



**PROJECT REPORT**  
**Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip**  
**St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands**  
**November 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 November 12 – 18, 2023. This was the sixth 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 eight 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 landscapes. Aggressive vegetative growth quickly claims trails and cultural resources. Maintenance involves removing trees with a diameter less than six inches, wild pineapple, grasses, and vegetation such as the catch & keep, tan-tan, and Christmas bush.

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 Caneel Hill, Reef Bay Trail, Cinnamon Beach, and the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins.

All group members were experienced and highly motivated to support the work that was planned. A total of 304 volunteer hours were spent on work and cultural orientation with an additional 144 hours of planning, leading, purchasing and meal preparation. There were an additional 100 hours spent by the supporting FOVI leaders and Tuesday/Thursday walk-up volunteers.

The group cleared along both sides of ~2 miles on the Caneel Hill and Reef Bay trails. They also cleared vegetation and overgrowth on ~2 acres on the Annaberg Sugar plantation. Overall, they hiked 4.5 miles with a total of 1300' elevation gain including getting to and from the work locations. Some sections were more difficult than others with wet rock and roots, rock tripping hazards and steep elevation gains. They planted 33 native plants along Cinnamon Beach to prevent erosion by digging holes, installing fence posts and fence and watering. Tools included weed eaters, loppers, corona saws and hand clippers.

FOVI used a 10-person VIPN passenger van for transportation to and from worksites and ConservationVIP® rented two 5-person 4x4 Jeeps for added seating and educational excursions. 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 quite hot and humid with daytime temperatures in the 80s and nighttime in the 70s. Most days had some cloud cover while the nights had periods of rainfall. The temperature of the ocean water was pleasant and there was not much wind, allowing volunteers to take advantage of their time at Cinnamon Bay. On the last workday and day of departure there were rip tide warnings and increased windy conditions.

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 by the leaders and dish washing by the volunteers 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, snack bar, shower facilities and Wi-Fi. It is within walking distance of 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), wild pineapple, Christmas bush, 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. Local hikers and visitors frequently thank the volunteers for their hard work on the trails.

## Sunday, 12 November

The leaders met the volunteers at the campground and some at the Cruz Bay ferry dock around 3 p.m. 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, history of the island, hurricane destruction, 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. The group also met Vince, the camp host who would be working with them for most of the week.

After dinner and dishwashing, the volunteers continued their engagements and then went for a nighttime beach walk. The stars were quite visible. On the way back to the campground, some volunteers participated in the traditional parking lot "Zen and watching the stars" activity. Everyone was tired from their travels and turned in early enjoying the beautiful sounds of the fauna and the rainfall in the night.





*Volunteer Camp tent and 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 November

At 8:30 a.m. the group was picked up by the FOVI NP Trails Manager, Taylor White. They first drove to the FOVI tools container and the FOVI Plant Nursery and Learning Lab where Taylor provided an overview of the plants in the nursery and their purpose.



They then loaded tools and drove to the NPS maintenance lot in Cruz Bay. A tool safety briefing was conducted and then the team headed up the Caneel Hill trail and started working immediately at the beginning of the trail.



The goal for the day was to clear the trail 6' wide and 8' high and make it to the junction with the trail leading to North Shore Road. The group divided into smaller groups. Some led the way while a weed eater followed, and some followed behind the weed eater to finish the trail. The work is detailed and tedious to minimize trail clearing visibility or tripping hazards by cutting down to the ground. Saws were used to remove small, overhanging trees. Loppers were used to remove Tan Tan, Christmas Bush and the thorny Catch-

and-Keep as well as the large thorny wild Pineapple plants. The group took lunch on the trail close to the junction. After lunch, they reached the junction ahead of schedule and started working on the trail towards the road. The day was finished by a weed eater and a brusher making their way down to the North Shore road, while the rest of the group hiked back to the original trailhead. The group did a great job and Taylor was pleased with the result of clearing the entire loop. They cleared along both sides of 0.6 mile of trail. The total ascend was 324' and at times the trail was steep, rocky, and slippery due to recent rains.

Hot, sweaty but satisfied, the group returned with their tools to the NPS maintenance lot. They then rode with Taylor to pick up the remainder of the group on the North Shore Road and went to camp for a well-deserved swim in Cinnamon Bay. The leaders drove a separate car to purchase fresh groceries and refreshments.



*Before and After on the Caneel Hill Trail, opening the trail by removing overhanging small trees and brush*





*Wild Pineapple attack and removal*



*Removing old, dead tree trunks to prevent trail hazards*





*Before, during, and after on the Caneel Hill Trail*

At 5:30 p.m., the volunteers attended the USVI Turtle Presentation hosted by FOVI. Dinner included chicken and tofu, Spanish saffron rice, Jamaica Jerkey bowl for the vegans, and a healthy salad followed by a small desert.

After dinner, the group enjoyed talking with each other and sharing life and trip experiences. Mark 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. The trailhead to Tektite is on the left of the unpaved road towards the 2017 hurricane-destroyed Virgin Islands Environment Research Station (VIERS) location. The night was beautiful again with the sounds of the forest and a refreshing rainfall.

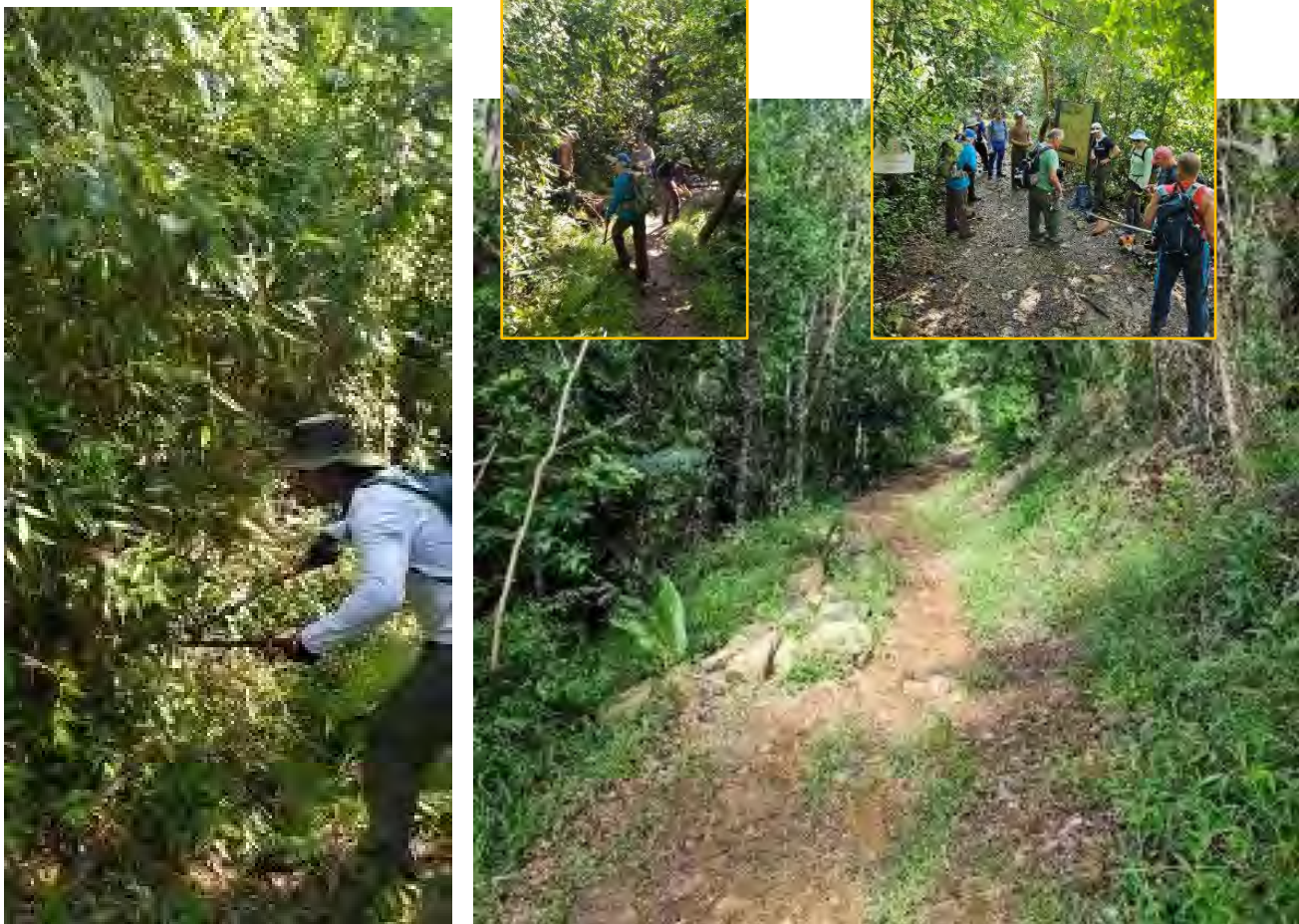
## Tuesday, 14 November

After a hearty breakfast, the group was picked up by Taylor at 8:30 a.m. to work on the Reef Bay Trail. Tuesdays and Thursdays are also volunteer walk-up days with locals, returning volunteers and often guests who stay at the Cinnamon Bay campground. This is one of the most popular trails on the island and visited by many. The trail descends through a shady and



moist forest. Along the way, Taylor provided information, stories and legends about the flora and the ruins that we passed. We were lucky to have her on the trail with us telling the stories and leading the way.

The tools included weed eaters, one used by a walk-up volunteer, Steve. The other weed eater was used by our volunteers as well as Vince, the volunteer campground host. One weed eater went ahead, followed by a brusher. There were several spots that needed extra attention which the rest of the group worked on. The goal was to reach the side trail to the petroglyphs by lunch. By noon, everyone had reached the beautiful petroglyphs location, and they enjoyed the views while eating lunch. Some explored the rocks and Taylor shared information about the location and petroglyphs. The waterfall was running due to the rains from the season. After lunch, the group headed back while doing some minor lopping. It was another hot and humid day, and the way back was long and steep, about 800' elevation gain. Tired but super satisfied about being able to help FOVI clear ~1.5 mile of this heavily used trail at the start of the season.



*Reef Bay trail*





*Reef Bay trail and welcome break while Taylor of FOVI shares about the Kapok tree*

The late afternoon was spent lounging at the beach and taking care of sore muscles while the leaders prepped the evening meal including a hearty beef and vegetarian chili, bread, and salad. The entire group attended the 5:30 p.m. presentation by Ital Delroy Anthony who 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 and talked about the accomplishments for the day. Most had rented their snorkel gear for the rest day at Maho Bay, and everyone was looking forward to some rest and relaxation.



*Evening entertainment with Ital Delroy with music, arts and medicinal plant uses*

## Wednesday, 15 November

Today was the rest day. After an apple pancake breakfast, the entire group went to Maho Bay for snorkeling. They arrived around 9:00 a.m. and early enough to find many species including turtles feeding on the sea grass very close to the beach. Some went along the rocks which provided a great display of colorful fish. It was a gorgeous day with some clouds moving in. Everyone went in the water, lounged and talked or took a stroll to the small store and rental area. Pelicans also joined the scene fishing for their meals. Midday, everyone returned to camp for some more snorkeling, beach time or showers.



*Beautiful Maho Bay – location for the group's rest day*

Due to the forecasted winds on Friday, the leaders arranged for the Catamaran trip on the rest day. The group left at 3 p.m. They stopped at the Coral Bay overlook point for a few pictures. At the dingy dock, they were shuttled with the “uber” to the beautiful Mahiya where they met Captain Karl. The sailing was spectacular and super relaxing. Captain Karl, always a great host, provided the group with his insights, safety briefing and overview of what to expect. This was followed by a traditional island rum/juice toast while Mark Hardgrove introduced and thanked Captain Karl, followed by Captain Karl's thank you to the volunteers. The waters were calm and most of the volunteers made it to the trampolines in the front of the boat enjoying the scenery, sunset, and each other's company.





*Group picture on the dingy dock in Coral Bay and “uber” service to the Mahiya*



*Well deserved relaxation on the beautiful Mahiya with Captain Karl departing from Coral Bay*

Back at the dock, the group walked to Skinny Legs restaurant where they enjoyed burgers and Mahi Mahi sandwiches. Some went t-shirt shopping, did the hula hoop dance, and eventually the leaders shuttled the group back to camp where they arrived around 9 p.m.

### Thursday, 16 November

After breakfast, Taylor met the group. The plan for the day was planting native plants to help with erosion prevention. This is always a favorite activity, partially because the group gets to meet [Eleanor Gibney](#) who is an expert on indigenous and cultivated plants and shares about the importance of the project and the volunteers' assistance. Taylor took half of the group to the trailer to pick up the tools and materials while the other half walked to the Cinnamon Beach location to unload the truck once it arrived. This included fencing, fence posts and shovels. Nine



walk-up volunteers also joined including five Iowa State University interns. In the meantime, Mark Gestwicki and Eleanor Gibney arrived and they provided an overview on the topic of beach erosion especially since the 2017 hurricanes and preventative actions. Next, the volunteers helped move the plants from the truck and placed them in locations as directed by Eleanor. Mark Gestwicki demonstrated how to plant and put in fencing. While there were 24 volunteers and just 33 plants, there were still plenty of assignments for everyone including digging the holes, planting the trees, ensuring good soil stability, preparing fencing, inputting the fence posts and the fences. Next, some went to fill large water containers and transported them with the truck to the beach where others filled buckets to water the newly planted trees as well as some planted previously. Early afternoon, the groups completed their work, loaded the truck with the tools and buckets and returned to camp for lunch.



*Learning, planting, fencing, watering of three native species on "our" Cinnamon Beach*





*Cinnamon Beach with the planted 33 native species in the background*

After an early, 4:00 p.m., Fajita dinner, the group departed around 5:30 p.m. to Miss Lucy's, a true St. John destination overlooking the emerald waters of Friss Bay and the Caribbean sea where local, talented artists display their art and join in the open mic singalong. There are views of Leduck, Flanagan, Pelican, Peter, Norman Island and British Tortola. The restaurant is family owned and the concept was born in the 1960s when Lucy A. Matthias-Smith-Prince known to her family as 'Mama Lucy', started out on the bayside preparing and serving Fish, Soupe, Sugar Cakes, and brick oven baked breads and tarts. She always dreamed of extending her skills beyond the bay, and with the family's help, they built a family compound for hosting gatherings and sharing the beauty of the location with St. John locals & visitors. To this day it is family owned and run.

This was the first night of the season and the group was eager to see the art that Ital Delroy and other artists displayed. The local talent was amazing, singing songs and playing instruments. It was a wonderful experience to be part of this and alongside the crashing waves. Our volunteer, Dave, shared his singing talent by singing John Denver's Country Road while cheered on by his team. A wonderful end to the day and local experience and education not to be missed.



*A true St. John destination - Miss Lucy's in Coral Bay*

## Friday, 17 November

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 quiet morning with some wind, and it 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, almost 6 years later, some bird species have not yet returned. She does, however, see improvement and progress. For example, the Antillean crested hummingbird is now spotted much more frequently. During this trip, Laurel also spotted the endangered, white-tipped pintail and the coot. Other sightings included boobies, yellow legs, the magnificent frigatebird, the black-crowned night heron and the green throated Caribbean hummingbird.

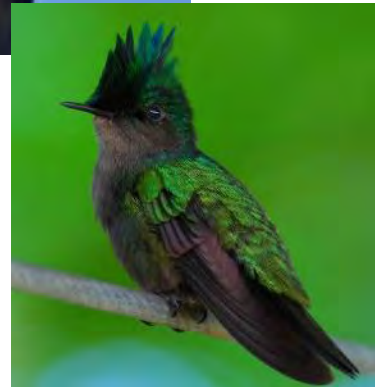
The group paused for a moment at Francis Bay and looked out over the water for more bird spotting. The two 2017 hurricanes, especially Irma, had destroyed the boardwalk, the sand, and trees on the shoreline. A lot of work was done by paid and volunteer workers, finding and putting back 90% of the boardwalk in about twelve days. Also, because of the hurricanes,



artifacts surfaced dating back to pre-Columbian days.



*Francis Bay  
saltwater pond  
bird walk with  
Laurel Brannick,  
Antillean crested  
hummingbird and  
frigate bird*



At 9:00 a.m., the group drove a short distance to the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins to start the work and to remove invasive species from the area. The group started near the mill and worked with weed eaters, loppers, and clippers. There was a lot of work to be done around and inside the structures and our volunteers had permission to go inside. Some worked on top of the dungeon, inside the mill, and the boiling chambers. Some of the work was tedious and detailed. There were many wasps in the area and the volunteers took great care in preventing issues while sprays were used to destroy the nests. Once the top was cleared, the weed eaters went down to clear grasses closer to the entrance and the slave structure while others removed coral vine, an aggressive and very fast-growing vine from Mexico that can smother plants on which it grows.



***Before and after*** uncovering the steps near the dungeon and towards the sugar cane plantation





*Weed eaters in action around the mill*



*Before, during, and after clearing inside the mill*



*Before and after removal of brush/grasses above the dungeon*





***Before and after “carpeting” the coral vine from the hill side towards the slave quarters***

The group had lunch at the two picnic tables near the Mill. It continued to be quite windy which was very refreshing. After lunch, the group continued clearing the area and small details of growing brush outside of the structures. They completed their work at 1:00 p.m. and after gathering tools and loading the truck, the leaders thanked Taylor for hosting and leading our group for the week. They provided her with the latest ConservationVIP hat and handwritten thank you notes from the volunteers. They then departed to camp where the volunteers enjoyed their last visit to beautiful Cinnamon Bay. The meal for the evening was “all you can eat” including a chicken chili on Spanish and white rice and followed by a pineapple yoghurt desert. The evening was free and some of the volunteers participated in a few fun games of Codenames.

## 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, followed by a departure at 8:15 a.m. to the second car barge. It was windy and the water was choppy. 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 448 ConservationVIP® volunteer work hours donated to the VINP. We thank VIPN and special thanks to the FOVI and their team, Tonia Lovejoy, Executive Director, Mark Gestwicki, Program Director, and Taylor White, Trails Manager. We also thank Laurel Brannick, Mr. Ital Delroy Anthony, and Captain Karl for their ongoing support to ConservationVIP®.

Most of all, we thank our November 2023 volunteer group. They enthusiastically participated in all events and activities and quickly engaged and partnered with each other. Our volunteers are always special and ConservationVIP® is grateful for their work and positive participation. New friendships and camaraderie and everyone looked forward to seeing each other again soon.

**“Ordinary people performing extra ordinary work.”**

