



PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
February 23–29, 2020



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 23 to 29, 2020. This was the first ConservationVIP® trip since April 2017. The September 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria caused significant devastation to the island of St. John requiring the National Park Service (NPS) and Friends of the Virgin Islands organizations to pause volunteer services and implement a recovery strategy.

The group consisted of fourteen volunteers including two ConservationVIP® leaders, Mark Hardgrove and Susan Murray. As in prior years, the host was Friends of Virgin Islands National Park and Volunteer Coordinator, Mark Gestwicki. Work consisted of trail maintenance and removal of exotic vegetation from plantation ruins, grave sites, and cultural landscapes as well as planting new saplings and beach clean-up. Aggressive vegetative growth quickly claims trails and cultural resources. Maintenance involves removing trees with a diameter less than six inches, grasses and other vegetation such as catch-and-keep, a thorny vine.



A lot of the hurricane recovery work has been done since 2017 and the work assigned to volunteer groups (~14 groups per year) is consistent with the past with the exception of planting saplings to replace the lost coastal and mangrove trees. The work performed during the four days included vegetation removal at Lameshur Sugar Plantation and Ruins, Annaberg Sugar Mill, Peace Hill and tree planting and beach clean-up at Hawksnest Bay. A voluntary improvement was also made on the camp access trail at the Cinnamon Bay volunteer camp.

The volunteers and leaders completed ~270 hours of volunteer work which included over one acre of exotic vegetation and weed removal and the planting of 19 saplings. Trash collection at the various sites included plastic, large wood and one metal roof panel. The work also attracted walk-up volunteers who performed an estimated 40 hours of service. The trip leaders spent additional volunteer hours planning and leading the trip including meal purchases in and outside the Virgin Islands, shuttling volunteers, daily meal purchases and leading the in-camp cooking and cleaning activities.

NPS provided a government-owned, 15-passenger van at no charge for transportation during the week. A second van was available as needed. Both trip leaders were able to drive the vans and drive on the left side of the road. The roads on St. John are curvy and steep and the average driving speed is 25 miles per hour. Each day the van(s) transported the volunteers to and from the work sites and provided opportunities to the volunteers to join them on the daily market trip to purchase beverages of their choice for camp.

The weather was consistently hot and humid with average daytime temperatures ranging from 82-87 degrees. Most days had some cloud cover and earlier in the week there was a rainstorm during the night. Night time temperatures ranged from 70-75 degrees.

Trip leader Mark Hardgrove, previously superintendent of the park, shared with the group a lot of interesting information and knowledge about the history, culture, people, customs and flora and fauna of the islands.

Detailed Trip Report

The environment of St. John and Virgin Islands National Park is tropical and ranges from very arid (desert like) along the south coast to tropical forest only a short distance inland. Although a lot of work was done by volunteer groups and weekly walk-up volunteers since November, the vegetation growth is never-ending. The area recently experienced a two-week rainfall which stimulates the growth on the trails, cultural landscapes, ruins and gravesites. The group worked on three heavily impacted areas that had not been worked on yet this season which was both exciting and rewarding. They worked in hot weather with not much cover, and, at times, on very rocky and steep slopes. Vegetation is often difficult to remove because of the type of vegetation including encroaching grasses, vines, catch & keep (a

thorny, stick-to-your clothing plant), Tan Tan, Sansiveria (also called mother-in-law tongue, an invasive species), cacti and brush. Additionally, one has to watch out for wasps, especially the Jack Spaniard wasp. The removal of the vegetation is very important as it allows for the preservation of the structures, improves viewing from the area, and improves the safety for tourists. If not maintained, the growth is rapid.

Sunday 23 February

The twelve volunteers arrived throughout the day with the last volunteer arriving around 5 p.m. The orientation was divided into two sessions to allow the volunteers to get settled in and eat their first in-camp dinner consisting of spaghetti and a volunteer-prepared salad and garlic bread. Generally, dinner was around 6 p.m. Around 6:30 p.m. camp became dark. Volunteers used solar lighting and head lamps for the evening. After dinner, dishwashing, and the second part of the orientation, some of the volunteers went with one of the leaders to the beach to enjoy the sound of waves and to look at the stars. Some shared their knowledge of the sky and the milky way became slowly visible. Stargazing continued to be a favorite during the week, at the beach, in the parking lot, standing or lying down on the sand and asphalt. What a view and experience especially since camp was away from lights and people. Volunteers slept in large tents on platforms with plenty of room to stand and store their items. The kitchen area was in the center of camp also raised on a platform and with plenty of space for working and storing. There were 2 picnic tables for dining and a separate Adirondack chair set-up around a small fire place. Two large portable toilets were located outside of the camp and serviced 2x per week. The nights were quiet with the sound of the waves crashing on the shore.

Monday 24 February

The group met Mark Gestwicki of Friends of the Virgin Islands and departed in two vans to Lameshur Sugar Plantation and Ruins on the south side of the island. The last part of the drive was off road and also passed the Virgin Islands Environmental Resource Station (VIERS) which was the location of prior ConservationVIP®/ REI trips. VIERS is not in operation at this time as a result of the hurricane damage. The road was bumpy and very wet due to the rains of the last few weeks. Both drivers used their skills and experience to maneuver through the water and bumpy road. At the location, an overview of the work and available tools was provided by Mark Gestwicki and the teams were eager to get to work. They cut vegetation up to 10 ft. around the structures, ensuring they did not damage the walls.



Once areas were cleared, two weed eaters were used to clean up the grasses. Structures and walls existing of coral that were not visible previously were uncovered. Tourists on their hikes were now able to access the structures. After a good lunch, the team was assigned to work on the graveyard, an area they had not seen on arrival due to all the growth. They went full speed ahead clearing most of the area. Around 2 p.m. the team packed up and left for camp. During the drive back to camp they spotted the infamous wild donkeys that roam the island.



After a swim and/or showers and a hearty curry dinner with another wonderful volunteer-prepared salad, the team was joined by Ital, a Rastafarian from the island, and received a two hour comprehensive and very interesting plant overview including the uses of the plant by the locals. It was now dark but under the solar lighting and head lamps the group viewed and passed around some 25+ plants/bushes as well as handmade art work. Ital provided a lot of information that was clear and useful and during the week, the group continued to recognize and identify the various plants.

Tuesday 25 February

Today, the volunteers were led by Taylor, an intern with Friends of the Virgin Islands. But first, ConservationVIP® leader Mark Hardgrove had arranged for an educational walk led by



Laurel Brannick the Chief of Interpretation and Education for the NPS. This one-hour walk was via the Francis Bay Trail and around the salt pond. Laurel led the group on a path around wetlands and back via the boardwalk. We paused for a moment at Francis Bay and Laurel and Mark shared about the devastation of the two hurricanes, especially Irma, and how the board walk, the sand and trees on the shoreline were impacted.

A lot of great work was done by paid and volunteer workers, finding and putting back 90% of the boardwalk in about twelve days. Along the way, Laurel pointed out some artifacts that had surfaced dating back to pre-Columbus days. Laurel brought binoculars for everyone and she shared about the birds in the bay. There used to be a lot more around this time of the year, yet she was pleased with the birds she now saw including migratory birds. The group saw the Puerto Rican Virgin Island pigeon, snowy white egrets, a boobie (black footed), and migratory birds such as the kingfisher and blue winged teal. Laurel noted that she had not seen the pigeon since the storm. One of the volunteers saw a hummingbird which is also one of the first sightings since the storm. Laurel was happy about the positive changes.

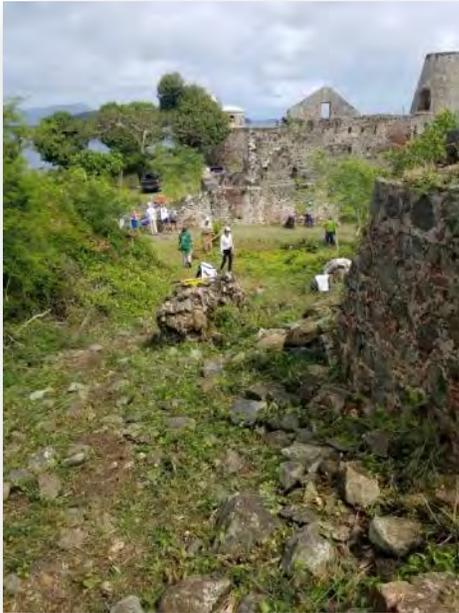


After this very nice walk, the group drove a short distance to meet up with Taylor and to start working at the Annaberg Sugar Mill ruins. They also met up with several walk-up volunteers the project had attracted and were introduced to Charles, a local islander, who shared about the island and the culture. He presented the volunteers with a piece of the



healthy sugar cane. The group used large and small loppers as well as saws. One group moved up the trail to bushwhack in the hope to uncover a ruin supposed to be in the area. Our hard working volunteers were eager to take on this challenge and went to work. Others worked around the lower sections, brushing and cutting carefully around the structures. Around 12:15 p.m. the team took a break and walked up to the baking house where bread was made and presented to the volunteers. This smelled and tasted delicious. After lunch, the group continued to work on the structures.

One volunteer worked with Charles to remove a very large piece of metal (a roof blown off during the storm) from the brush. Plastic and other trash was also collected. The group departed at 2 p.m. Back at camp, a store run was made by one of the leaders while the other leader joined the group for a well-deserved swim in Cinnamon Bay. Dinner included barbequed chicken legs and Spanish rice, corn and the usual, excellent, volunteer-made salad.



Wednesday, 26 February

Wednesday was a rest day. The group started with a hearty breakfast including scrambled eggs and special blue berry pancakes prepared by one of the volunteers. Two volunteers did an early morning hike on the Cinnamon Bay Trail while others had a little extra time to sleep in. The group left at 9 a.m. to the trailhead at the NPS building in St. John where eight volunteers joined the hike to Honeymoon Beach. Two volunteers and a leader were dropped off at Honeymoon Beach where they got settled in with beach chairs on a beautiful white sandy beach with plenty of shade.

The other leader went back to camp to pick up the two hikers. The group that hiked in had a wonderful walk with a lot of learning about the island and flora and fauna. They arrived a little bit before noon. Lunch orders (hosted by the resort) were taken and five volunteers took advantage of the three-hour kayak and snorkel tour. They had a wonderful time with many great sightings including turtles and what seemed to be mating fish.

Once back, they were tired, cold from the water and super hungry. Additionally, all gear including snorkel gear, paddle boards were made available to the group. Two volunteers were dropped off in town for shopping and eventually everyone was gathered for the trip home. It was a well-deserved rest day for our hard-working volunteers. There was much to do, to see and to enjoy and we are greatly indebted to the hospitality of Eco tours, the owner Sibylla, and her staff including “Party Paul”, Lance the guide, and Tyler and Nancy of food services.



Back at camp, the team showered and rested from this active day. The leaders prepared for Fajitas that evening with the help of volunteers prepping and the usual, excellent, salad. After dinner, the dessert box was passed around and this was the evening that had the game Codenames on the schedule. Initially, a bit skeptical, half of the volunteers joined in “and the rest is history.”



Thursday, 27 February

On Thursday the group went to Peace Hill. The plan was to work until 12:30 p.m. to allow the group to take showers and experience part of the 2-day annual Folk Life Festival. The work at Peace Hill was exciting for the group as there was much to be done. In the parking lot, one of the leaders did a quick tool safety refresher and then they joined up with Mark, Taylor and Reed of Friends. They walked up a short, steep hike to the mill. Instructions were provided and the group went to work. Within hours they reduced the brush, uncovered rocks and the “Christ of the Caribbean” sign, cleared structures resulting in an unobstructed view of the north, east and west side of the island. Several tourists hiked up and complimented and thanked the volunteers for their hard work. One couple noted that they visited for twenty years and had never seen it this clear. It was a very hot day, little wind and any thorny bushes.





The festival focused on sharing about the deep roots of cultural heritage and included dancing, music, food and the arts and crafts of local artists. The group was dropped off at the festival which was also across from the local outdoor shopping mall and was picked up by the leaders later that afternoon. Unfortunately, due to the heat, many stands were already closing upon arrival and the group then moved on to the outdoor mall, jewelry and ice cream store. Back at camp the new President of Friends briefly stopped by to say hello around 5:30 p.m. Mark Gestwicki joined the group and brought the St. Johnian dinner by a local woman, Maria. It consisted of local dishes including chicken, rice, beans and coleslaw and was enjoyed

very much by the volunteers. The evening consisted of listening to music around the fire, star gazing, passing around the dessert box, fighting off the no-see-ums and playing Codenames.

Friday, 28 February

Today, the group worked at Hawksnest Bay to plant saplings. Due to the hurricanes, many trees were damaged or disappeared, impacting the shoreline and flora and fauna. After the hurricanes, a local woman and horticulturist, Evelyn Gibney, started growing saplings to be planted across the island with the help of volunteers. Ms. Gibney joined the group with Mark Gestwicki and she explained to the volunteers about her background and approach. She then showed the group the two type of saplings (Seagrape and Maho), about 2 to 3 foot high and 2-3 years old. She showed the group how to plant and the group went to work planting 19 saplings. After completing this task in record time, the volunteers received trash bags and gloves and did litter patrol left and right from the location on the beach. Little trash was found, and locals shared they also pick up trash when they visit the beach.



Work was stopped around 12:30 p.m. and the group went with the leaders to town to visit the grocery store for their selection of beverages for the sunset cruise and/or for home purchases. Next, back to camp for lunch and snacks and an overview/close out by the leaders including evening schedule, camp/tent clean-up protocols and plan for the next morning's departure. There was time for a beach visit, clean-up and showers and the group joined together to take advantage of this.

During the week, one of the experienced trail volunteers, John, voluntarily worked on the entrance of the campground to remove root and rock and to put in rocks that he found disbursed in the forest. A significant improvement was made improving drainage and safety for volunteers. A master project! John asked the group to gather around and facilitated



a ribbon cutting ceremony of this new, improved section which was named the Gecko Hop & Stop trail. A job well done!

At 4 p.m. the group departed for the city to pick-up the pre-ordered meals from Uncle Joe's Barbeque (a local favorite) and then everyone boarded the Sadie Sea with captain Bob, in front of the National Park visitor center. Shoes were collected in a box and off they went. A well-deserved end of the week for the volunteers who worked hard and accomplished a lot. The boat cruised along the shore including Honeymoon Beach, Turtle Bay, Hawksnest Point, Peace



Hill and Trunk Bay. In front of Trunk Bay during the sunset, the boat stopped and several volunteers and leaders dove or jumped in the silky water. Next, everyone enjoyed their barbequed chicken and ribs, coleslaw and rice/beans or pasta. They then returned to shore, back to camp enjoying the last night and each other's company around the campfire with music, stargazing, beach walks and Codenames.

Saturday, 29 February

Today was departure day which was organized via two shuttles and ferries. The first group was shuttled at 9 a.m. to take the 10 a.m. ferry, while the second group left by 10 a.m. to take the 11 a.m. ferry. Goodbyes were said, emails exchanged and one of the volunteers facilitated a group and leader thank you, joining in a circle and raising up their hands sending their positive energies to the sky. What a special gesture and wonderful way to end the week.

Summary

The trip was a success with 270 ConservationVIP® volunteer work hours donated to the Virgin Islands National Park. We would like to thank the Virgin Islands National Park and Laurel Brannick for her time, and special thanks to the Friends of VINP and their team, especially Mark Gestwicki, Volunteer Coordinator. Additionally, we are deeply grateful for the generosity and kindness by Virgin Islands Eco tours and staff. Most of all, we thank the hard working, positive and fun-loving volunteers who poured their hearts and passion in the work and everything else that was presented to them.

“Ordinary people performing extra ordinary work”

**Tribute to ConservationVIP® – February 2020 Virgin Islands National Park
by Carol Green, Volunteer**

***There once was a group called Conservation VIP
That gathered together to camp by the sea
For a weeklong adventure in St John National Park
With our fearless leaders Susan and Mark.***



***We came together from far and near
A convivial group full of good cheer
We bonded in camp and while traveling by van
Around the steep curvy roads of the lush, green island.***

***Mark was chill and very laid back
Susan cooked and kept us on track
They worked well together like yin & yang
Sparing no effort to take care of our gang.***

***Windmills and stone ruins, awesome views astound
And always the sparkling turquoise sea all around
Every morning we headed out, we knew the drill
Lameshur, Annaberg, Hawksnest, Peace Hill.***



***We battled brush and thorns in the extremely hot sun
The Catch & Keep nearly made us come undone
But we sharpened and dug, we clipped and we lopped
When work was done, a 360 view from the top.***

***John did extra work morning and night
The Trail Master made sure everything was just right
Pruning bushes, moving rocks, often at a run
At week's end the Gecko Stop & Hop Trail was all done!***

***The company was great, the food was divine
Every dinner finished off with some wine
And Tecate or bourbon or even island rum
Music by the fire and then the day was done.***

***Oh wait! At least until Codenames came out
It was hands down a favorite without a doubt.***

***The last night we cruised the north coast by boat
At Maho Bay we jumped in for a float
Ate island specialties as the sun went down
Then the Sadie Sea headed back to the town.***



***At the end of the week we were sorry to go
Saying goodbye to new friends left us feeling quite low
But we gathered in circle to join spirits & love
And send our energy up to the stars above***

***Until we meet again, whenever that may be
A big thanks to each of you and to ConservationVIP!***