



PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
February 12 – 18, 2023



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 12 – 18, 2023. This was the fifth ConservationVIP® trip to the Virgin Islands since the hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017. The hurricanes caused significant devastation to the island requiring the National Park Service (NPS) and Friends of the Virgin Islands (FOVI) organizations to pause volunteer services and implement a recovery strategy. ConservationVIP® started their first trip since the hurricanes in February 2020 based out of the Cinnamon Bay volunteer campground. Previously, the base location was Virgin Islands Environmental Resource Station (VIERS) which was no longer operational after the hurricanes.

The group consisted of seven volunteers and two ConservationVIP® volunteer leaders, Mark Hardgrove and Susan Murray. The host was FOVI 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 Murphy Estate House, L'Esperance Trail and Sieben Estate, Europa Point and Bay Spur Trails, Lameshur Bay Plantation, and the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins.

All group members were experienced and highly motivated to support the work that was planned. A total of 288 volunteer hours were completed with an additional 126 hours of leader planning and leading, purchasing and meal preparation. There were an additional 82 hours by the FOVI leaders and ~9 Tuesday/Thursday walk-up volunteers.

The group cleared a total of 1.5 acres on and around the Murphy Estate House, the Sieben Estate, Lameshur Bay and Annaberg plantations. They also cleared both sides of a total of 1.5 miles of trails including ~0.8 mile on the L'Esperance trail and 0.7 mile on the spur and connector trails to beautiful and secluded Europa Point. Tools included two weed eaters, loppers, corona saws and hand clippers.

FOVI used a 14 person VIPN passenger van for transportation to and from worksites and ConservationVIP® rented a 7-person minivan for added transportation needs. The trip leaders drove the van 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.

The weather was overall pleasant with daytime temperatures 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. Some days had 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 seating area 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. There is electric lighting in the bath house and above the dish washing station outside the bath house as well as in the kitchen and over the dining table. 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. It is in walking distance from the volunteer campground. Volunteers may use the free Wi-Fi and FOVI organizes evening programs on most evenings during the week.

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, 12 February

The leaders met the volunteers at the Cruz Bay ferry dock around 3 p.m. and shuttled them in two groups by van and local taxi to the campground. Upon arrival at the volunteer camp, the volunteers chose their tents and settled in and started exploring the area around camp and beautiful Cinnamon Beach. 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 beef and vegetarian Spaghetti dish, garlic bread and a small dessert.

After dinner and dishwashing, the volunteers continued their engagements around the “tiki torch” fire. Leader Mark Hardgrove shared his knowledge about the island, times before and after the hurricanes, and many of the locations. The group connected quickly sharing about their life adventures and travel experiences with ConservationVIP®.



*Arrival at camp / Remains of the oldest house on St. John at Cinnamon Bay
(converted into a Heritage Center & Archeology Lab and destroyed during the 2017 hurricanes)*

Monday, 13 February

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 after a safety briefing, they hiked ~0.8 miles with tools on the Leinster Bay trail along the water while exploring flora and fauna. The goal was to reach the Murphy Estate House via the Johnny Horn trail while taking a water and picture break at the Guard House ruins. In November 2022, ConservationVIP® volunteers cleared the trail up to the Murphy Estate House and it was exciting to now be able to clear the brush at the Estate House. As the group hiked, they could see the Murphy Estate House ruins on the hill above Waterlemon Cay. The small island of Waterlemon Cay once served as a place for settling disputes and matters of honor. The Danes had outlawed dueling and as a result, citizens of St. Thomas and St. John who felt the need to engage in this activity would go to Tortola where it was legal. But after 1800, when it was also prohibited there, this small island became the new “field of honor.”



After a group picture and guidance by Aaliyah, the group used two weed eaters, loppers, saws, and hand clippers and spread out. The weed eaters started on the top first while others worked below in the chambers or around the structure.

Guidance by FOVI Trails Coordinator Aaliyah Hodge

It was a hot date with a light breeze. By lunch, significant progress was made and eventually all the work on top and inside was done with progress even on the right side of the structure! The group enjoyed spectacular views while eating lunch. They reflected on the painful stories during the 1840-1848 timeframe when St. John slaves attempted to cross from Leinster Bay to British Tortola where slaves had received freedom. Hot, sweaty but satisfied to be able to make a difference to preserve the past, the group started on their descent carrying their tools and looking forward to an afternoon swim in Cinnamon Bay. They hiked 2.4 miles round trip with tools including a short 300 feet ascend to the Estate House. They cleared and improved ~0.5 acres.



Leinster Bay trail from Annaberg to Murphy House Estate via Johnny Horn Trail

Trail



*Weed eater preparations by Tim and Robert W. and **before and after** on top of Murphy Estate House grounds*



*Murphy Estate House south side **before and after** with Elaine and Susan W.*



*Murphy Estate House room **before and after** with Robert R.*



Cleared Murphy Estate House grounds and view of Leinster Bay and hiking trail

At 5:30 p.m., the volunteers attended the Turtle Presentation hosted by FOVI. The group enjoyed the information and asked many questions. Dinner included barbequed chicken and tofu, a delicious large baked potato with all the toppings, and salad. After dinner, some of the volunteers caught up on their communication at home at the Cinnamon Bay restaurant while others sat and continued their engagement. Everyone enjoyed an early night and great rest.

Tuesday, 14 February

After a hearty breakfast, the group was picked up by Aaliyah at 8:30 a.m. to work on the L'Esperance Trail. Tuesdays and Thursdays are also volunteer walk-up days with local, returning volunteers and often guests who stay at the Cinnamon Beach campground. The group also met Taylor White, FOVI trails manager, who helped with transporting volunteers to the trailhead. The group started the hike in while enjoying conversations with the walk-up volunteers. Initially, the hike is a descend on the western side of the Fish Bay Valley in a moist forest environment where one will pass through stands of genip, guava berry, turpentine, bay rum and mango trees. They also took a short spur trail to visit the L'Esperance Ruins. This old estate contains ruins of the original horse mill, a storage building, an estate house and a sugar factory. In 1830, the plantation stopped its sugar production operation and became a cattle and provision growing farm. Records from 1875 report the L'Esperance estate to have been abandoned.

The group continued on their way and the environment now gets moister and denser. The trail crosses the Fish Bay Gut and turns east where one will pass through an area dominated by bromeliads, pinguins and anthuriums. As it winds around to a southern exposure, the group experienced drier areas and the flora changed dramatically from forest to scrub. Here, wild

tamarind, thorny cassia trees, catch-and-keep and maran bush became the dominant species of plants because the cattle ate almost everything else.

At ~0.3 miles in, the two weed eaters started their work and teamed with some volunteers to ensure the brush was cleared and cut to the ground. The rest of the group kept on going and eventually took the first path off to the right leading to the ruins of the old Sieben Estate. This estate was started by Johan von Sieben in 1721. The plantation covered more than 150 acres including the sugar factory, the rum still, the estate house and other structures. There were reported to be two cannons with one still remaining somewhere in the thick bush. Some volunteers worked on a very thick brush section to uncover a ruin wall. This was difficult work removing catch-and-keep, tan tan, and other brush but quite rewarding in the end. Other volunteers went with Aaliyah down a trail towards Fish Bay while clearing, including some of the thorny wild pineapple. The entire group met for lunch at the Sieben estate and enjoyed some of the wild pineapple fruit some of the volunteers had brought back. What a treat.



L'Esperance Trail *before and after* by Tim and Robert W



Sieben Estate Ruin *before and after* with Deepa and Robert R



Sieben Estate uncovering a structure wall and brush with Susan W and walk-up volunteer

Hiking 2.2 miles roundtrip, clearing trail on both sides about 0.8 miles and 0.3 acres on Sieben estate.

The late afternoon was spent lounging at the beach while the leaders prepped the evening meal including a hearty beef and vegetarian chili. The entire group attended the 5:30 p.m. presentation by Ital Delroy Anthony who had a large audience and played drums and sang, shared about the flora and medicinal uses and told stories. It was quite special, and everyone thoroughly enjoyed it. Back at camp, the group enjoyed dinner followed by a special and surprise birthday cake and wine celebration and an introduction to the game of Codenames.



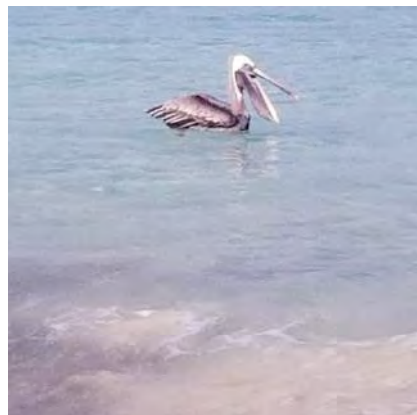
Evening entertainment with Ital Delroy and a Codenames game

Wednesday, 15 February

Today was a rest day. After an apple pancake breakfast and gathering volunteer input the day before, the entire group was shuttled to Maho Bay for snorkeling. They had rented snorkel gear and because of the early arrival, they were able to find many species including turtles feeding on the sea grass very close to the beach. It was a gorgeous day with some clouds moving in. Everyone went in the water and some played frisbee. Pelicans also joined the scene fishing for their meals. The volunteers were then shuttled back to camp for showers and for a visit to the visitor center and FOVI store. Leaders purchased groceries and eventually the group met up and shuttled back to camp. Dinner included chicken and vegetarian Fajitas and dessert. At

8:00 p.m. the group walked to the beach where Mark, the ranger, was set-up for Stargazing. Unfortunately, clouds had moved in as well as some rain. Some volunteers put on their rain jackets and participated in the presentation by Mark who shared about light pollution and the impact on the turtles and applicable info about the sky, stars and planets.

Back at camp, the group enjoyed drinks and more conversations and one of our talented singing volunteers led the group singing John Kanaka. This was a “long haul” chantey, that was used at the halyards for hosting up sails. Many Hawaiians worked aboard the ships in the Pacific renowned for their excellent seamanship. English-speaking sailors often had difficulty pronouncing their names and to make it easier they called them “Kanaka” which means Hawaiian man. The lyrics “tu lai-e” are also Hawaiian and remnants of the chantey singing tradition of combining the music and language of different seafaring cultures. Later on in the week, we were blessed with some more of Robert’s singing talents.



Fun in the Sun and Water at Maho Bay on the rest day

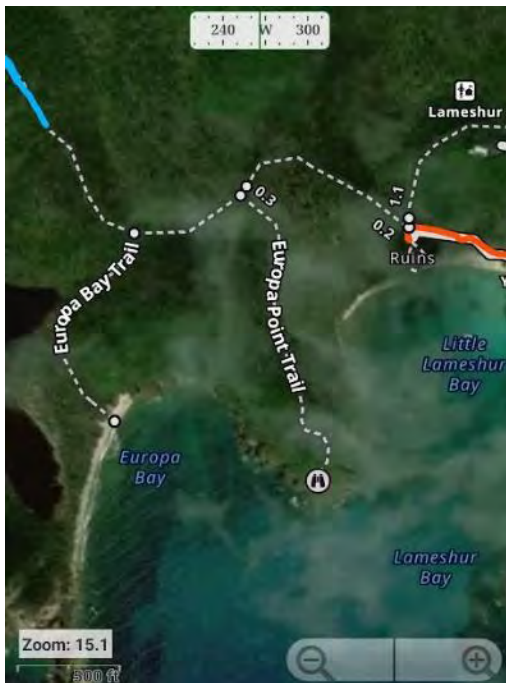


Chicken and vegetarian Fajita dinner / Robert W. leading the John Kanaka naka chantey with the group

Thursday, 16 February

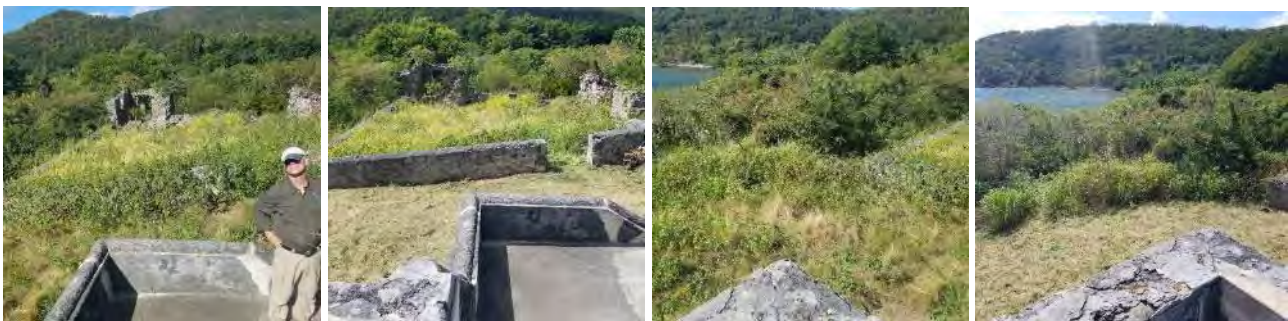
After breakfast, Aaliyah picked up the group including some walk-up volunteers and the plan for the day was to drive to the Lameshur Bay Plantation area via the Lameshur Bay Trail. On the

non-paved route on the way to the area, the group made a stop at VIERS which, as noted earlier in the report, became nonoperational as a result of the 2017 hurricanes. As the group toured the area, Mark Hardgrove shared about the way the volunteers operated from this area prior to 2017. He also shared about the [Tektite](#) Project of 1969 which was a cooperative effort by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Navy, NASA and the General Electric Co. The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects on human beings of living and working underwater for prolonged periods of time. The name Tektite originates from a glassy meteorite that can be found on the sea bottom. Shortly before one arrives at VIERS the access to Tektite is on the left of the unpaved road.



After VIERS, some walked the short walk to the Lameshur Bay Plantation where everyone picked up the tools and proceeded to work the two spur trails towards Europa point starting from the Reef Bay Trail. The group split in two with a weed eater on each trail and by lunch the work was completed including taking down a few small trees that covered the trail. Not yet satisfied, the group asked if they could work on the growth they had seen on the Lameshur Bay Plantation. Quickly and efficiently the work started including weed eaters, loppers, and hand clippers. Within two hours, a wall ruin to the cemetery was exposed as well as other areas around the ground and on top of structures including removing the aggressive catch-and-keep. Especially because the work was unplanned it was very motivating for the group to see the progress they made. Several visitors came to this area and everyone was proud that it was now much better to experience the history and views. During the week, many visitors thanked the volunteers for their work and inquired about ConservationVIP®. Information was shared and ConservationVIP® cards were handed out. We thank our volunteers for their enthusiasm in spreading the positive feedback about the organization so that ongoing work can be done on the island.

Trail work on ~0.7 mile of trail and 0.34 acres cleared.



Before and after exposing the ruin wall; before and after clearing with weed eaters



Before and after Lameshur Bay Plantation



Next, the group departed, and shortly after leaving the paved road, they stopped at Ital Delroy Anthony's Native Art & Crafts shop. After drinking some cold refreshments, the group continued to camp. Beach, swimming, lounging and showers were taken and at 5:30 p.m., the group joined another FOVI speaker, this time about the Coral Reefs. Upon return to camp, the leaders had prepared a hearty soup with salad and dessert. After dinner, Mark Hardgrove led a constructive



feedback session for the leaders to intake feedback, recommendations and thoughts about the week. The evening included sitting around the "tiki torch" and sharing stories.

Friday, 17 February

Today was an early day. The group left camp at 7:15 a.m. to meet Laurel Brannick, the retired Chief of Interpretation and Education for the NPS, and other visitors for a morning bird walk around Francis Bay. It was a beautiful morning, and the walk 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 recovery is slow and gradual and even now, 5 years later, many bird species have not yet returned. During this trip the group spotted various birds including the native white cheeked pintail duck (with orange beak), the black-faced grass quit (native to the Caribbean), the black neck stilt, the brown footed boobie, the gray king bird, the magnificent frigatebird, the banana quit sugar bird (official bird of the Virgin Islands), the white egret and even a juvenile blue heron.

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, black-faced grass quit and magnificent frigatebird

At 9:00 a.m., the group drove a short distance to the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins to remove invasive species from the area near the Slave Quarter Ruins and above. Mark Hardgrove led the group up the trail to the top and provided the work scope and as always, the group started working with the two weed eaters, loppers and clippers. Taylor joined shortly and provided permission for volunteers to work within or on top of the structures where brush and grasses were removed. This included the windmill and the dungeon. Many wasps were in the area and the volunteers took great care in preventing any issues. Once the top was cleared, the two weed eaters, Tim and Robert went down to clear grasses closer to the entrance and the slave structure while others removed coral vine, an aggressive and fast-growing vine from Mexico that can smother plants on which it grows. During the morning, while taking needed water and snack breaks, the group, again, completed a great amount of work (~0.4 acres).



***Before and after** clearing windmill and Sugar cane boiling pot, cooling and drainage area*



Before and after weed eaters and removal of coral vine slave quarters area

Around 11:30 a.m., two local interpreters sat with the group around a picnic table and shared about the history while the volunteers ate lunch. As always, the group was very engaged and interested to hear about the history of the island. At 12:30 p.m., the group departed for camp. They had several hours for swimming, lounging, showering and packing. At 3:15 p.m. they departed in two cars to Coral Bay for a 4:00 p.m. sunset cruise with Captain Karl and Amanda on the Mahiya.



The group met Captain Karl at the Coral Bay dingy dock. They could see the beautiful Mahiya and soon Captain Karl came with the dingy and transported the volunteers to the Mahiya where they also met his assistant Amanda. The sailing was spectacular and super relaxing. Captain Karl sailed from Coral Harbor around Harbor Point to Hurricane Hole. Here we sailed towards Borck Creek and then turned, sailing along Princess Bay, Otter Creek and Water Creek which are part of the Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument. Our host presented a small rum drink toast in wooden cups and thanked the volunteers for their hard work. Next, the sun was setting and the coloring with the clouds was beautiful. As we entered Coral Bay, our talented volunteer, Robert, led the group in singing Drunken Sailor, an Irish folk song traditionally sung onboard sailing ships as early as the 1830s.



A well-deserved relaxing catamaran sunset cruise with Captain Karl and Amanda

Back at the dock, the group walked to Skinny Legs where they enjoyed Hamburger and Mahi Mahi sandwiches. Some went t-shirt shopping, and eventually the leaders shuttled the group back to camp where they arrived between 9 and 10 p.m.

Saturday, 18 February

Today was departure day. After breakfast, the first group departed at 7:15 a.m. with the car ferry to St. Thomas. Others took shuttles for later flights or for additional vacation on the island. 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 and each other. New friendships, new stories, and conservation work accomplishments in a beautiful location.

Summary

The trip was successful with 414 ConservationVIP® volunteer work hours donated to the VINP. We thank the VIPN and special thanks to the FOVI and their team, Tonia Lovejoy, Executive Director, Mark Gestwicki, Program Director, Taylor White, Trails Manager, and Aaliyah Hodge, Trails Coordinator. We also thank Laurel Brannick, Mr. Ital Delroy Anthony and Captain Karl and Amanda for their ongoing support to ConservationVIP®.

Most of all, we thank our February 2023 volunteer group. They enthusiastically participated in all the events and activities and quickly engaged and partnered with each other. Our volunteers are special and ConservationVIP® is grateful for their work and participation. We hope to see you soon again.

“Ordinary people performing extra ordinary volunteer work.”

