



PROJECT REPORT

Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip

St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands

November 14–20, 2021



Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) led a volunteer trip to Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) on St. John U.S. Virgin Islands from November 14-20, 2021. This was the first ConservationVIP® trip since February 2020 (COVID-19) and the second trip since April 2017 (Hurricanes). The September 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria caused significant devastation to the island of St. John requiring the National Park Service (NPS) and Friends of the Virgin Islands organizations to pause volunteer services and implement a recovery strategy. This was also the first volunteer group for the 2021/2022 season to stay at the Friends' volunteer camp.

The group consisted of nine volunteers and two ConservationVIP® volunteer leaders, Susan Murray and Norman Hageman. As in prior years, the host was Friends of Virgin Islands National Park and Volunteer Program Coordinator, Mark Gestwicki and Volunteer Trail Leader, Taylor White. Work consisted of trail maintenance and removal of exotic vegetation from plantation ruins, grave sites, and cultural landscapes as well as planting new saplings. Aggressive vegetative growth quickly claims trails and cultural resources. Maintenance involves removing trees with a diameter less than six inches, grasses, and other vegetation such as catch-and-keep a thorny vine.

A lot of the hurricane recovery work has been done since 2017 and the work assigned to volunteer groups is consistent with the past except for planting saplings along the shoreline to prevent erosion and to replace the lost coastal and mangrove trees. The Park continued volunteer services locally during 2020 and 2021, and we were the first U.S. based group since the start of COVID-19. The work performed during the four days included vegetation removal at Caneel Hill Trail, Annaberg Sugar Plantation, Upper Lind Point Trail, and sapling planting at Trunk Bay.

The group completed 220 hours of volunteer work including exotic vegetation and brush clearing of ~1.15 acres, along 1.3 miles of trail at Caneel Hill and Lind Point; removal of exotic vegetation and brush at the Annaberg Sugar Plantation on a steep hill above the Leinster Bay Trail; and planting 65 saplings at Trunk Bay. Tools used included several weed wackers, loppers, corona saws and hand clipping tools. Weed wackers would typically lead, with others following and clipping to the ground, around rocks and removing the plants/grasses off the trail. Also included are the volunteer hours by the leaders for meal planning, purchasing and preparation. Additional volunteer hours were spent by walk-up volunteers on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.

NPS provided a government-owned, 8-passenger van at no charge for transportation during the week and ConservationVIP rented a 5-person mini-van in line with their COVID-19 protocols. Both trip leaders were able to drive the vans and drive on the left side of the road. The roads on St. John are curvy and steep and the average driving speed is ~20 miles per hour. Each day the leaders transported the volunteers to and from the work sites and provided opportunities to join them on the daily market trip to purchase beverages of their choice for camp.

Our trip was at the end of the rainy season. The weather was consistently hot and humid with average daytime temperatures from 82-87 degrees. Most days had some cloud cover as well as short periods of rain fall. Nighttime temperatures ranged from 70-75 degrees. The temperature of the water was pleasant, day and night. During our week we had a full moon and several rainbows during the day, a perfect week for afternoon and nighttime swimming at Cinnamon Beach.

Compared to February 2020, the camp was improved with a bath house with two bathrooms, cold water showers, and sink and solar lighting. There was now electricity and lights above the dining area (picnic tables) and in the kitchen. The kitchen was equipped with a large refrigerator.

Sanitization of cars and meal preparation was done in line with CDC and organizational guidance.

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. Although a lot of work was done by volunteer groups and weekly walk-up volunteers since February 2020, the vegetation growth is never-ending. Being at the end of the rainy season, there are many trails and structures that need vegetation removal. The group worked on three heavily impacted areas that had not been worked on yet this season which was both exciting and rewarding. They worked in hot weather with not much cover, and, at times, on rocky and steep slopes. Vegetation to be removed is often difficult because of the type of vegetation such as encroaching grasses, vines, catch & keep (a thorny, stick-to-your clothing plant), Tan Tan, Sensiveria (also called mother-in-law tongue, an invasive species), cacti and brush. Additionally, one must watch out for wasps, such as the Jack Spaniard wasp. The removal of the vegetation is especially important as it allows for the preservation of the structures, improves viewing from the area, and improves the safety for tourists. If not maintained, the growth is rapid.

Sunday 14 November

All nine volunteers were picked up at the Cruz Bay ferry dock at 3 p.m. and the leaders drove them to camp and showed them to their tents. After a COVID-19 health screening, the volunteers settled in followed by a 5 p.m. orientation including introductions, the food plan of the week, the location, and safety protocols. At 6 p.m. the leaders served a Taco Soup with tortilla chips and a small dessert. Around 6:30 p.m. camp became dark. This year, both the kitchen and dining area had lighting and the bath house with two bathrooms and showers had light from solar panels. In addition, the volunteers used head lamps. After dinner, dishwashing, the volunteers went with the leaders to the beach to enjoy the sound of waves and to look at the stars and the moon.



Star, moon gazing and even moonlight swimming, continued to be a favorite during the week, at the beach, in the parking lot, standing or lying down on the sand and asphalt. What a view and experience especially since camp was away from lights and people.

Volunteers slept in large tents on platforms with plenty of room to stand and store their items. The kitchen area was in the center of camp also raised on a platform and space for working, storing, and serving. There were three picnic tables for dining and a separate Adirondack chair set-up around a small “tiki torch” fireplace. A bath house with two separate rooms with sink, toilet and cold-water shower were in camp. The nights were magical with the loud sounds of the forest and the crashing of waves on the shore. The group often went to the beach at night, taking walks and a swim in the ocean under the light of the moon. Around camp, the small black-tailed deer wandered around at all times of the day.

Monday 15 November

The group (including camp host Vince) met Taylor White, Trail Crew Leader and Amir (assistant) of Friends of the Virgin Islands and departed to the Caneel Hill trailhead. At the location, Taylor provided an overview of the work and available tools, a safety talk, and the volunteers were eager to get to work. Two weed wackers went ahead removing vegetation. The rest of the group followed behind using loppers and hand tools to finish the work resulting in a .45 mile cleared trail 6' wide and 8' high.



Two volunteers were asked to cut down one tree that obstructed the path. The group stopped for lunch at Margaret Hill with a beautiful view of Cruz Bay. At 1:30 p.m., the group was back at the trailhead.



They accomplished clearing ~0.45 mile of trail including ~350' elevation gain along the way.



After a well-deserved swim and/or showers and a 5:30 p.m. spaghetti dinner with salad, the team was joined by [Ital Delroy Anthony](#), a local artist, musician and medicinal plant expert from the island. While the volunteers were still eating, Ital started playing his music. After dinner Ital spent an hour with the group sharing about the local plants and their medicinal applications. Stories were told and laughter was heard. In the meantime, the sun had set, and the conversation was wrapped up. The next day, the volunteers would learn similar information from Charles at the Annaberg Sugar Plantation Garden.



Tuesday 16 November

The volunteers started the day with an educational walk led by Laurel Brannick, the Chief of Interpretation and Education for the NPS. This one-hour walk was via the Francis Bay Trail and around the salt pond. Laurel led the group on a path around wetlands and back via the boardwalk. We paused for a moment at Francis Bay and Laurel shared about the devastation of the two hurricanes, especially Irma, and how the board walk, the sand and trees on the shoreline were impacted. A lot of great work was done by paid and volunteer workers, finding and putting back 90% of the boardwalk in about twelve days. Along the way, Laurel pointed out some artifacts that had surfaced dating back to pre-Columbus days. Laurel brought binoculars for everyone, and she shared about the birds in the bay and their return after the hurricanes. The group spotted the Caribbean Elaenia, the scaly necked pigeon, the white cheeked pintail, the black necked stilt, the pearl eyed thrasher, the black footed boobie, and the king fisher.



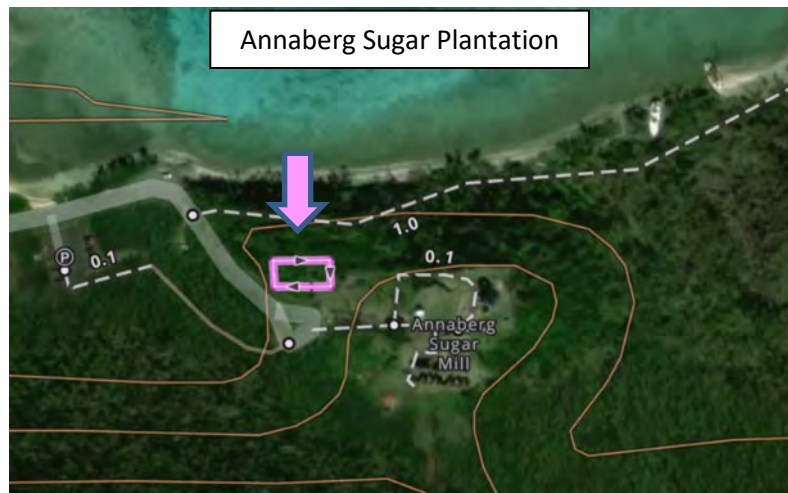
After the walk, the group drove a short distance to meet up with Taylor and to start working at the Annaberg Sugar Plantation ruins. Taylor took the group around the plantation and shared about the history. They then started working on the North side of the Sugar Mill and above the Leinster Bay Trail. The group used two weed wackers, large and small loppers as well as corona saws.



A section of 0.25 acres was cleared exposing some of the ruins previously covered by the vegetation. During lunch, one of the NPS docents, joined the group and spoke about the history of the island.



At 1:30 p.m. the volunteers finished their last tasks and then walked over to the Plantation Garden where Charles, a local islander, provided a walk-through of the garden, showed, and share about the value of several plants and allowing the volunteers to put them under clothes and hats. Each volunteer received a juicy piece of sugar cane when they left. The group departed at 2 p.m. and felt good about what they accomplished despite the heat and humidity. Visitors during the day expressed their thanks and some inquired about our organization.



After returning the volunteers to camp for their afternoon rest, the leaders went to the store to replenish for the week and included orders for the volunteers. Dinner included barbequed chicken breast, rice and beans and salad, followed by dessert.



On this night, interested volunteers were introduced to Codenames, a board game where two teams compete by each having a “spymaster” give one-word clues that can point to multiple words on the board. It is always an intriguing game and favorite, resulting in even more camaraderie and playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks. Finally, the group went to the beach to enjoy the moon and the sound of the waves.



Wednesday, 17 November

This was the rest day. The volunteers were shuttled to the NPS visitor center area, where two volunteers left the group to enjoy the day by themselves, while four volunteers met the Eco Tours guide, Matt, to hike the Lindpoint Trail to Honeymoon Beach. The leaders then took the remaining volunteers in the cars to Honeymoon Beach where they were received with open arms, settled in under the cabana “Two Palms,” and laid on beach chairs on the white sand. People enjoyed the water, the beach, and the facility including paddle boarding. After a hearty lunch of a variety of fish and chicken tacos, salad, and burgers, eight group members participated in the kayak and snorkeling trip to the bay between Turtle Bay and Caneel Bay. The group saw schools of fish, several sea turtles, flounder, and sting rays.



Eco Tours provided for all activities, food, and drinks during the day in appreciation of the work done by the volunteers on the island. It was a day well deserved for their hard work. There was much to do, to see and to enjoy and we are very much indebted to the hospitality of Eco Tours, the owner Sybille, and her dedicated and cheerful staff. The volunteers signed cards and rewarded the staff and guides before returning in the shuttle to the cars.

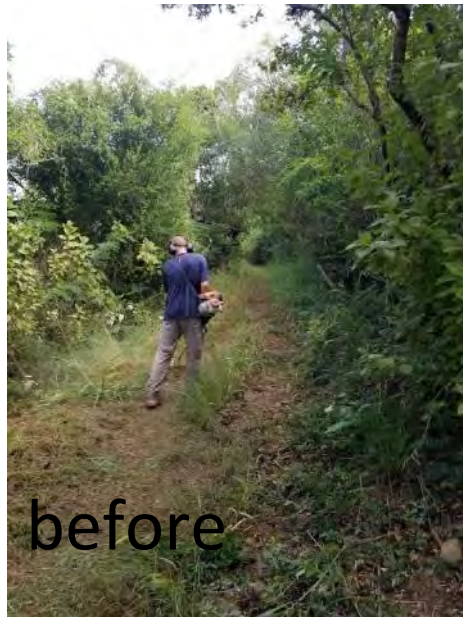


Back to camp, the team showered and rested while the leaders prepared fajitas and salad. The meal was enjoyed by all. After dinner, blueberries and cake dessert was provided and a few games of Codenames were played followed by a walk to the beach.

Thursday, 18 November

Today, the group went to work on the Upper Lind Point Trail. This is the same trail some of the volunteers took the prior day to Honeymoon Beach and some of them had mentioned the need for vegetation clearing. The group divided into smaller groups clearing thicker brush in front of the weed wackers or finishing work behind the weed wackers and clearing debris off the trail. This was also the day for walk-up volunteers and the team was joined by George, a first-time volunteer, who quickly was embraced as a member of the group.





The group worked on 0.8-mile trail, clearing vegetation 6' wide, 8' high and/or reducing stumps to ground level with loppers and hand tools. Weed wackers cleared 0.5 acres of brush. It was a very hot and humid day, and the group took breaks when needed and returned to the trailhead by 1:30 p.m.

The leaders dropped the group at camp and one leader with some volunteers went to Cruz Bay to do final purchases that would last them through the end of the week while the other leader joined the group at camp and the beach. At 4:30 p.m., Mark Gestwicki, Volunteer Program Coordinator, joined the group and brought a local prepared dinner for the team. This was a vegetarian meal including cabbage, beans, rice, and tofu and local juices called Sorrel and Passion Juice. Sorrel (the Caribbean name for hibiscus flowers) is made from the sorrel plant, a low bushy shrub with red stems and calices which comes into season toward the end of the year. For some cultures or regions, this is the favorite drink at Christmas time. It is very red and sweet tart. The volunteers introduced themselves to Mark and provided feedback and input on the volunteer activity, the leadership, and tools. The rest of

the evening consisted of conversation, games and enjoying the beach, waves, and full moon.

Friday, 19 November

Today, the group worked at Trunk Bay to plant ~65 saplings. Due to the hurricanes, many trees were damaged or disappeared impacting the shoreline, flora, and fauna. After the hurricanes, a local woman and horticulturist, Eleanor Gibney, started growing saplings to be planted across the island with the help of volunteers. Ms. Gibney joined the group with Mark Gestwicki, Taylor and Amir and she explained to the volunteers about her background and approach. She also shared that not all saplings that she is using are natives because of the erosion issue which causes loss of the natives. For now, she is using a combination of native and non-natives to preserve the native plants. The saplings that were used for today's project included Turpentine Tree, Fencing Rains, Sea grape, Buttonwood Mangrove, Bay Cedar, Lilies, Black Torch, and Nothing Nut or False Nutmeg. The volunteers grouped together and went to work, completing the task quickly and assisted with fencing around some of the plants to prevent deer browsing which increasingly is becoming an issue on the island.



The group completed the work before noon and ate on the beach overlooking the very beautiful Trunk

Bay. Some even went for a swim. The group was back in camp around noon and went to the beach, showered, and started to clean their tents and pack for departure day in the morning. At 2:45 p.m. the team departed by car via Cruz Bay to pick up pizza from Ronnie's pizza and then the leaders took them to Coral Bay on the East side of the island for a Sunset Cruise and to thank them for their hard work during the week.

After a stop along the way to look down on Coral Bay, the group arrived at the dinghy dock at 3:45 p.m. from where they could see the Mahiya ("magical"), the catamaran that would take them to sail south towards Norman Island and Privateer Bay and Ram's Head to the West.

The leaders personally treated the group with island rum and thanked them for their hard work, attitudes, and friendship. Dinner on the boat consisted of several types of pizza while enjoying the music and conversations with Captain Karl and his deck hand Amanda and each other.

We were lucky to see a beautiful sunset and full moon rise, yet another magical evening on this enchanted island.



After 2.5 hours of sailing, the group returned at camp around 7 p.m. Together, they took one last beach walk finishing with one more night of camping under a full moon and the sounds of the forest and crashing waves.

Saturday, 20 November

Today was departure day which was organized via two shuttles and ferries. The first group was shuttled at 8:15 a.m. for the 9 a.m. ferry, while the second group left by 9:15 a.m. for the 10 a.m. ferry. Goodbyes were said, emails and COVID hugs exchanged. Always bittersweet but most already knew they wanted to continue to **Travel with Purpose** and meet again one day.



Summary

The trip was successful with 220 ConservationVIP® volunteer work hours donated to the Virgin Islands National Park. We thank the Virgin Islands National Park and Laurel Brannick for her time; special thanks to the Friends of Virgin Island National Park and their team, Mark Gestwicki, Volunteer Program Coordinator, and Taylor White, Volunteer Trail Work Leader.

We are also deeply grateful for the generosity and kindness by Virgin Islands Eco tours and staff on our day off. We also thank Mr. Ital Delroy Anthony and Captain Karl and Amanda for their support and special accommodation in support of our volunteer team.

Most of all, we thank the hard working, positive and fun-loving volunteers who poured their hearts and passion into the work, each other, and everything else that was presented to them and regardless of the journey it took them to reach the island.

“Ordinary people performing extra ordinary work”

Thank You and we hope to see you soon again!