



PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
February 6 – 12, 2022



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 February 6 – 12, 2022. This was the first ConservationVIP® trip to the Virgin Islands in 2022 enabling the continued restoration and maintenance since the April 2017 (hurricanes) and the impacts of COVID-19. 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. The impacts of COVID-19 followed the impacts of the hurricanes with our November 2021 trip being the first volunteer group to resume staying at the Friends' volunteer camp.

The small, but mighty, group consisted of six volunteers and three ConservationVIP® volunteer leaders, Mark Hardgrove, 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 the addition of planting saplings along the shoreline to prevent erosion and to replace the lost coastal and mangrove trees. The work performed during the four days included vegetation removal at Leinster Bay Factory Ruins, Hermitage Plantation Ruins, Cinnamon Bay Trail, and sapling planting at Jumbie Beach and Francis Bay.

The group completed 185 hours of volunteer work, including exotic vegetation and brush clearing of ~0.5 acres around Leinster Bay Factory Ruins and Hermitage Plantation Ruins as well as along 0.8 miles of trail at Cinnamon Bay Trail; and planting 37 saplings at Jumbie Beach and Francis Bay. Tools used included several weed wackers, loppers, corona saws and hand clipping tools. Weed wackers would typically lead when clearing trails, with others following and clipping to the ground, around rocks and removing the plants/grasses off the trail. An additional 274 volunteer hours were completed by the leaders for meal planning, purchasing and preparation. Further volunteer hours, which are not included in the totals above, were worked by walk-up volunteers on Tuesday and Thursday, adding to the output as well as enhancing the volunteers' experience by getting to know some local residents.

NPS provided a government-owned, passenger van at no charge for transportation during the week and ConservationVIP rented a 7-person mini-van in line with their COVID-19 protocols. The 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 for volunteers to join them on the periodic trips to the market to purchase beverages of their choice for camp.

Our trip was at the end of the prime tourist 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 rainfall. Nighttime temperatures ranged from 70-75 degrees with periods of rainfall. The weekend leading into the trip had consistent rain as a major front moved through the area. Fortunately, the 3 inches of rain was finishing up as volunteers arrived and there was no meaningful impact to our stay or work. The temperature of the ocean water was pleasant, day and night, allowing volunteers to take full advantage of their free time right there at Cinnamon Beach.

The volunteer camp continues to enjoy a bath house with two bathrooms, cold water showers, and sink and solar lighting. It is convenient having electricity and lights above the dining area (picnic tables) and in the kitchen. The kitchen is now equipped with two large refrigerators. One is for volunteer group use (like our team) and the other is for the camp host and interns.

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

Also, the Cinnamon Bay service providers reopened just days before our arrival for the first time following the nearly complete devastation during the 2017 hurricanes. This was beneficial to our volunteers as it enabled them to access Wi-Fi in the outdoor restaurant area and to have the option to rent snorkeling and kayaking equipment on the beach if desired. The small on-site store also made it so the volunteers could purchase drinks and souvenirs right there at Cinnamon Beach, especially on days when the leaders didn't need to go into Cruz Bay to get groceries.

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 continues to be done by other volunteer groups and weekly walk-up volunteers, the vegetation growth is never-ending. The group worked on three heavily impacted areas that had not been worked on recently 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, 6 February

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. The kitchen and dining area had lighting and the bath house had light from solar panels. In addition, the volunteers used head lamps.

After dinner and dishwashing, a number of the team members played a few games of Codenames which was a great way to get to know each other better. 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 for walks at night. Around camp, the small white-tailed deer wandered around at all times of the day.



Monday, 7 February

The group met Taylor White, Trail Crew Leader and Ameir Sprauve (assistant) of Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park and departed to Jumbie Beach. At the location, Taylor provided an overview of the work and available tools, and safety reminders. The volunteers were eager to get to work. First, the group picked up trash along the beach and in the brush/trees, collecting about 5 bags of trash. Then Eleanor Gibney, arrived with saplings for the volunteers to plant. Mark Gestwicki provided further instruction and informed the volunteers that the Daily News from St Thomas was coming on site for pictures and interviews as part of an article that was being published about the improvements being made throughout the national park.

Here is a little more background about the effort to plant tree saplings on the beaches within the national park. 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 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 she is growing for planting include Turpentine Tree, Fencing Rains, Sea Grape, Buttonwood Mangrove, Bay Cedar, Lilies, Black Torch, and Nothing Nut or False Nutmeg.

Upon finishing at Jumbie Beach, the group then relocated to Francis Bay to plant more saplings. At both locations, protective barrier fence was installed around the newly planted trees to protect against deer eating their tender branches. Four varieties, including a total of 37 trees, were planted and protected: Buttonwood, Sea Grapes, Necklace Seed Pod and Black Torch.



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. Ital started the evening by singing a few traditional songs while playing his drum. Ital then 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.



Tuesday, 8 February

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. The group 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 shore birds like 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 Ameer to start working at the Leinster Bay Plantation ruins. On the hike to the worksite along the bay about three dozen sea turtles were spotted. At lunch time a reef shark was spotted in the bay. On the hike out, a stingray was seen jumping a couple feet out of the water.



The work at the ruins was rewarding and the team's efforts were magnified by five additional walk-up volunteers. The team worked diligently to remove vegetation within 10' of the structure. There was plenty of sunshine, so volunteers were reminded to stay hydrated and take breaks as needed. The work on the ruins and trail was all associated with brush. Thus, rather than using a weed wacker, large and small loppers were the tool of choice as well as corona saws.

A section of 0.2 acres was cleared exposing some of the ruins previously covered by the vegetation. There was also a terrace section that was cleared for the first time in many years.



At 1:30 p.m. the volunteers finished their last tasks and then started the hike out of the worksite enjoying the beautiful view along the way. Near the trailhead, the group happened to come across a lady in distress as waves pushed her against an underwater rock ledge while snorkeling. The leaders quickly responded and were able to get her to safety. Fortunately, she only suffered minor scrapes and bruises. She was most grateful for our help and it was meaningful to be a blessing to another in their time of need. The group then departed at 2 p.m. and felt good about what they accomplished despite the heat and humidity. On the way back to camp, the group drove the remainder of the loop around the island to enable the volunteers to get a better feel for the beauty of the complete island.



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

After dinner volunteers rested, enjoyed the beach, and some played Codenames. This time, some of the “new” players took on the role of “spymaster” which deepened their understanding and enjoyment of the game. Fun was had by all.

Wednesday, 9 February

This was the rest day. Volunteers were able to choose how they spent their free time. Some rested or participated in activities around camp, while others chose to hike the Reef Bay Trail on the other side of the island/mountain. This provided spectacular views as well as the ability to visit an ancient Tainos Tribe petroglyph site.



After returning to the volunteer camp late in the morning, the volunteers enjoyed snacks before the team went to Cruz Bay to visit the VINP Headquarters and Visitor Center. The volunteers then spent a few hours dining and shopping at their leisure while the leaders picked up some final groceries and supplies.

Then it was back to camp for rest and a chicken fajita dinner. That evening there was a Dark Sky and Star Gazing presentation by Park Ranger Mark Whitefoot held right at our Cinnamon Bay Beach. Although clouds restricted the full affect of the presentation, it was still fascinating and educational. The leaders look forward to continuing this new tradition on future trips.

Thursday, 10 February

Today, the group went to work at the Hermitage Plantation ruins after a hardy breakfast. This enabled the team to see yet another part of the island and park. Like always, Taylor started with a work overview, equipment pointers, and safety guidance for the team as well as the four walk-up volunteers.



Once again the work was demanding, yet very rewarding. Tremendous progress was made despite the heat and humidity. Approximately 0.3 acres were cleared along the ruins as well as over 100' of trail. The team worked at their own pace, had areas they could take ownership for clearing as small work teams

which was very fulfilling, and enjoyed each other's company while working and during lunch break.





The team returned to the volunteer camp and eagerly headed to the beach to cool down. Then for dinner, Tonia Lovejoy, the Executive Director for Friends of VINP joined and was treated along with the group to locally produced and prepared vegetarian meals. Tonia thanked the group for our service and our ongoing volunteer relationship. She also provided the group with an update regarding the happenings for Friends including a specific update regarding Caneel Bay and the options being considered for the reopening of the high-end resort.



The rest of the evening consisted of conversation, games and enjoying the beach.

Friday, 11 February

The group woke and went about what had become our normal ritual. Coffee and tea available starting at 6, freshly cooked breakfast at 7, and ready to go to work at 8. Today, Taylor and Ameir met the group at

the volunteer camp. Then the group caravanned to the top of Cinnamon Bay Trail on the top of the mountain on Centerline Road. But before going to work on the trail, Taylor led the group a short distance to visit plantation ruins followed by hiking to a Tainos Ball Court. It is believed that the ball court was used to bring tribes together for rituals and to also have games to nurture getting to know members from other tribes via competition and fun.

Then the team settled into the task at hand. It was very fulfilling to be able to “work our way home” on the last day. The team cleared as much of the trail as time allowed which was about 0.8 miles.



A special treat was getting to eat lunch at the Cinnamon Bay Overlook area on the trail. Previously a lovely bench made of rock had been built into the side of the mountain for resting while taking in the view. There was a certain sense of satisfaction and peace as you looked down on this awe-inspiring bay and beach that the group had been fortunate enough to call home for the last week. The mixed feelings of knowing each individual had personally and collectively made a meaningful difference through our volunteering were also flavored by knowing our time was coming to an end. Our tired and hot bodies wanted to finish working our way down the trail so our work could be done, yet it was surprisingly difficult to leave this view behind. Perhaps the group burned that view into our minds so it could be carried home as a treasured memory.



After getting back to camp around 2 p.m., the volunteers had a couple of hours to stroll the beach and trails, rest, cleanup, and be ready to depart at 4 p.m. for a celebration dinner. The original plan was to go on a boat and snorkeling outing, but the leaders received a call from the captain explaining that the high winds were causing unsafe sailing conditions and thus the outing was canceled. Although a bit disappointing, the team fully understood that safety comes first, and quickly developed an alternate plan to have dinner at Skinny Legs in Coral Bay, which was where our outing was scheduled to depart from. This way the volunteers still got to see the bays on the east side of the island, and the team was able to have a very enjoyable dinner in that setting. It was nice getting to share a meal with our new friends and celebrate the difference their hard work had made for the Virgin Islands National Park. There are these wise words “that it is in giving that we received.” That wisdom was shining in each of our faces as everyone enjoyed the evening together.

The leaders personally thanked the group for their hard work, attitudes, and friendship. Then the group returned to camp and enjoyed one more night of camping under the stars with the sounds of the forest and crashing waves.



Saturday, 12 February

Today was departure day, which was organized via two shuttles and ferries. The first group was shuttled at 9:15 a.m. for the 10 a.m. ferry, while the second group left by 11:15 a.m. for the noon ferry. Goodbyes

were said, email addresses exchanged, COVID-19 hugs employed and our leader, Mark Hardgrove, together with the other leaders facilitated a special thank you—joining in a circle and raising their hands to send their positive energies to the sky. 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 185 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, Tonia Lovejoy, Executive Director, Mark Gestwicki, Volunteer Program Coordinator, and Taylor White, Volunteer Trail Work Leader.

We also thank Mr. Ital Delroy Anthony for his 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 again soon!