

Center for State of the Parks



VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK VIRGIN ISLANDS CORAL REEF NATIONAL MONUMENT

SNAPSHOT

Located on the island of St. John, Virgin Islands National Park was established in 1956 and comprises more than half the mountainous island's land area. The park includes most of the north shore and most of the central and southeast portions of the island, including 7,259 acres of terrestrial and shoreline habitat and 5,650 acres of adjacent submerged lands (off-shore underwater habitat, added to the park in 1962). The park also includes Hassel Island, located in Charlotte Amalie harbor on St. Thomas, which was added in 1978. In 2001, Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument was established to protect an additional 12,708 acres of submerged lands and associated marine resources around the island.

In 2006, more than 677,000 people visited Virgin Islands National Park to enjoy the park's sparkling water and white sand beaches; to hike on trails that wind through mountainous areas; to snorkel and dive through coral reef seascapes that support more than 400 reef fish species; and to explore cultural resources that document the park's rich human history.

HISTORY

People have lived on the Virgin Islands for at least 3,000 years, beginning with hunter-gathers of the Archaic Period. Settlements continued throughout pre-



history and ended with the Taino, the pre-Columbian culture present when Columbus explored the New World. When Europeans arrived, the Virgin Islands became a melting pot of people who came from around the world. The Danish West India Company colonized St. John in 1718 and established plantations that used enslaved Africans to work the sugar cane, coffee, cotton, and indigo fields. The plantation era began to erode when slavery was abolished in the Danish West Indies in 1848. A major hurricane and earthquake that struck the island in 1867 dealt the final blows. Denmark eventually sold St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix to the United States in 1917. Virgin Islands National Park was established in 1956 as a result of a land donation to the federal govern-

ment from Laurance Rockefeller, who owned much of St. John, and the Jackson Hole Preserve Corporation.

A multitude of archaeological sites and structures are evidence of the island's cultural history. The remains of hundreds of structures from the plantation era are located throughout the park. Preserved sites such as the Annaberg Plantation give visitors a glimpse of the lives of some of the island's past inhabitants.

The park and monument provide a wealth of habitats for plants and animals, from marine areas that support coral reefs and seagrass beds to some of the last remaining native tropical dry rain forest in the Caribbean.

THREATS

- About 1,400 acres of private lands, known as inholdings, are scattered throughout Virgin Islands National Park. Many have been subdivided, resulting in further forest fragmentation and development that has destroyed cultural landscapes and archaeological sites. Intact forests are important habitat for migratory birds; fragmenting these areas could have drastic consequences for birds that spend winters in the park.
- Marine ecosystems within the parks face a variety of threats: Natural disturbances such as hurricanes and drought have harmed mangroves, coral reefs, and seagrass beds; visitors are responsible for damage caused by boat groundings and careless anchoring; and coral diseases



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linked to global climate change have killed corals.

- Browsing, grazing, and predation by non-native wild goats, sheep, hogs, cats, rats, and mongooses threaten the survival of native plants and animals and harm natural communities and processes.
- One permanent employee currently handles all cultural resource issues within the two parks. Additional full-time cultural resource staff positions (such as archaeological technicians, a historic architect, a preservation specialist, and historic masons) are needed to address the growing needs of neglected sites in the parks.
- Dense vegetation threatens hundreds of historic structures throughout the park. The park risks losing irreplaceable Virgin Islands history as structures are reduced to rubble before they are identified and documented.
- Poaching of building materials from historic sites is a problem within the park, but without enough staff and funds to survey and protect endangered sites, this illegal activity is likely to continue. In addition, without baseline cultural resource studies, staff do not know the extent of the park's cultural resources and cannot gauge the severity of the poaching problem.
- Research is needed to help Virgin Islands National Park staff better understand groups of people whose lifeways are traditionally associated with park resources. These studies must be done before older island residents pass away, but funding shortfalls prevent this work.
- The park's museum storage building is corroding and is not designed to protect the collections from severe weather.

WHAT'S BEING DONE

- *Mooring Buoy and Marker Buoy Installation.* Improper boat anchoring and groundings damage coral reefs and seagrass. To minimize this damage, the Park Service has instituted anchoring restrictions, installed a mooring buoy system, and deployed marker buoys to warn boaters of shallow coral and rocky areas.
- *Ongoing Research.* Park staff are engaged in a host of interdisciplinary research projects that focus on coral disease, sedimentation rates, fisheries population biology, and watershed delineation, to name several. Partnerships with universities, the Sierra Club, and Elderhostel help the park take on cultural resource projects and research that would not be possible otherwise because of budgetary shortfalls.
- *Danish Colonial Architecture Archive.* The park is using three-dimensional mapping to document crumbling historic structures, thanks to a partnership with the engineering department of the University of Maine. A digital archive allows users to view documented structures in three dimensions.
- *Research Partnership with Danish University.* Danish settlers colonized the Virgin Islands in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Today, most of the park's written history (AD 1665-1917) resides in Denmark. Park staff are working with the University of Copenhagen to locate the first settlement sites and lost plantations using historic research and ground surveys.
- *GIS Database.* The park is working with Syracuse University to create a database of the locations of cultural resources within the park.

ABOUT NPCA AND THE CENTER FOR STATE OF THE PARKS

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. NPCA, its members, and partners work together to protect the park system and preserve our nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage for generations to come.

NPCA initiated the State of the Parks® program in 2000 to assess the condition of natural and cultural resources in the parks. The goal is to provide information that will help policymakers, the public, and the National Park Service improve resource conditions in national parks, celebrate successes as models for other parks, and ensure a lasting legacy for future generations.

CONTACT US

For a copy of NPCA's full report on Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument, to get copies of reports on other parks, or for more information about the Center for State of the Parks, visit www.npca.org/stateoftheparks or contact Dr. James Nations, vice president for the Center for State of the Parks, at jnations@npca.org.

For more information on Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument, contact NPCA's Sun Coast Regional Office located in Hollywood, Florida, at 954.961.1280, or visit the parks online at www.nps.gov/viis and www.nps.gov/vicr. For media inquiries, please contact Shannon Andrea, NPCA media relations manager, at 202.454.3371 or sandrea@npca.org. To learn more about what the public and our elected officials can do to help improve the health of this park, visit www.npca.org/take_action.