

Using education and outreach to monitor beaches and promote sea turtle conservation awareness and marine stewardship on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands



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Program Overview

- The Virgin Islands National Park Sea Turtle Program's various education and outreach initiatives are helping to protect the sea turtles of St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) through volunteer-based beach monitoring and by spreading awareness of sea turtle conservation within the Virgin Islands National Park (VIIS).
- Through these efforts the Sea Turtle Program is able to:
 - monitor up to 51 beaches for nesting activity with a team of 95 trained volunteers
 - teach school children from St. John and St. Thomas about sea turtle ecology
 - educate visitors and locals on how to be respectful marine stewards

Nest Monitoring and Protection

- Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), green (*Chelonia mydas*), and leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) sea turtles have been recorded nesting on St. John. **Hawkbills produce the majority of nests with 30+ nests documented annually.**
- Nest protection methods include screening, mongoose eradication, relocations, nest marking/signage, and nest excavations.
- Nesting surveys are conducted island wide on most VIIS and territory beaches, including offshore cays, during the official nest monitoring season of July-November, with strategic patrolling occurring year round.

YEAR	NO. OF VOLUNTEERS	NO. OF BEACHES SURVEYED	NO. OF NESTS		
			HAWKSBILL	GREEN	LEATHERBACK
2016	38	14	13	-	1
2017*	39	40	4	2	-
2018	45	37	24	1	-
2019	32	36	29	1	-
2020	99	47	41	-	-
2021	100	47	34	-	-
2022	67	47	18	2	2
2023	90	42	34	3	-
2024	95	51	37	-	-

TABLE 1. Number of volunteers, beaches surveyed, and nests documented per calendar year from 2016-2024. * Efforts ended September 3 due to hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Sea Turtle Program Volunteers

- Our Turtle Team consists of dedicated members of the island community that advocate for the sea turtles of St. John.**
- Trained volunteers:
 - conduct early morning turtle patrols
 - beach cleanups
 - engage interested beachgoers
 - assist with outreach events
- Volunteer engagement and continued learning opportunities include:
 - annual training sessions
 - weekly update emails
 - monthly presentations
 - group nest excavations



Volunteers at a nest excavation.

Location

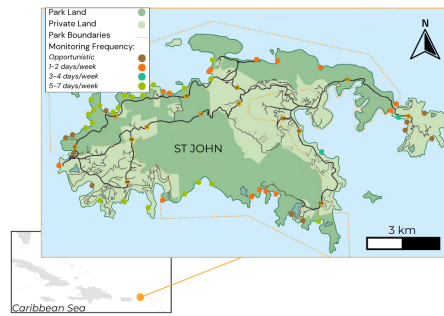


FIGURE 1. St. John, USVI, is the smallest of the three US Virgin Islands and is approximately 80 miles east of Puerto Rico. Two thirds of the island is designated as national park, making it a unique and important protected natural resource.

Community and Visitor Outreach



A weekly informational turtle table display at Maho Bay, one of St. John's most important green turtle foraging habitat, engages beachgoers (left). "Turtilla" rarely misses an educational opportunity (right).



- Visitor outreach initiatives are geared towards **informing the public about general sea turtle biology, mineral based sunscreen, snorkeling etiquette and best practices.**
- Our continued goal is to spread conservation messaging virtually and in-person with scheduled seminars, events, interactive displays and a charismatic sea turtle mascot!

Education and Outreach Initiatives Over the Years

- SKIP field trips and classroom visits** (200-300)
- Community events** - Earth Day fair, Culture Day, Folk life festival (500-1000)
- Summer Trail Crew and YCC** (15-35)
- Volunteer excavations and trainings** (25-100)



- Weekly Maho Turtle Table** (500-1000)
- Expansion and creation of interactive displays



- Beginning in 2025:**
- Boater outreach** targeting local charter companies and captains
 - Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue** awareness
 - Traveling Trunk** outreach by Inwater Research Group



- Ocean Week seminar** (50-100)
- Enhanced volunteer engagement** (50-100)
- Monthly volunteer seminar series** (25-50)



- Cinnamon Bay weekly turtle talk** (500-1000)
- Monthly educational boat trips** (200-300)
- Marine stewardship with Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association** (200-300)
- Public nest excavations** (50-100)



FIGURE 2. This timeline shows the beginning dates for various continual education and outreach initiatives. The numbers in parentheses represent the number of people engaged on an annual basis.

Educating School Kids in the Park (SKIP)

- The SKIP sea turtle field trip incorporates various topics on sea turtle ecology, life cycle, nesting and threats **as we strive to foster a fun and interactive learning experience** while teaching on a national park beach.
- Pre-K-12th grade students from six schools on St. John and St. Thomas:
 - receive grade-specific curriculum
 - field trips
 - classroom visits
 - community events
 - summer camps



Students participating in the SKIP sea turtle field trip.



Acknowledgements

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