



PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
February 18 – 24, 2024



Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully conducted a volunteer trip to the Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands, from February 18-24, 2024. This marked the seventh ConservationVIP® trip to the Virgin Islands since the devastating hurricanes Irma and Maria struck in September 2017. The impact of these hurricanes necessitated the National Park Service (NPS) and Friends of the Virgin Islands (FOVI) organizations to temporarily suspend volunteer services and develop a comprehensive recovery strategy.

In February 2020, ConservationVIP® resumed their volunteer trips in the area, establishing a base at the Cinnamon Bay volunteer campground due to the unavailability of the previous base location, Virgin Islands Environmental Resource Station (VIERS), which was rendered inoperable by the hurricanes. This trip served as a testament to the resilience and dedication of both ConservationVIP® and the VINP community in overcoming the challenges posed by the natural disasters and continuing their vital conservation efforts.

The volunteer group included nine dedicated volunteers along with two experienced ConservationVIP® leaders, Mark Hardgrove and Susan Murray. The trip was hosted by FOVI, led by Program Director Mark Gestwicki and Program Manager Taylor White. Frank Olivieri-Barton took charge of day-to-day trail work, overseeing tasks such as trail maintenance and the removal of invasive vegetation from plantation ruins and surrounding landscapes. Given the rapid encroachment of aggressive vegetative growth on trails and cultural sites, regular maintenance is crucial. This involves clearing trees with a diameter less than six inches, removing wild pineapple, grasses, and other vegetation like catch & keep, tan-tan, and Christmas bush. During this trip, under Frank's guidance, the group also focused on enhancing drainage along the Brown Bay trail.

Significant progress has been made in hurricane recovery efforts since 2017, and the assigned tasks for volunteer groups aligned with previous initiatives. Over the course of four days, the work locations included Lower Estate Leinster Bay Ruins, Peace Hill, Brown Bay Trail, and the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins. The dedication and professionalism demonstrated by the group throughout their efforts contributed to the ongoing recovery and preservation of these remarkable sites.

All group members possessed extensive experience and a strong commitment to supporting the planned work. A total of 326 volunteer hours were dedicated to work and cultural orientation, alongside an additional 169 hours for pre- and post-trip planning, leadership, procurement, and meal preparation. Additionally, the supporting FOVI leader and Tuesday/Thursday walk-up volunteers contributed an extra 64 hours.

The group accomplished the clearance of vegetation and overgrowth at part of the Lower Estate Leinster Bay Ruins, on top of Peace Hill, alongside the Brown Bay trail, and on various sections of the large Annaberg Sugar plantation. The trail clearing included both sides and often low-to-the-ground hard to remove vegetation. At the Brown Bay trail, starting at the saddle down, they improved the functionality of seven rock drainages to improve waterflow. At Peace Hill, at the end of the day, the group readily cooperated in transporting a notable load of forty twelve-foot-long fence posts, weighing approximately twelve pounds each. Tools included a weed eater, loppers, clippers, handsaws and pick mattocks. Exemplifying unwavering commitment and professionalism, the group successfully executed the project of vegetation removal of nearly one acre, ¾ mile of trail and significant improvement of seven rock drainages.

FOVI provided a passenger van accompanied by a skilled driver to facilitate transportation to and from the designated worksites. In addition, ConservationVIP® secured the rental of both a 7 and 5 passenger car, to provide ample seating capacity and to enhance educational excursions. The responsibility of driving the van, adhering to the left-hand side of the road, was assumed by the appointed trip leaders. The road conditions on St. John are characterized by curvy roads and steep gradients, requiring an average driving speed of approximately 20 miles per hour. Donkeys and goats traverse the trail frequently, often appearing unexpectedly.

The weather throughout the trip was hot and humid, with daytime temperatures in the 80s and nighttime temperatures in the 70s. Rainfall was minimal during the duration of the trip. The ocean water was pleasant, and the absence of strong winds allowed volunteers to make the most of their time at Cinnamon Bay.

Volunteers were accommodated in spacious tents with raised platforms that offered standing room and storage space. The camp's kitchen, also situated on a raised platform, provided sufficient working, storage, and serving space. Dining was facilitated by several picnic tables. The nights at the camp were charming, with the sounds of the forest and waves crashing on the shore. It was common to encounter small white-tailed deer in the area.

The volunteer camp receives regular upgrades from a dedicated group of local volunteers who prepare it before each season. Electric lighting is now available in the bathhouse, outdoor dishwashing station, kitchen, and dining area. The leaders adhere to backcountry camping guidelines and the organization's directives for meal preparation and dishwashing.

Following the devastation caused by the 2017 hurricanes, the Cinnamon Bay Beach & Campground facilities have been fully restored and improved. The amenities now include a restaurant, general store, kayak and snorkel rentals, snack bar, shower facilities, and Wi-Fi access. The campground is conveniently located within walking distance of the volunteer camp. Volunteers have the option to use the provided Wi-Fi, and FOVI organizes evening programs on most nights during the week.

Detailed Trip Report

The environment in St. John and VINP is tropical, ranging from arid conditions along the south coast resembling a desert to lush tropical forests slightly inland. Despite ongoing maintenance efforts by volunteer groups and weekly walk-up volunteers, the growth of vegetation is relentless. Work is typically carried out in hot weather, often on challenging and steep slopes with limited shade. The removal of various types of vegetation such as encroaching grasses, invasive vines, thorny plants like catch & keep, Tan Tan, Sensiveria (also known as mother-in-law tongue), wild pineapple, Christmas bush, cacti, and brush is a challenging task. Volunteers must also be cautious of the aggressive Jack Spaniard wasp. Removing this vegetation is crucial for preserving historic structures, enhancing visibility, and ensuring safety for hikers. If left unattended, the growth rate is rapid. However, the rewarding aspect for volunteers stems

from their accomplishments in this work. Local hikers and visitors frequently express gratitude to the volunteers for their dedication to maintaining the trails.

Sunday, 18 February

The volunteers arrived at the campground starting at 3:00 p.m., where the leaders welcomed them. They were shown the facilities and tents before having time to explore the area, including the beautiful Cinnamon Beach. At 5:00 p.m., an orientation session took place, covering introductions, island history, hurricane impact, the week's plan, location, and safety protocols. Frank, the new FOVI trail leader, introduced himself and discussed the work plan. The orientation was followed by a delicious dinner of beef and vegetarian Spaghetti, garlic bread and a small dessert. After dinner and dishwashing, the volunteers continued their engagements and then went for a nighttime beach walk.



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, 19 February

At 8:30 a.m. the group was met by Frank, who also resides in the volunteer campground, and they shuttled in the FOVI van and the leader car to the trailhead near the Leinster Bay Trail. Frank provided a safety overview including showing proper use and handling of the tools. The group put on their gloves, selected their tools, and then started the beautiful 0.7 mile walk along Leinster Bay.



When they reached the Lower Estate Leinster Bay Ruins, Frank provided a brief overview of the purpose of the project, some additional tool and flora safety

awareness, and then assigned work locations to small groups of two or three people. Additionally, the weed eater worked inside some of the structures and away from the volunteers to prepare the areas for lopping and clipping. The work was detailed and tedious, ensuring that vegetation was cut down as close as possible to the ground. Lunch was taken at the bay where they saw some turtles and birds. They continued into the early afternoon and then hiked back to the cars. Hot, sweaty but satisfied, the group returned with their tools to the parking lot. The afternoon was spent at Cinnamon Beach or camp while the leaders went to Cruz Bay to purchase fresh groceries and refreshments.



Before, during, and after at the Lower Estate Leinster Bay Ruins removing aggressive invasive trees and brush



Before and after by weed eater in preparation for lopping and clipping



Weed eater in action under the hot sun



Before and after pictures showing the removal of aggressive and fast-growing invasive flora

At 5:30 p.m., the volunteers attended the USVI Turtle Presentation hosted by FOVI. Dinner included barbecued chicken and tofu and large, baked potatoes with all the toppings, followed by a small dessert.

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.

Tuesday, 20 February

After a hearty breakfast, the group was met by Frank at 8:30 a.m. to work on Peace Hill. Tuesdays and Thursdays are also volunteer walk-up days with locals, returning volunteers and often guests who stay at the Cinnamon Bay campground. This location is popular and easy to access and visited by many.

The 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.”

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 Durloe Channel. The statue was destroyed in 1995 by Hurricane Marilyn.

Frank provided a safety and work orientation at the cars before the group headed up the short trail to the windmill. In the meantime, Frank distributed work to small groups along the trail to remove aggressive growth from both sides of the trail to open it up. On top, Frank also assigned work projects. Early on, there was some rain followed by refreshing winds. Everyone gathered for lunch in the windmill ruin. In summary the group cleared both sides of ~0.1 miles of trail including small catch & keep trees, as well as approximately 0.2 acres on the hilltop, which was again tedious but important work, cutting down to the ground and carefully around the rocks and structure. On the way to the car, the group was asked to leave backpacks and tools at the Denis Bay Spur trail and carry out forty, twelve-foot-long fence posts from the Denis Bay spur trail storage to the parking lot, about 500’. 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 on Peace Hill



Before and after on Peace Hill



A welcome lunch break in the mill with the walk-up volunteers

In the late afternoon, the group relaxed on the beach and attended to their tired muscles while the leaders prepared a satisfying dinner of beef and vegetarian chili, accompanied by bread and salad. At 5:30 p.m., everyone gathered for a captivating presentation by Ital Delroy Anthony. He entertained the group with his drumming and singing, shared knowledge about local flora and its medicinal uses, and regaled them with engaging stories. The experience was truly special, and it brought enjoyment to all. Later, back at camp, the group enjoyed their beef and vegetarian Chili, bread, and salad dinner and reflected on the day's achievements. Many had rented snorkel gear in anticipation of a relaxing rest day at Maho Bay, eagerly looking forward to some well-deserved downtime.



Evening cultural program by Ital Delroy including music, arts and medicinal plant uses



Cooking and Cleaning done with a smile

Wednesday, 21 February



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

On the rest day, the group started with a delicious apple pancake breakfast before heading to Maho Bay for snorkeling. Arriving around 9:00 a.m., they were fortunate to encounter various species, including turtles feeding on sea grass near the beach. Some members explored the

colorful fish along the rocks, adding to the scenic experience. Despite a few passing clouds, it was a beautiful day, and everyone enjoyed swimming, lounging, and engaging in conversation. The presence of pelicans fishing added to the picturesque atmosphere.

By midday, the group returned to camp and enjoyed a satisfying lunch. Subsequently, they utilized two cars to shuttle to the NPS visitor center and the Mongoose shopping area while the leaders purchased additional groceries. At 5:30 p.m., the highlight of the day was a fantastic interactive Caribbean drumming session led by Ital Delroy. The session attracted both visitors and children, providing a lively and engaging atmosphere. For dinner, they had beef and vegetarian fajitas accompanied by black beans and a delightful dessert.



Thursday, 22 February

Following breakfast, the leaders drove both cars to the Brown Bay trailhead, the designated work site for the day. In addition to their primary task, they utilized the extra time to drive the group to the “end of the road,” showcasing various snorkeling spots and offering picturesque views of the surrounding islands. Upon reaching the trailhead, they met Frank, along with four walk-up volunteers. After brief introductions, the group gathered tools, which included pick mattocks, and began their ascent to the saddle, covering a distance of ~1/3 of a mile.



Frank proceeded to assign the tasks among the 15 volunteers. Twelve people diligently worked on both sides of the trail, utilizing loppers, clippers, and hand saws to cut down the invasive vegetation. Meanwhile, four volunteers focused on improving seven drainage areas using pick mattocks, ensuring proper waterflow to prevent trail erosion. In some cases, the drainages required complete reconstruction, involving the removal and repositioning of large rocks.



"Lop till you Drop"



Drainage and rock work with the pick mattock



Trail drainage improvement Before and After

As the day progressed, the group made their way down the trail and enjoyed lunch while admiring the scenic view of Brown Bay. Afterward, they continued their work until completion, before heading back to the trailhead. Along the way, they took a brief detour to observe the condition of the historic Hermitage Ruins. The remarkable growth of aggressive vegetation in that area served as a vivid reminder of the ongoing battle to preserve the past. The overgrowth made it challenging to access the work zone, emphasizing the significance of the ongoing clearance efforts. This work ensures the preservation of historical events, allowing people to visit and learn from them. It is no wonder that many hikers, especially locals familiar with such growth, express gratitude to the volunteers for their valuable contributions.

Upon returning to camp, some of the group indulged in a quick swim and refreshing showers before preparing for the evening event.



St. John donkeys have been wild and free since the 1600s when slavery was abolished and donkeys from the plantations were set free.

Following an early dinner at 4:00 p.m. called "Cinaminastone," a delightful "All You Can Eat" meat and vegetarian dish served over quinoa, the group departed around 4:45 p.m. for an enchanting destination known as Miss Lucy's. Located overlooking the emerald waters of Friss Bay and the Caribbean Sea, Miss Lucy's is renowned for showcasing the work of talented local artists and hosting open mic singalongs. The panoramic views include Leduck, Flanagan, Pelican, Peter, Norman Island, and British Tortola.

The rich history of Miss Lucy's dates to the 1960s when Lucy A. Matthias-Smith-Prince, affectionately known as "Mama Lucy," began preparing and serving delectable dishes by the bayside. Her offerings included Fish, Soupe, Sugar Cakes, brick oven-baked breads, and tarts. Mama Lucy had always aspired to expand her culinary skills beyond the bay. With the support of her family, they transformed the location into a family compound, welcoming gatherings and sharing the beauty of the area with both St. John locals and visitors. Even today, Miss Lucy's remains a family-owned establishment, rooted in tradition. Mama Lucy passed away in October 2007 at the age of 91, leaving behind a cherished legacy on the island. She was also beloved as an island taxi driver.

The evening at Miss Lucy's was filled with incredible performances by local talent, showcasing their singing skills and instrumental prowess. The unforgettable experience took place against the backdrop of crashing waves, enhancing the atmosphere, and creating a truly magical ambiance. It served as a magnificent conclusion to the day, offering a genuine local experience and an opportunity for cultural enrichment that should not be missed.



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

Friday, 23 February

Today began with an early start. Following breakfast, the group gathered at 7:15 a.m. and set off from the camp to meet Laurel Brannick, the retired Chief of Interpretation and Education for the National Park Service (NPS), as well as other visitors, for a morning bird walk around Francis Bay. The morning was calm, with a gentle breeze accompanying the participants on their leisurely one-mile stroll around the saltwater pond at Francis Bay. To enhance the bird-watching experience, Laurel provided binoculars for everyone and shared fascinating insights about the avian population in the bay and their recovery following the hurricanes.

The process of recovery has been slow and gradual, with some species still absent even 6.5 years later. However, Laurel observed signs of improvement and progress. For instance, the Antillean crested hummingbird is now spotted with greater frequency. During this particular trip, Laurel's keen eye spotted a diverse range of birds, including the white-cheeked pintail, the little green heron (which is not commonly found in the area), the clapper rail known for its tendency to creep around the edges, the grass quits (an occasional sighting, especially when the grass is short), a stilt, and the melodious yellow warbler.

During the bird walk, the group took a moment to pause at Francis Bay, gazing out over the water in search of more avian sightings. The devastating impact of the two hurricanes in 2017, particularly Hurricane Irma, was evident in the destruction caused to the boardwalk, the sand, and the trees along the shoreline. However, in the face of adversity, a tremendous amount of work was undertaken by a combination of paid workers and dedicated volunteers. Miraculously, within approximately twelve days, they managed to locate and restore 90% of the boardwalk, reinstating a vital pathway for visitors to enjoy.



Furthermore, the hurricanes had an unexpected consequence as artifacts from pre-Columbian days surfaced due to the significant disturbances caused by the storms. This discovery highlighted the rich history of the area and provided a glimpse into the past that otherwise may have remained hidden.

The resilience of both the natural environment and the local community became evident as nature slowly rejuvenated itself and efforts were made to restore and preserve the cultural heritage. Despite the challenges posed by the natural disasters, the group was able to witness the spirit of recovery and adaptation, underscoring the determination to protect and cherish the land's invaluable treasures.

At 9:00 a.m., the group drove a short distance to the parking lot of the Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins to start the work and to remove invasive species from the area. The group met Frank up the hill below the boiling chambers. Like the rest of the week, Frank provided an orientation,

distributed tools, and walked small groups to their areas of work for the day.



Tools included saws, loppers, and clippers. Weed eaters were not required because this is now done by dedicated support at Annaberg. Annaberg is one of the largest and well-preserved ruins and visited by many and our groups work in this area on each trip. Our volunteers also have permission to go into certain structures for clearing. The group started near the mill and worked with loppers, clippers, hand saws and a rake. Again, the work was tedious and low to the ground, but important to stay on top of the aggressive growth to preserve the historic structures.



Before and after vegetation removal near the Boiling Chambers



Before and after "carpeting" the coral vine from the hill side towards the slave quarters

The group gathered for lunch near the Mill, taking final group pictures. Mark Hardgrove thanked Frank, the trail work leader, for his outstanding support in leading, distributing tasks,

and providing oversight, as well as his kind and engaging leadership throughout the week. After lunch, the volunteers returned to camp for a final visit to Cinnamon Bay.



At 3:15 p.m., they set off to Coral Bay for a well-deserved catamaran cruise with Captain Karl on the Mahyia. A shuttle boat transported them to the catamaran in groups of five. The sailing was spectacular and relaxing, with Captain Karl offering insights, a safety briefing, and an overview of the experience. A traditional rum/juice toast was made, and Mark Hardgrove thanked Captain Karl, who expressed gratitude to the volunteers. The calm waters allowed many volunteers to enjoy the trampolines on the front of the boat enjoying the scenery, sunset, and each other's company.

Returning to the dock, the group made their way to the renowned Skinny Legs restaurant, a favorite among locals and visitors alike. While the leaders arranged for take-out, which included burgers and Mahi Mahi sandwiches, the volunteers had the opportunity to browse the souvenir and t-shirt shop, indulge in refreshing drinks, or listen to live music.



At camp, after enjoying their meal, the group participated in a close-out session. Leaders expressed gratitude for the volunteers' outstanding work and partnership. They also welcomed constructive feedback on the campsite, work tasks, tools, gear list, transportation, and meals. This session provided an important opportunity for the volunteers to reflect on their experiences and contribute valuable insights that could help improve future endeavors.

Saturday, 24 February

On departure day, the group travelled with Mark and Susan in two cars on the car barge to the airport in St. Thomas. Prior to their departure, everyone participated in a final clean-up. At 7:10 a.m., the group gathered in camp, where Mark Hardgrove led a heartfelt moment of gratitude. They formed a circle, raised their hands, and sent positive energy to the sky and to one another, symbolizing their appreciation for the new friendships, shared stories, local engagement, learning experiences, and conservation achievements in the beautiful location.

Summary

The trip yielded a successful outcome, with a remarkable total of 495 volunteer work hours generously donated to the VINP. We extend sincere thanks to VINP for their collaboration and

special appreciation to the FOVI and their dedicated team, including Tonia Lovejoy, the Executive Director, Mark Gestwicki, the Program Director, and Taylor White, the Program Manager. We also like to express our gratitude to Frank Olivieri-Barton, Trail Leader, who proved to be a valuable addition to the FOVI team. Additionally, we thank Laurel Brannick, Mr. Ital Delroy Anthony, and Captain Karl for their continual support of ConservationVIP®. Their unwavering dedication has played a significant role in our mission's ongoing success.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the exceptional volunteer group who joined us in February. Their unwavering enthusiasm and active participation in all events and activities were truly inspiring. It was impressive to witness their quick engagement and seamless partnership with one another. Our volunteers hold a special place in our hearts, and ConservationVIP® is immensely grateful for their remarkable efforts and positive contributions. The growth of new friendships and the camaraderie that blossomed among the group was truly remarkable, leaving everyone eagerly anticipating future reunions.

“Travel with Purpose”

