



TRAILS MANAGEMENT AND NATURAL & CULTURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION

SEASON REPORT 2022/23

Overview

The Friends' Trails Program runs annually from November to August and is essential to keeping Virgin Islands National Park accessible and safe. The Trail Crew performs duties such as hiking trail and historic site maintenance, native plant restoration, and trash/debris removal. This year, the program included 470 Trail Crew Volunteers, who contributed 5,237 hours of labor towards the improvement of Virgin Islands National Park.

This program is made possible by our members and donors, our National Park counterparts, and the dedicated hard work of our volunteers. Thank you.

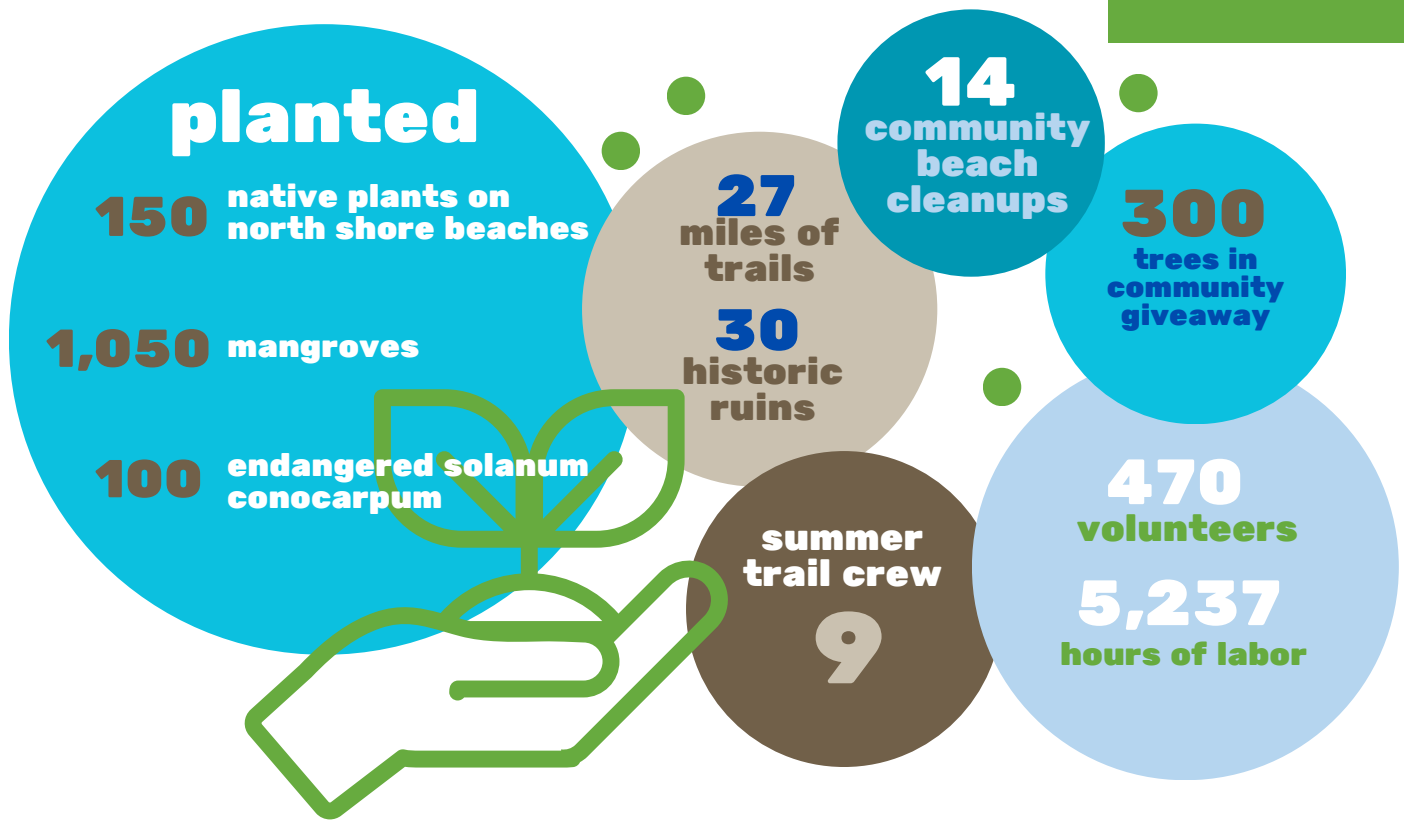
Trail Maintenance

The Friends Trail Crew's main priority is keeping all 27 miles of hiking trails in Virgin Islands National Park open, safe, and accessible. Hikers in the National Park often see the Friends volunteers clearing vegetation, improving trail watershed, constructing retaining walls and steps, maintaining scenic vistas, and replacing signage. These volunteers are supervised in their day-to-day activities by the Friends Trails Program Manager, Taylor White, and Friends Trail Crew Leader, Aaliyah Hodge. Many island residents would agree that the trails have never looked better.

Historical Ruin Preservation

The Friends Trail Crew maintains 30 historic sites within the Park. This work involves carefully cutting vegetation that is growing out of and around the structures and applying herbicide as needed. This work is important because these historic sites are venues for education and can help visitors and residents connect with the history of St. John and the Virgin Islands.

This season, the crew uncovered ruins that hadn't been cleared in many years including hidden structures at Fredriksdal and Leinster Bay. Leinster Bay was an area of focus this season because it was recently accepted into the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program. This program honors, preserves, and promotes the history of resistance to enslavement through escape and flight.



Coastal Planting and Beach Stabilization

The coastline of St. John was severely impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. In response to this devastation, the Friends and the National Park Service started a coastal planting initiative with the goal of stabilizing and protecting popular north shore beaches from further erosion. Since 2019, over 750 trees have been planted at Hawksnest, Jumbie, Trunk, Cinnamon, Maho, Francis, and Leinster Bays.

During the 2022/23 season, Friends volunteers planted 100 native trees at Cinnamon Bay and 50 at Leinster Bay. These trees were propagated from locally sourced seeds by local horticulturist and expert Eleanor Gibney, who also acts as the lead advisor on the project. After planting, the volunteers use welded wire fencing to protect against marauding wildlife such as deer, goats, tourists, and donkeys. The trees are watered several times a week, depending on the rainfall, by Friends Natural Resource Intern, Ameir Sprauve.

The native species that have been planted include buttonwood, sea grape, black torch, bay cedar, turpentine, nothing nut, necklace seedpod, frangipani, orange manjack, and more.

Mangrove Restoration

Friends partnered with Iowa State University and Virgin Islands National Park to plant 1,050 mangroves in the Annaberg wetland area. After the hurricanes of 2017, this area was selected by experts at the National Park Service for a multi-pronged ecological restoration project that included the planting of mangroves, the clearing of culverts to improve hydrological function, and a coral planting initiative aimed at restoring the near-shore reef of Leinster Bay.

Friends hired a six-person crew of local youth to carry out this large-scale planting project. Black, white, and red mangroves were planted in clusters along the perimeter of the Annaberg wetland. Temporary fencing was erected to protect the newly planted mangroves from the prolific white-tailed deer. These mangroves will continue to be monitored and the fence will be removed when the plants reach a suitable height.

Endangered Plant Species Protection

Solanum conocarpum, or marron bacora, is a federally listed endangered plant that is endemic to the Virgin Islands. The world's largest population is located near Salt Pond on St. John and consists of less than 200 individuals. Friends of Virgin Islands National Park has been working to protect this population by removing invasive species such as catch and keep (*Acacia retusa*), guinea grass (*Megathyrsus maximus*), and wild tamarind (*Leucaena leucocephala*).

This season, the crew established a new population of 100 nursery-raised *Solanum conocarpum* plants in a second location in the Park. This site was selected in cooperation with experts from the National Park Service and US Fish and Wildlife. The *S. conocarpum* trees were planted in December 2022 and they are being periodically watered and monitored. To-date there has been a 100% survival rate.

The next phase of this project will be to select another site and obtain the proper compliance for establishing a population of 100 additional *S. conocarpum* plants. Restoration activities for two other federally listed species; the St. Thomas lidflower (*Calyptanthus thomasiana*) and *Eugenia earhartii*. This work will include habitat restoration, selecting sites for establishment of satellite populations, and the monitoring and protection of existing populations.

Nursery Management and Plant Propagation

The Plant Nursery and Learning Lab was established at Cinnamon Bay in January 2021 with the goal of raising native trees for coastal plantings, fruit bearing trees for an annual plant giveaway, and rare and endangered plants as part of a federal grant from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The nursery is also utilized as an educational space to teach youth about native plants and their traditional uses.

A huge thank you goes out to seasonal resident and extraordinary volunteer, Ellie Wasson, along with Friends Natural Resource Technician, Ameir Sprauve, who were integral to the upkeep of the nursery.

During the 2023 Earth Week celebration, Friends gave away 300 plants to community members and held a tree planting activity for local school kids. The goal was to increase access to fresh fruits, help kids connect with nature, and raise awareness about the benefits of native trees.

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park worked with the National Park Service and the community to rebuild the playground in front of the Park Visitor Center that was damaged in the 2017 hurricanes. 27 native and shade bearing trees and plants were selected for the playground and are planted along the playground pathways.



Trash/Debris Removal

Throughout the season, the trail crew removes trash and debris from the National Park as part of their normal volunteer duties. Most of these efforts are concentrated at Brown Bay, North Haulover, and Drunk Bay. These areas are prone to accumulating large amounts of ocean debris because of their orientation facing the prevailing winds.

Friends has also partnered with Dulce Vita Sails to remove thousands of pounds of trash from the more remote beaches. Captain Dulce generously donates her 45' Leopard Catamaran for use in these special cleanup events. The trail crew stage trash at strategic locations that are best accessed via the water.

Additionally, Friends holds trash cleanup events every Ocean Week in October and Earth Week in April. Alongside Friends Drunk Bay cleanup, local business and organizations including Rotary, Get Trashed, Unitarian Universalist Church, Low Key Watersports, Cruz Bay Watersports, and VI Expedition Company "adopt" a beach and commit to cleaning up any trash they find. It takes an island!

Volunteer Service Camp

Throughout the season service groups and volunteers are hosted at the Friends camp at Cinnamon Bay. Participants are offered tent accommodation in exchange for work on the trail crew. This season we hosted 182 volunteers at the camp, including groups from American Hiking Society, Conservation Volunteers International Program, Saint Croix Hiking Association, Appalachian State University, Vermont Commons School, and more.

Over the past several years, we've added new amenities to the camp including two bathrooms with running water, electricity, refrigerators, and a perimeter fence. This year's improvements included new kitchen counters, shelving in the bathrooms, safety railings and stairs for every tent platform, and a roof over the kitchen sink.

A special thank you to all-star volunteers KC and Nancy Cushing, Beth and Russ Hilton, Ric Jablonski, and Vince Schmidt for their continued dedication to camp maintenance and improvements. Another sincere thank you to the staff of Cinnamon Bay Resort and Campground who are extremely helpful and supportive of Friends programming.

Walk Up Volunteers

The Walk-Up Volunteer Program takes place every Tuesday and Thursday from mid-October to the end of May. This program offers visitors and residents an opportunity to give back to the island by spending a day of volunteering with the trail crew. This year we had a total of 288 volunteers participate in the program, including 76 local students from Ivanna Eudora Kean High School and Giffit Hill School.

Many island visitors and residents participate in the walk-up trail crew, but there are a few dedicated volunteers who form the heart of the program. Eric Adolph, Teresa Beam, and Sam Eberlein deserve a gold star for their commitment to the program and their physical contributions to the maintenance of Virgin Islands National Park.

Archaeology Program Support

Archaeologist, Dr. Brittany Mistretta, was hired by the National Park and funded by the Friends to perform artifact analysis and cataloging work. These artifacts were unearthed through an archaeological excavation that took place at Cinnamon Bay during the extensive renovations to the Campground in 2020/2021. The excavation and artifact analysis yielded evidence that suggests that the indigenous Taino people had a large village at Cinnamon Bay with many generations of continuous occupation. This important discovery adds key insights into our understanding of the human history of St. John.

Another component of the Archaeology program is education outreach for island residents and visitors. Dr. Mistretta was a weekly speaker at the Cinnamon Bay Campground Chats, she led school field trips and in-class presentations, and represented the NPS Cultural Resource division at the Earth Day and Culture Day events for local schools.

Summer Youth Trail Crew

Summer Youth Trail Crew is a six-week program for local Virgin Islands high school students (ages 15-18). This is an opportunity for students to gain professional work experience, develop leadership skills, work outdoors as part of a team, and learn about Virgin Islands National Park. The goal of this program is for participants to gain an appreciation and passion for the natural world, conservation, and environmental stewardship. The Summer Youth Trail Crew Program provides a vital link between the National Park and the local community by providing an avenue in which area youth can engage in the park in a positive and meaningful way.

This year the crew performed trail work, habitat restoration, and historic site maintenance at various sites throughout the park. This manual labor was interspersed with educational opportunities such as a CPR and First Aid training, a resume building workshop, and presentations from local experts on traditional arts and crafts, coral reefs, sea turtles, and frogs. Every Friday is known as Friday Fun Day where the students engage in recreational activities such as kayaking, sailing, snorkeling, and volleyball.

This hard working, dedicated crew consisted of 9 members, 7 of whom were returning for a second year. The participants were Omari Mark, Jack Oram, Kemoi Thomas, Alexia Brookes, Tumayah Bartlette, Cordell Abraham, Aleja Meade, Maxim McMahon, and V'Kesha Adams. They were supervised by Trail Crew Leader, Aaliyah Hodge.



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