Making Connections!

STRATEGIC PLAN
FY 2020 – FY 2024

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park
PO Box 811, St. John, USVI 00831
(340) 779-4940
info@friendsvinp.org
Making Connections: Friends of Virgin Islands National Park Strategic Plan

Since 1988, Friends of Virgin Islands National Park (Friends) has served as the official philanthropic partner to Virgin Islands National Park (VINP), and since its establishment in 2001, Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument (VICRNM). Friends supports environmental education, natural resource protection, cultural preservation and scientific research. Friends acts as an advocate for our national park, particularly on issues that threaten its precious natural or cultural resources. Today we find ourselves in a time when public lands are often undervalued, environmental threats are increasing in complexity, government funding does not meet even maintenance needs and the importance of private philanthropy is at an all-time high.

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park is the official philanthropic partner of Virgin Islands National Park and the only nonprofit on St. John/St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands, focused solely on the protection of the park’s natural and cultural resources. Since 1988, we have been assisting and advising the National Park Service (NPS) in assuring VINP’s unique terrestrial and marine resources are protected, the Virgin Island’s cultural treasures in the park are preserved, and visitors are connected to their park through volunteerism, education and advocacy.

Friends’ Strategic Plan development and implementation is overseen by the Board of Directors. The outputs of a Board retreat and an Advisory Council workshop held in July 2019, informal meetings with NPS VINP staff in August 2019 and additional community discussions throughout Fall 2019 have informed and directed the development of this strategic plan. These outputs were synthesized by leaderships, reviewed by staff and Board members to arrive at the present document. While this document guided operational planning beginning October 2019, it was finalized and formally approved by the Board, in May 2020.

PROTECT • PRESERVE • CONNECT
SPRING 2020 UPDATE: In January 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) began reporting on a novel Coronavirus – COVID-19 – that was emerging and spreading in China. Throughout January and February, the virus spread to and throughout the United States and other countries around the world. By March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Travel, and particularly tourism, was curtailed, businesses closed, schools began transitioning to online distance learning and efforts were put in place to limit large gatherings to try to slow the spread of the virus.

In the US Virgin Islands, we saw our first COVID-19 case on March 13. The Governor ordered non-essential businesses to close by March 25 and denied entry to new tourists for a 30-day period. The cruise ship industry began curtailing cruises and would later be mandated to stop all cruises until at least August 1, 2020. During the first 2 weeks of April, to dissuade large gatherings, the Governor and Virgin Islands National Park closed all public beaches and hiking trails. During this time period, Friends closed our retail stores and canceled all in-person events and seminars – including making EarthDay 2020 and our 17th Annual Beach-to-Beach Powerswim virtual events. Tourism to the US Virgin Islands resumed on June 1, with limited flights and no cruise ships until at least August. By June 1, the USVI had 70 confirmed COVID-19 cases and six deaths as a result of the virus. Across the United States, there were over 2 million cases and over 104,000 deaths by June 1, with new cases still rising in many states.

For Friends’ staff and Board members, these sobering statistics and overriding importance of the health and safety of our Virgin Island’s community, have certainly altered our work and timeframe for implementing our strategic priorities. However, we see our park as a place of healing and our mission to responsibly Connect visitors to the park and the park to the community as more important than ever. Rest assured, we are safely continuing to work to ensure your park is ready to greet you! Thank you for your continued support!

***

Mission and Vision

The Mission of Friends of Virgin Islands National Park is:

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park protects and preserves the natural and cultural resources of Virgin Islands National Park while connecting visitors to the park and the park to the community.

We achieve our Mission by assisting the National Park Service with:

- Scientifically guided research and restoration of the park’s natural resources
- Research and interpretation of the park’s cultural and archaeological resources
- Connecting visitors responsibly to VINP and VINP to the community through education, volunteerism and advocacy
- Assisting with workforce development through education, scholarships, internships and summer jobs
- Strengthening the Friend’s organization through diversity, inclusion and collaboration
Friends’ vision for the future is:

Virgin Islands National Park is a model of resource protection and cultural preservation which is valued by the community around it and all those who experience this unique national treasure.

Friends’ Values

The Values that guide and drive the Friends’ staff and Board as we work every day to fulfill our mission are:

**Integrity** – Friends strives to operate transparently in order to be seen as a trustworthy and honest steward of financial resources entrusted to us to carry out our Mission.

**Collaboration** – Friends embraces and seeks to partner with individuals, government, NGOs and businesses who share in our Vision for a healthy and thriving Virgin Islands National Park.

**Entrepreneurial problem-solving** – Friends works within NPS guidelines to help find creative solutions to pressing problems faced by the Park and the community.

**Diversity** – Friends values the unique diversity of heritage, thoughts and lifestyles that make up our Virgin Islands community and strive for inclusivity in all we do.

**Community** – Friends is committed to advocating for all people to feel access and equality within their park, to retain a sense of pride and ownership of their public land, and to feel confident that the best natural and cultural resource protection plans are being followed in Virgin Islands National Park.

Program Principles

The fundamental purpose of Friends is to support projects, programs and activities that:

- Protect and restore the terrestrial and marine ecosystems of VINP
- Increase the understanding of the flora and fauna of VINP through scientific research, and a variety of experiences which include seminars and printed material
- Preserve historic structures within VINP and tell the story of their history
- Educate about, and help keep alive, the cultural history of the peoples who have lived within VINP
- Investigate the earliest populations that inhabited St. John
- Connect the public with VINP and NPS, and the social, political, economic and environmental issues that affect the park
- Increase environmental awareness of visitors and residents, with a special emphasis on children
- Further the responsible enjoyment of VINP
• Promote the use of VINP as a learning resource for Virgin Islands students
• Contribute to fostering a sense of conservation stewardship among residents and visitors, and especially among Virgin Islands youth
• Advocate appropriately for VINP

**Strategic Directions and Objectives**

Four strategic directions, or goals, are selected to guide achievement of our mission and advancement towards our vision over the next five years. These are:

1) **Protect** – Natural Resources
2) **Preserve** – Cultural Resources
3) **Connect** – Community, Visitors and VINP
4) **Strengthen** – Financial Support, Board, Staff, Partners and Membership

| Strategic Direction 1: | Friends will support and implement projects and programs that Protect our flora, fauna and natural habitats |

Protection of the natural resources – native plants, animals and ecosystems – of Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument is a priority of the Friends. Protection strategies take on many different forms depending on the threats, costs and availability of partners. Regardless of the strategy employed, decisions on natural resource protection made by Friends are based on sound science and supported by staff at VINP.

Entering the period of this strategic plan, VINP and VICRNM are both in the early stages of recovery from the category 5 hurricanes of Irma and Maria that hit in September 2017. Both terrestrial and marine natural communities have been significantly altered and work is underway, supported by Friends, to better understand how to protect and restore those natural resources while recognizing the ongoing threats from pollution, conversion from development, invasive species and a changing climate.

Friends’ natural resource protection priorities entering the period FY2020-FY2024 are focused on sea turtle nest monitoring, invasive lionfish removal, coral reef and mangrove ecosystem health and restoration, and native plant protection and recovery. Friends is prioritizing the effort with NPS and University of Virgin Islands to help rebuild the Virgin Islands Ecological Research Station (VIERS) on St. John and supports research and education programs at the station. We will continue to seek new opportunities and partnerships for research that will better inform VINP and VICRNM natural resource management strategies. We recognize that research priorities may change throughout this 5-year period depending on management priorities and ongoing natural resource threats to the Park.

**PROTECT • PRESERVE • CONNECT**
Friends’ restoration efforts are focused on support for invasive lionfish removal to help restore reef fish communities. We are also working with NPS, US Fish & Wildlife Service, local NGOs and individual botanists on restoration of native plants – both threatened and endangered species as well as native plant community restoration on our beaches to help with erosion and resiliency against future storms. Our research on mangrove environments informs the potential for mangrove restoration as part of our native plant restoration efforts. Lastly, we are working with NPS, USVI agencies, NGOs and other university scientists to monitor advancing coral diseases and explore the potential for future coral reef restoration.

Finally, protection of our natural resources can only be achieved by engaging others – visitors and VI residents – to understand and participate in protection efforts. Friends will expand outreach efforts to beachgoers, boaters and others in support of the VI chemical sunscreen ban, coral disease monitoring, reducing pollution from plastic and other sources, volunteer efforts like sea turtle nest monitoring and lionfish removal, as well as trail maintenance.

**Objective 1:**

Expand the VINP Trail Maintenance Program to increase resource protection, safety and erosion resilience and ensure trail usability year-round

**Strategies/Principle Activities:**

- Improve the volunteer camp and volunteer experiences at Cinnamon Bay
- Expand the Summer Trail Crew to maintain trails year round
- Expand the number and skill levels of individual volunteers and groups helping to maintain VINP trails and resources
- Explore the transition of trail maintenance back to staff at VINP with assistance from Friends’ volunteers

**Objective 2:**

Increase support for natural resource research projects that inform VINP management decisions

**Strategies/Principle Activities:**

**PROTECT ▪ PRESERVE ▪ CONNECT**
• Increase partnerships with UVI and other research institutions (and funding partners) to ensure availability of researchers and support for priority management topics of VINP  
  o Coral reefs  
  o Mangroves  
  o Species/natural communities of concern
• Develop routine methods for clear communication with VINP staff, Regional NPS staff and relevant departments within NPS with regard to Caribbean public/private advances in protection of natural resources, and public interests in the protection of VINP natural resources.
• Link sea turtle monitoring program to other sea turtle monitoring programs world-wide to ensure data relevance and expansion of the scope of the program
• Develop and initiate campaign for rebuilding and/or reestablishing of research and environmental education programs at VIERS in partnership with UVI and VINP

Objective 3: Establish natural resource outreach and restoration projects for VINP that engage students, volunteers and local businesses

Strategies/Principle Activities:
• Support restoration for St. John mangrove communities
• Increase propagation and restoration capacity for native plant species and replant important native/endemic/coastal/beach plant communities
• Support coral reef protection, monitoring, outreach and restoration initiatives

Preservation of archaeologically and culturally significant resources – and their interpretation and use for education – is a hallmark of our national parks. The Virgin Islands are rich in archaeological sites, artifacts and historical lessons that inform us about the past and our world today. Virgin Islands National Park contains archaeological sites that date back to as early as 840 BC, with most of the Park’s beaches and bays having been important settlement and religious sites. VINP is rich with sites established by the Taino people and archaeological digs have uncovered scores of artifacts and ceremonial carvings.

As European countries explored and settled the Caribbean, St. John saw hundreds of plantations developed for sugar cane, molasses and rum production. Along with this more industrialized period, enslaved people from Africa were brought to St. John. The history and cultural impact of Danish settlement, enslaved Africans and their eventual emancipation, other Caribbean influences and ultimately United States ownership of the Virgin Islands territory are
all important histories affecting the interpretation of VINP. These historical precedents also provide important insights into the culture and community of the Virgin Islands today.

Friends’ preservation efforts are focused on supporting the Park’s archaeological program. In partnership with NPS archaeology staff, Friends supports interns and researchers from the United States and Denmark. Research focuses on uncovering Taino artifacts as well as investigating ruins from Danish plantations and enslaved African settlements. Several ruins sites throughout VINP have been partially restored, reinforced for safety and used to interpret the important history of the Virgin Islands. These efforts are supported by Friends.

Longer term, Friends intends to work with VINP and various community partners to scope, plan and develop a cultural museum where not only the story of VINP can be told but also where important artifacts and cultural stories can be displayed and interpreted. Such a site is crucial to insuring the rich history and culture of the Virgin Islands and the struggles and triumphs that helped shape today’s Virgin Islands community can be preserved. Friends’ focus on youth education includes telling this important story.

Objective 4: Support growth and sustainability of VINP archaeology program

Strategies/Principle Activities:

- Support a robust archaeology intern program with stipends, expenses and lodging for visiting interns at Friends’ Cinnamon Bay camp
- Increase educational opportunities for local students, adults and visitors to learn about Virgin Islands’ archaeology
- Increase accessibility to and interpretation of archeological resources on Hassel Island

Objective 5: Increase preservation and interpretation of VINP historical and cultural ruins sites

Strategies/Principle Activities:

- Expand vegetation removal and management of documented ruins sites in VINP through Friends’ volunteer programs
- Support local artisans, stonemasons and craftsmen to learn and employ traditional techniques for historically accurate ruins restoration, repairs and reinforcement
- Support restoration and signage for all accessible ruin sites in VINP
Objective 6: Support expanded interpretation of St. John cultural activities in VINP

Strategies/Principle Activities:

- Support VINP’s annual Folk Life Festival
- Expand cultural programs in VINP, including demonstrations, displays, and live performances throughout the Park’s historic sites
- Expand interpretation and education opportunities about the post-emancipation sustenance era on St. John
- Present a campaign for the creation of a St. John Cultural Museum/Center

Strategic Direction 3: Friends will serve as a catalyst to better Connect visitors in a responsible way to VINP and VINP to the St. John/St. Thomas community

Volunteerism is a fundamental aspect of Friends and we seek to strengthen and expand these opportunities. Volunteers serve on our Board and Advisory Council and make our projects, events and programs possible. Opportunities to become involved with the Park and Friends are important to our members, the Park and the community. Friends will work with the Park to actively recruit NPS volunteers and help coordinate their work in ways that further Friends’ and VINP priorities.
A hallmark of the work of Friends has been engaging our youth in educational opportunities learning about the natural and cultural resources of VINP. Under the umbrella of School Kids in the Park (SKIP), we seek to greatly expand the learning opportunities of our children on St. John and St. Thomas and connecting them with their park. We will continue to work cooperatively with NPS staff to help deliver in-classroom presentations and in-the-park fieldtrip opportunities. Additionally, we will support ranger-lead activities by engaging Friends’ staff and community leaders, culture bearers and experts in a wide variety of programs, field trips and seminars to further educate our children about the natural and cultural resources of their national park. We are especially excited to expand swim lesson offerings as St. John’s official partner for Learn to Swim. We will partner with NPS, University of Virgin Islands and VI Sports, Parks & Recreation to offer a structured Learn to Swim program to interested youth on St. John. Lastly, we will continue and expand support for St. John and St. Thomas summer camps by providing an ecological component – fieldtrips and seminars – connected to experiences in VINP. It is our intention to eventually bring back summer eco-camps at VIERS or in alternate locations, including possibly our Cinnamon Bay campground.

Advocacy is an important way for Friends to better connect visitors and the community to the Park. Friends’ members reside throughout the United States. Additionally, many elected officials have vacationed or spent time in the Virgin Islands and have become advocates for the Park. Because the Virgin Islands have only one non-voting representative in Congress, member relationships with their elected officials at the national level make them a critical voice for VINP concerns. Friends plays a unique role in communicating issues to its membership and urging calls to action when federal intervention is warranted.

Local advocacy with the Governor of the Virgin Islands and his/her appointees, particularly the St. John Island Administrator and our local elected representatives are critical relationships. The park and territorial government have not always enjoyed a close working relationship and the Friends can serve to support and foster key partnerships. Currently, we share priorities for educating local youth and connecting them to VINP. We will continue to build on this relationship.

Visitors and particularly local residents may be uncertain of Friends’ role as advocates for the users of the Park, and indeed there is a fine line between “advancing the protection and preservation of the resources” and the “promotion of responsible use of these resources”. Friends seeks to find the appropriate balance between these two purposes. As the local Virgin Islands’ economy rebounds after Hurricanes Irma and Maria,
this fine line becomes even more challenging as businesses spring up to take advantage of access to VINP. Local residents find themselves choosing sides over businesses that may or may not have a negative impact on the Park’s resources. Friends will continue to seek to support sound science that addresses potential impacts on resources and advocate supported by that science.

Developing a sense of stewardship among residents and visitors by increasing their awareness of the environment and of issues related to the Park’s resources is where these two advocacy interests come together and become more sustainable.

In the same vein, we believe that nurturing the next generation of conservation citizens is an extremely important part of our mission. We have already achieved considerable success in this area but with new children beginning school every year this work is obviously never-ending.
**Objective 7:** Increase meaningful opportunities for volunteerism in VINP, expand promotion, training and recognition of park volunteers

**Strategies/Principle Activities:**

- Build on success of trail program to expand opportunities for individuals, service groups and corporations to volunteer in exchange for camping at Cinnamon Bay for year round maintenance outside of hurricane months
- Establish a volunteer recruitment, orientation and mentor program for docents, hikes and Visitor Center
- Expand youth volunteer opportunities for next-generation engagement

**Objective 8:** Ensure every student on St. John and St. Thomas has multiple opportunities to engage with natural/cultural experts and connect with VINP

**Strategies/Principle Activities:**

- Update and maintain Friends’ “app” to supplement the Park’s efforts to educate the community and visitors about the Park’s resources and build in student interaction opportunities
- Expand School Kids in the Park (SKIP) offerings using NPS Rangers, local experts and Friends’ staff for educational offerings, including an expanded Learn to Swim program
- Work with NPS and UVI to increase Friends’ support for VIERS rebuild and operations, offering expanded eco-school and summer camp options
- Expand internship opportunities for natural, cultural and educational fields

**Objective 9:** Be an effective advocate for the resources and responsible users of VINP

**Strategies/Principle Activities:**

- Expand role in Friends Alliance and Public Lands Alliance (cooperating associations) to learn and foster best practices for fundraising, organizational/board development, events and retail
- Expand use of print, social and broadcast media and periodic op-ed pieces to promote positions on issues important to VINP; participate in and represent Friends’ positions at local community meetings
- Strengthen relationships with local, territorial and national elected/appointed officials to benefit VINP
- Serve as a facilitator to engage the community in conversations that help inform the direction of management of the Park and decisions made by the Territory and Federal Governments that have the potential to impact Park resources
**Strategic Direction 4:** Friends will strengthen the organization through diversity of thoughts, sources of financial support, staff and board member backgrounds and ethnicities, membership and partnerships

**SPRING 2020 UPDATE:** Global civil rights and Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality followed the deaths of several African-Americans. George Floyd, an African-American Minneapolis man was killed on May 25th, by white police officers. In February, 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed while jogging in his hometown of Brunswick, GA. In March, police stormed the wrong apartment with a no-knock warrant and shot and killed 26-year-old Breonna Taylor in Louisville KY. These events renewed an important debate over systemic racism in our society and have profoundly impacted how we think about the work of Friends and our Virgin Islands community.

Let us be explicit, we condemn all forms of racism. Black Lives Matter and we support Black Americans, Caribbean Islanders, Latinos and people of color everywhere. We recognize that environmental and conservation efforts have, at times, exacerbated inequities in our communities and failed to acknowledge the important cultural connections between Virgin Islanders and the lands and waters we seek to protect. Further, we acknowledge that the Friends’ organization, by its very association with the National Park Service and Virgin Islands National Park, has played a part in systemic racism.

The Board of Directors and staff at Friends have been actively working to engage local people in the Friends’ mission for decades, and in many cases with great success, but we accept with humility that there is much work to be done. With the development of our most recent strategic plan, we have taken explicit steps to make changes within the organization, in the way that we communicate and how we operate. Specifically, we have established as guiding values, a commitment to transparency, diversity and community, and today we are taking that even further to denounce all racism.

Formed in 1988, its founding members – many native St. Johnians – had been meeting out of concern for the care and condition of Virgin Islands National Park. Today, we continue to be concerned over the care and condition of our national park. We believe that the continued preservation of the protected cultural and natural resources in Virgin Islands National Park in the year 2020 is in the best interest of all future generations, especially Virgin Islanders! Now, more than ever, we believe that our national park needs to be seen as a place of rest, healing, recreation and relaxation to be enjoyed by all responsibly and equally.

At the same time, we are listening to our community. Systemic racism – and the after effects of poverty and disenfranchisement – have visibly taken their toll on the most vulnerable of the US Virgin Islands’ citizens. The tourism-based economy that has fueled St. John in particular has led to greater disparity in wealth and access...
Friends of VI National Park, Strategic Plan FY 2020 -- 2024

Page 14

to critical resources like food and education among residents. Virgin Islands National Park is an integral part of that economy.

We can envision a St. John that has the bounty of its beauty and the preservation of its precious resources as a source of local pride – livelihood and sustenance. There are many steps that need to be followed and many more lessons to be learned before we get there. However, we want to say it loud and clear:

- We will help amplify the concerns of local community members within the National Park Service to the best of our ability.
- We will support assistance for VINP/NPS hiring processes with the intention of increasing the number of Virgin Islanders employed as Park staff.
- We will continue to offer college scholarships and paid summer jobs to local youth, in order to continually expand the pool of local candidates for environmental and conservation positions.
- We will expand our focus on responsibly connecting visitors to our park and to our community, and more importantly, connecting our park back to our community.

***

Friends has had a long, 31-year history of success in supporting VINP. However, the world we live in is constantly and rapidly changing and those changes are coming at an ever-increasing pace. To insure sustainability of Friends and our ability to serve our mission for the next 30 years, we must work on increasing our diversity to better represent our Virgin Islands’ community. To insure our sustainability, we must also seek to diversify our fundraising strategies, constantly learning the most current best practices in philanthropy and how to utilize a rapidly changing set of technological tools to meet our member and community needs. Additionally, as generations mature, wealth changes hands and the workforce continues to change, how we engage supporters will also change. We must continue to invest in learning to continue to stay relevant to those who care about VINP.

The Board of Directors is responsible for the governance and oversight of the organization. We must continually engage community leaders with an eye towards recruitment for leadership positions. Our Board members continue to set the direction of the organization and should be as equally engaged in philanthropy trends, important Virgin Island economic development issues and other important topics that may impact the health of VINP and the Friends organization.

The Advisory Council is an important way to insure we have an ongoing supply of Board member candidates as well as giving Friends insight to a broader cross-section of the Virgin Islands community. We must continue to build and strengthen the Advisory Council and seek
new ways this group can help Friends achieve our mission. Recruiting a broader cross-section of the community as members of the Advisory Council will provide for a greater diversity of ideas to the organization and the Park, and a more diverse pool for selecting Board members in the future.

Membership in Friends continues to be a meaningful way that individuals and businesses can support the work of the organization and share in our mission to help protect and preserve VINP. In the past, Friends enjoyed a steady stream of new members as they camped at Maho Campgrounds. With this business now gone, we must continue to look for new ways to attract and retain members, particularly as many who appreciate VINP are only here for a short time on vacation. Our membership provides the foundation for who we are as an organization, and serves as a pool for getting to know new donors who will seek to provide increased support for our work above and beyond their membership investments. Additionally, local businesses make up an important sector of our membership base. These “Affinity Partners” recognize the importance of VINP to their business success and seek to give back through support to Friends. Often, they provide benefits to Friends’ members and in turn benefit from recognition and promotion by Friends as important Park partners.

Objective 10: Actively recruit and engage Advisory Council members, Board Members, volunteers and staff that represent the diversity of the Virgin Island community

Strategies/Principle Activities:

- Develop a charter for Friends Advisory Council, based on this strategic plan that outlines productive ways to engage this diverse group to benefit VINP
- Draw on active Advisory Council members as a pool for regular Board candidates; continue to seek greater diversity, in every manner, in Board members
- Increase focus on hiring local and native Virgin Islanders for Friends’ contractor and staffing positions; utilize pool of students that have participated in Friends’ educational programs, scholarship recipients
and interns and seasonal staff

- Improve Board orientation, participation on committees and engagement in field activities and on-site program updates

**Objective 11:** Increase net membership income by at least 10% per year and strive for greater diversity in all membership types – individual, family and business

**Strategies/Principle Activities:**

- Improve membership experience, donor tracking and trends through improvements in technological systems, including increased use of monthly giving
- Develop and implement strategies and events that benefit West Indian and Hispanic residents and cultivate as members
- Improve and increase affinity partnerships with Virgin Islands business partners to increase member benefits offerings

**Objective 12:** Increase overall fundraising by at least 10% per year over the next five years

**Strategies/Principle Activities:**

- Increase online marketing presence, global social media reach for fundraising and sales revenue
- Increase unrestricted fundraising through a focus on growing major gift fundraising relationships and establishing giving circles or special recognition groups
- Establish priority programmatic endowments for key programs including but not limited to archaeology and ruin restoration, trails, SKIP, and research
- Establish a planned giving program and promote and recognize Legacy Club members
- Utilize a mini-campaign for the playground to prepare for a multi-faceted capital campaign launch by 2024 – possible focuses include, cultural center, VIERS, program endowments, Legacy Club and operating endowment