market to provide volunteers an opportunity to purchase any additional supplies they might need. Travel between the islands on the first and last days of the trip was accomplished using the vans and 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 with the help of a repeat volunteer staff that, like us, clearly love their work. (Two couples were there for their fifteenth year!) The food, lodging and amenities were tasty and the cooks of the day went out of their way to accommodate any specific dietary needs. All but the three men (sharing one cabin) had showers and toilet facilities in their cabins. The three men used the nearby shower and rest room building or one of the three restrooms located near their cabin.

Overall Logistics: 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.

Tools: ConservationVIP brought and donated a selection of tools, including 10 hand pruners, to the Friends of VINP. 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 warm-hot and humid with average daytime temperatures ranging from 82-87 degrees. Most days were sunny to mostly sunny with virtually no rain (one day had some drops of rain but it never developed into a shower). The trip leaders provided extra snack bars, nuts, and water to help ensure the volunteers were energized and hydrated. On average, the weather was normal for Caribbean weather as the dry season begins to roll in. Beautiful!



Free Time: Mid-week, the volunteers were provided with a day to rest. Half of the volunteers chose to hike from VIERS out to the Petroglyphs, down to the Reef Bay Sugar Plantation and up the L'Esperance Trail where they were picked up by the van to catch up with the other half of the group. The other half of the crew participated in a private NPS bird hike around a salt pond at Francis Bay. Laurel Brannick the Chief of Interpretation and Education for the NPS led the tour. The group surveyed the trail, pruned a few limbs and collected trash along the one mile hike also.



Then we all met at Honeymoon Beach (Caneel Bay) where Virgin Islands Ecotours compensated the volunteers to a complimentary afternoon at their site. We were met by the owner Sybilla who treated us like royalty. Our volunteers swam, snorkeled, kayaked, stand up paddle boarding and we all joined together in the huge water ring.

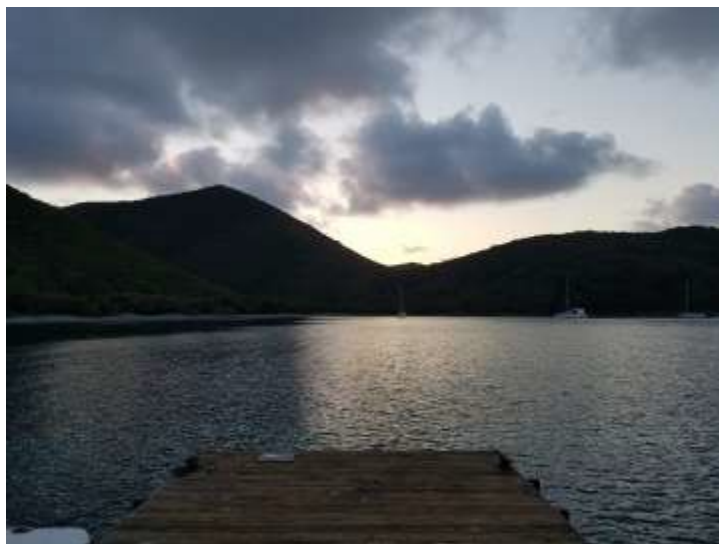




Educational Opportunities: Mark Hardgrove provided Information since he served as the superintendent at the Virgin Islands National Park for five years, and his insight and knowledge of geography, culture, and customs were invaluable. Mark Gestwicki also provided local insight and knowledge from his perspective. Volunteers were also able to interact with other research groups staying at VIERS, including a group from Castleton University (Vermont). These student researchers were doing research on bats (capturing at night) and coral reef monitoring and were willing to share their information and processes. Additionally, Cynthia Moulton, a professor of Biology at Castleton University and the author of a delightful book, "Interconnected – Tropical Biodiversity of St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands" was available during most of our meals and several of us took advantage of the ability to purchase a signed copy of her book.

## **Summary**

The trip was a success with 298 volunteer work hours donated to the Virgin Islands National Park. The trip's success was in large part due to the organizations that hosted ConservationVIP and the volunteers themselves. We would like to thank the Virgin Islands National Park and Laurel Brannick for her time, and special thanks to 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 Whitney Sears, manager at VIERS; she was professional and attentive to every detail, while warmly welcoming and making our group feel at home. And her volunteer staff for cooking and maintenance was extraordinary! Additionally, we are also deeply grateful for both the generosity and kindness that Virgin Islands Ecotours and their staff have shown this and prior Conservation VIP groups. We are proud to have worked with so many fine organizations, people, and of course the wonderful hard working and fun loving volunteers.



**We hope you will join us on our next trip!**