

**PROJECT REPORT**  
**Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip**  
**St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands**  
**December 4 – 10, 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 December 4 – 10, 2022. This was the second ConservationVIP® trip to the Virgin Islands in 2022 enabling the continued restoration and maintenance since the 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 (FOVI) organizations to pause volunteer services and implement a recovery strategy. This was the 3<sup>rd</sup> trip since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The small but mighty group consisted of six volunteers and three ConservationVIP® volunteer leaders, Mark Hardgrove, Susan Murray, and Norman Hageman. The host was FOVI National Park with Program Director, Mark Gestwicki and Trails Manager, Taylor White. Work included trail maintenance and removal of exotic vegetation from plantation ruins and cultural landscapes. Aggressive vegetative growth quickly claims trails and cultural resources. Maintenance involves removing trees with a diameter less than six inches, grasses, and vegetation such as the catch & keep.

A lot of the hurricane recovery work has been done since 2017 and the work assigned to

volunteer groups is consistent with the past. The work locations during the four days included the Johnny Horn and Murphy Trails on Monday, Peace Hill Trail and ruins on Tuesday, Caneel Hill Trail including Caneel Hill on Thursday, and the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins on Friday.

All group members were return ConservationVIP® volunteers. They were experienced and highly motivated to support the work that was planned. A total of 226 trail maintenance hours were completed with an additional 189 hours of leader support for planning, purchasing and meal preparation. The group removed vegetation and brush on 0.5 acres on Peace Hill and the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins, and along ~2.5 miles of the Leinster Bay, Johnny Horn, Murphy, Peace Hill, Denis Bay Spur, and Caneel Hill Trails. Tools included weed eaters, loppers, corona saws and hand clippers. Additional volunteer hours and work included two walk-up and eight Liberty Cable (previously AT&T) volunteers on Peace Hill. The Cinnamon Bay Volunteer Camp Host, Vince, FOVI Trails Manager Taylor White and two Trail coordinators, Aaliyah, and Amir, added to the output with ~76 hours.

FOVI used a VINP passenger van for transportation to and from worksites and ConservationVIP® rented a 5-person SUV for added transportation needs. The trip leaders drove the SUV 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.

This trip was at the beginning of the peak tourist season in USVI. The weather was overall pleasant and not as hot and humid as some months during the year. Daytime temperatures were in the 80s and nighttime in the 70s. Most days had some cloud cover and short periods of rainfall. The temperature of the ocean water was pleasant, allowing volunteers to take advantage of their time at Cinnamon Bay. There were more waves than usual including rip tide warnings.

Volunteers sleep in large tents on raised platforms with room to stand and store items. The kitchen is in the center of camp also on a raised platform with space for working, storing, and serving. There are multiple picnic tables for dining and a separate Adirondack chair set-up around a small “tiki torch” fireplace. The nights were magical with the sounds of the forest and crashing of waves on the shore. Around camp there were often small white-tailed deer.

The volunteer camp continues to be upgraded by a group of local volunteers who set up camp before the season. This time, electric lighting was added in the bath house and above the dish washing station outside the bath house. Thick, polished cement slabs were added on the three kitchen counters to improve hygiene and prepping for cooking. Meal preparation and dish washing is done in line with back country camping and organizational guidance.

The Cinnamon Bay Beach & Campground facilities have been fully restored and upgraded following the devastation of the 2017 hurricanes. It includes a restaurant, general store, kayak and snorkel rentals, shower facilities and Wi-Fi and is in walking distance from the volunteer campground. Volunteers may use the free Wi-Fi and FOVI often organizes evening programs.

## Detailed Trip Report

The environment of St. John and VINP is tropical and ranges from very arid (desert like) along the south coast to tropical forest a short distance inland. Although there is a lot of ongoing maintenance by volunteer groups and weekly walk-up volunteers, the vegetation growth is never-ending. The group worked in hot weather with minimal cover and often on rocky and steep slopes. Vegetation to be removed is often difficult because of the type such as encroaching grasses, vines, catch & keep (a thorny, stick-to-your clothing plant), Tan Tan, Sensiveria (aka mother-in-law tongue, an invasive species), cacti and brush. Additionally, volunteers must watch out for the aggressive Jack Spaniard wasp. The removal of the vegetation allows for the preservation of the historic structures and improves viewing and safety for hikers. If not kept up the growth is rapid. As such, the work accomplishments for volunteers are rewarding.

### Sunday, 4 December

Volunteers were picked up at the Cruz Bay ferry dock at 3:30 p.m. by FOVI Trails Manager, Taylor White. Upon arrival at the volunteer camp, the leaders welcomed the volunteers and showed them to their tents to get settled in. The group met at 5:00 p.m. for an orientation including introductions, the plan of the week, the location, and safety protocols. This was followed by a delicious Taco Soup dinner with tortilla chips and dessert.

After dinner and dishwashing, the volunteers walked to the beach to watch the stars and the full moon. It was spectacular with the exceptionally high tide and large swells. On the way back to camp, the volunteers laid down in the parking lot to star gaze in silence, an interesting and fun “Zen” experience.



*Orientation at Cinnamon Bay Volunteer Campground*

### Monday, 5 December

At 8:30 a.m. the group was picked up by the FOVI NP Trails Coordinator, Aaliyah Hodge. They parked in the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins parking lot and hiked ~0.8 miles with tools on the Leinster Bay trail along the water while spotting birds, fish, and turtles. Once the Leinster Bay trail turned inland, they started their assignment with the goal to transition to the Johnny Horn

trail, the Guard House ruins, the Murphy Trail and reach the Murphy Estate House. The goal was to clear the trail 6 feet wide and 8 feet high. The experienced group spread out and quickly fell into a rhythm that allowed for quality and efficiency and fit their interests and abilities. One weed eater cleared the path, followed by loppers and saws, and followed by another weed eater to perform finishing work. Brush was discarded off the trail and tree and brush cuts were made close to trees and ground to minimize visibility to hikers. The group rapidly made progress and before lunch they reached the Danish Guardhouse ruins as well as the intersection with the Murphy Trail.



*Murphy Trail **Before, During and After** with Dave, Seetha, Aaliyah, Vince, and Susan*

Some had lunch at the Guardhouse and others at the Murphy Estate House. Both had spectacular views of the surrounding area. Volunteers reflected on the painful stories of the past and the timeframe 1840-1848 when St. John slaves attempted to cross from Leinster Bay to British Tortola where slaves had received freedom. It is rewarding and satisfying for volunteers to feel that they contribute to the maintenance of the trails to these historic and important structures and views.

After lunch, most volunteers started at the Murphy House Estate and worked backwards to catch up with the trail where they left off. The group proudly completed the entire work scope for the day and despite the hot weather. What seemed impossible at the beginning of the day, magically was completed through teamwork and hard work. It felt good to leave a “signature” on the trail and know that the hard work benefits those who come to the outdoors and learn about the island and history. Along this trail as well as later in the week, visitors thanked the volunteers and inquired about the organization.





*Lunch on Murphy Estate House; Johnny Horn cleared trail*

After a well-deserved swim and showers and a spaghetti dinner, the group 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, 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.



*Ital Delroy Anthony entertaining the volunteers in camp*

## **Tuesday, 6 December**

After a hearty breakfast, the group was picked up by Aaliyah at 8:30 a.m. to work at Peace Hill. They met up with the leadership of FOVI, Tonia Lovejoy, Executive Director, and Mark Gestwicki, Program Director, who were on location to receive a donation from the Liberty Cable organization. Liberty Cable volunteers spent the morning working on top of Peace Hill. There were also two long-time walk-up volunteers, camp host Vince, as well as Taylor, Aaliyah, and Amir of FOVI. In the morning, most of the group joined Mark Gestwicki to the Denis Bay Spur trail, a trail that is not regularly maintained but often used by locals to spend time at Denis Bay Oppenheimer Beach. The rest of the group spent time on the Peace Hill access trail and others worked on the Peace Hill hilltop.

This 7-acre tract of Peace Hill land was donated in the 1950s by the Wadsworth family to the VINP. The deed says “...it is their wish that Wadsworth’s Peace Hill be perpetually dedicated as a place where people might meditate and find inner peace, in the hope that in some way this might contribute to world peace.”

Another meaningful location for the volunteers to have the privilege to work, Peace Hill once was topped by the Christ of the Caribbean statue (1953) which for ~40 years was a St John landmark marveled at by the passengers and crews of vessels passing through the Durlow Channel. The statue was destroyed in 1995 by Hurricane Marilyn.



*FOVI leadership with volunteers on Peace Hill, map of Peace Hill and Denis Bay Spur Trail*

Lunch was at Oppenheimer Beach at the end of the Denis Bay Spur trail. Beautiful views, crashing waves and a short visit by three wild donkeys made it quite special. After lunch, the group focused on completing clearing the Peace Hill hilltop and the Peace Hill trail. In summary, ~0.4 miles of trail and 0.25 acres of grounds were cleared and ~15 catch & keep trees were cut. Tired, but satisfied, the group returned to camp reflecting on a hard day of work and the interaction with other volunteers and locals.



**Before and After** the work on Peace Hill with volunteers Dave Gorder and Dave Barger on the right



The volunteers returned to camp for rest and relaxation at Cinnamon Bay while the leaders went to the local store for food and refreshment purchases. Dinner included barbecued chicken breast, baked potatoes, quinoa, salad, and dessert. After dinner, volunteers enjoyed more beach, while some played Codenames, always a popular engagement game that is simple to set-up and explain and, most of all, fun.



### Wednesday, 7 December

Today was a rest day for volunteers to decide how to spend the day. Activities included the Cinnamon Bay Self-Guiding Trail, hiking Cinnamon Bay, Reef Bay and Petroglyph Trails including viewing the petroglyphs by likely pre-Columbian inhabitants of St. John known as the Taino.



*Seetha, Norman and Dave hiking Reef Bay trail, petroglyphs, and stargazing with Mark Whitefoot*

After lunch, the leaders shuttled the team in two groups to Cruz Bay to visit the local shops. Back at camp, more swimming and a chicken fajita dinner. At 8:15 p.m., the group joined ~15 other visitors for the Night Sky presentation by ranger Mark Whitefoot at Cinnamon Bay. Despite the full moon and clouds, Mark did a wonderful job sharing about the impact of non-natural light to wildlife, and pointing out visible planets and stars. ConservationVIP® leader, Mark Hardgrove, previously superintendent of St. John NP, thanked Mark for his passion and explained how important his work is for St. John.

### Thursday, 8 December

After breakfast, the group was picked up to work on the Caneel Hill Trail, another historic part of the island and park. The trail can be accessed from Cruz Bay, Center Line road and various spur trails. The goals were to start at Center Line road and to move swiftly clearing brush, grasses and removing the false pineapple (aka Pinguin) plants and to spend part of the afternoon clearing on Caneel Hill. Car shuttles were used so that the group did not have to hike back up the steepest section from Cruz Bay to Caneel and Margaret Hill. After a work overview, equipment pointers, and safety guidance by Taylor, the group went to work and progress was

made quickly.



*Seetha, Taylor, Chris and Dave prior to starting work on the Caneel Hill Trail*



*Before and after removing grasses, brush, and the thorny, false pineapple by Dave*

Again, the work was demanding, yet extremely rewarding. Tremendous progress was made despite the heat and humidity. Approximately 1.5 miles of trail was cleared. Three weed eaters led the way while others focused on clearing the thorny false pineapple plants. Extra effort was spent at the Margaret Hill entrance and after lunch, the goal was to do significant clearing of the Caneel Hill viewpoint to allow the stunning views of the Virgin Island archipelago. This included the difficult removal of catch & keep and tan tan trees. Some worked individually while others teamed up. The FOVI leaders continued to sweep and move the group forward to the end goal of completing the entire trail.



*Before, during, after Dave, Bob and Pam helping to clear brush, catch & keep and tan tan trees on Caneel Hill*



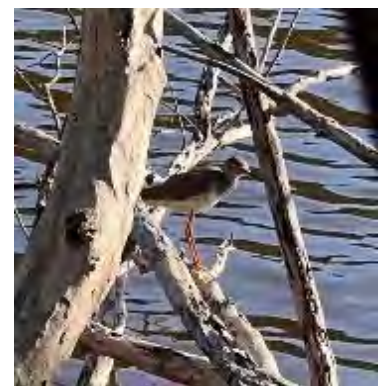
After improving the views at the 719 feet hilltop of Caneel Hill including around the Tower which was destroyed by hurricane Hugo in 1985 and rebuilt beginning in 2006, the group hiked down to Cruz Bay. Tools were left in the NPS maintenance yard and the group headed into town for ice cream and refreshments and to recharge after a hard day's work in the heat and humidity. Upon return to the volunteer camp, most headed to the beach to cool down. Dinner included chili, quinoa, chips, and toasted French bread and salad. Following dinner and dishes, Codenames was played engaging the group in fun chatter and banter and with the reality setting in that the days together were coming towards an end.



## Friday, 9 December

The volunteers started at 7:30 a.m. to participate in the Francis Bay Bird Walk led by Laurel Brannick, the retired Chief of Interpretation and Education for the NPS. This was a leisurely, mostly flat, one mile walk around the saltwater pond at Francis bay. Laurel brought binoculars for everyone and shared about the birds in the bay and their return after the hurricanes. The group spotted shore birds like the white cheeked pintail duck, the black neck stilt, the pearly eyed thrasher, the brown footed boobie, the northern parula, the gray king bird, the Zenaida dove (native to St. John), the bananaquit (aka as sugar bird and the official bird of the Virgin Islands), and two rarely seen grebes. Laurel also shared that she still has not seen the little Italian crested hummingbird since the hurricanes of 2017.

The group paused for a moment at Francis Bay and Laurel shared about the devastation of the two 2017 hurricanes, especially Irma, and how the board walk, the sand and trees on the shoreline were affected. A lot of work was done by paid and volunteer workers, finding and putting back 90% of the boardwalk in about twelve days. She also mentioned that artifacts had surfaced dating back to pre-Columbian days.



*Francis Bay saltwater pond bird walk with Laurel Brannick*

At 9:00 a.m., the group went a short distance to the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins to remove invasive species from the area near the Slave Quarter Ruins and above. Taylor outlined the work, gave a safety orientation about the plants, tools, best techniques, and potential wasp encounters. Then the group eagerly went to work with a weed eater, loppers, and hand

clippers. Most of the work was focused on removing the invasive coral vine, an aggressive and fast-growing vine from Mexico that can smother plants on which it grows. The group also had the opportunity to receive an educational tour of the ruins and to taste Johnny Cakes bread made in the original bake house over a charcoal stove. This was a welcomed break and a meaningful way to learn about the restored old sugar factory and gain insight into the history and culture of St. John during the plantation and post-emancipation eras. The group returned to camp around 1:00 pm to enjoy final beach time, start cleaning camp, pack, and meet for the 4:00 p.m. catamaran sunset tour with Captain Karl of the Mahiya.



*Before and After clearing of the invasive coral vine with Mark, Pam, and Susan*

A little before 4, the group walked to Cinnamon Bay where they met Captain Karl for a sunset sail. They were transported on a dingy from shore which was quite an adventure. The sailing was spectacular and super relaxing. Stories were shared about the week and the group celebrated new friendships and work accomplished through a week of volunteer service. Upon returning to camp after another adventurous dingy ride or swim, the group enjoyed a pizza dinner and dessert. It was another nice evening to share a meal with new friends and celebrate the difference the hard work made for VINP this week. The quote “for it is in giving that we receive” holds true for the experiences during the week; the wisdom reflected on volunteer faces as they enjoyed the evening together. Then, a final night of camping under the full moon and stars with the sounds of the forest and crashing waves.



*Run for Fun on beautiful Cinnamon Beach!*



## Saturday, 10 December

Today was departure day, which was organized via shuttles and ferries following breakfast. Arrangements were made for the group to be shuttled at 9:00 a.m. for the 9:30 a.m. ferry, while the leaders took the 9 a.m. car ferry. Goodbyes were said and Mark Hardgrove led a special thank you—joining in a circle and raising hands to send positive energies to the sky. Always bittersweet but most volunteers already knew they wanted to continue to **Travel with Purpose** and meet again one day.

## Summary

The trip was successful with 415 ConservationVIP® volunteer work hours donated to the Virgin Islands National Park. We thank the VINP and Laurel Brannick for her time; special thanks to the FOVI National Park and their team, Tonia Lovejoy, Executive Director, Mark Gestwicki, Program Director, Taylor White, Trails Manager, and Aaliyah Hodge, Trails Coordinator. We also thank Mr. Ital Delroy Anthony and Captain Karl for their ongoing support to ConservationVIP®.

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.

