

VI MARINE PARK PROJECT

COMMUNITY INFORMATION DOCUMENT

BACKGROUND

The International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) is an internationally-agreed initiative that was launched in 1994 to address the rapid decline of coral reefs. ICRI is said to be a “blueprint for conservation of coral reefs”, and is implemented through partnerships among governments, international organizations (such as the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Bank), and non-governmental organizations.

In response to both this global initiative, and the growing environmental crisis within the U.S., President William Clinton issued the Coral Reef Protection Executive Order 13089 on June 11, 1998. In addition to policies affecting coral reef conservation, the Executive Order established the United States Coral Reef Task Force. The Task Force, working with governmental and non-governmental organisations, prepared the National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs.

The US National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs was developed to guide the sustainable use of coral reef ecosystems within the jurisdiction of the U.S.A., including its Territories and Commonwealths. Sustainable use simply means that coral reef ecosystems should be used and managed in such a manner as to ensure the security of the economic, cultural, social, and environmental values and benefits of such ecosystems in perpetuity.

As part of the National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs, the Government of the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) has embarked on a project to develop a Marine Park System Plan for the USVI.

THE USVI MARINE PARK PROJECT

This marine park project has five main components:

1. Preparation of a Marine Park System Plan. The System Plan will, among other things, provide the guidelines and processes for establishment of marine protected areas in the USVI, set out clearly the linkages between the management institutions, and identify sites that require management.
2. Preparation of a Resource Description Report for the marine environment in the USVI. This report will provide a statement of the status of the natural resources

- within the marine environment, identifying important resources and habitats that require protection.
3. A Socio-economic Assessment of the uses and users of the marine resources in the USVI. This assessment will identify the patterns of resource uses, the value of those natural resources to the USVI economy, and the future demand for those resources.
 4. Preparation of a Management Plan for the proposed marine park for the east end of St. Croix. The management plan will identify resources that require protection within the specific area, will propose boundaries for a marine park, propose management objectives for the park, and recommend the types of activities that may or may not be permitted within the park.
 5. Preparation of an information brochure about the USVI marine parks, which can be used by residents and visitors.

The University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) is coordinating this project on behalf of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), and will be working with other institutions, such as The Nature Conservancy and Island Resources Foundation.

In addition to the technical work to be carried out, personnel involved in the project will be contacting stakeholder groups, and the wider community in general, in an effort solicit information and guidance concerning marine habitats and resources that require protection, or alternatively, possess special features that can support agreed levels of use by locals and visitors.

IF YOU ARE A MEMBER OF A GROUP THAT HAS AN INTEREST IN THIS PROJECT, CONTACT DPNR AT: Tel: 774-3320; Email: viczmp@viaccess.net.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

The lands, water, and other natural resources provide much of what the people of the USVI need for their well being. However, those resources are being degraded through the pressures of development activities. Most people agree that some effort must be made to take care of those resources on which we depend. We must develop a plan to manage critical resources in a coordinated and successful manner. Here are some of the reasons for taking immediate action.

Food Supply: The marine environment in the USVI provides a range of foods and drinks. Fishermen relate tales of times past when there were large numbers of fish, lobsters, and conch. Yet within the span of only two generations the amount of fish caught is so small that fishermen have serious concerns about their abilities to support their families.

Money and Jobs: The environment is the base of the VI economy. It attracts visitors in increasing numbers, which provides necessary jobs and income.

Rare Plants and Animals: Coral reefs and seagrass beds are some of the most productive ecosystems on the planet, providing resources that are found nowhere else. In addition to being necessary to fisheries and supporting tourism, the marine resources are important for medicine, and therefore human health.

Coastal Protection: Coral reefs protect our coastal areas by reducing the damage caused by wave action during storms.

Other Services: We use the marine environment for many other purposes that we take for granted. Swimming, picnics on the beach, teaching our children to fish, education, and a range of other activities contribute to our quality of life. That quality of life would be much diminished if those natural resources were absent. Therefore we must take measures to protect them.

THE ROLE OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

A marine protected area (MPA) can simply be defined as any area delineated by legislation to protect a given set of resources or values. Those values can be conservation, commercial, recreational, traditional/cultural, educational, scientific/research, or unique natural features. In many cases, a mixture of the above values is protected in each MPA. The many benefits provided by MPAs have been clearly demonstrated all over the world (see associated document on the benefits of MPAs).

Marine protected areas currently existing in the USVI are:

- Buck Island National Monument;
- Cas Cay/Mangrove Lagoon;
- Compass Point Pond;
- Inner Mangrove Lagoon;
- Sandy Point;
- St. James;
- The marine components of the Virgin Islands National Park (St. John) and Salt River Natural historical Park and Ecological Preserve (St. Croix).

This marine park project proposes to establish a marine protected area along the east end of St. Croix.

Do you know of other marine resources in the USVI that require improved management? Are marine protected areas necessary to protect those resources? If so, where should they be located?

BUILDING A PROGRAM OF ACTION

Building a system of protected areas in the USVI is a long-term process involving many steps and the active participation of the many interest groups and individuals in our community.

The system plan is a statement of intent, providing the policies and legislative and institutional framework within which an action plan for system development can be developed and implemented. While it is a statement of commitment by public sector agencies, it also provides a framework that allows all community interests to participate in the process of deciding on the priorities to be addressed, and then becoming engaged in implementing the agreed solutions.

As individuals and groups, you can participate in this project, as well as the long-term process of establishing a system of protected areas in the USVI by:

1. Staying informed. Watch for announcements on the project and get additional information on marine protected areas.
2. Participate in meetings.
3. Take the time to provide the project team and DPNR with specific information on the marine resources, as well as your ideas on marine protected areas.
4. Discuss the issue of marine protected areas with your friends or within your groups, and become actively involved in protecting environmental resources that support the VI economy.