

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park **FIVE YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN 2025-2030**




Friends of
Virgin Islands National Park

www.friendsvinp.org

Executive Summary

This strategic long-range plan 2025-2030 intends to provide a roadmap for the Friends of Virgin Islands National Park's programming, community engagement, fiscal priorities, and organization goals, as well as for the next phase of its partnership with the Virgin Islands National Park and Coral Reef National Monument (the Park). While this plan represents current thinking for the future of programs, projects and standards of engagement, we will remain open to worthy and unexpected opportunities.

Since 1988, Friends has been working to assure our unique terrestrial and marine resources are protected, our Virgin Island's cultural treasures are preserved, and that visitors, youth and community are connected to the Park through volunteerism and education. As a non-profit and the official philanthropic partner of the Park, Friends recognizes that a successful partnership with the Park elevates our shared vision and increases the quality of projects. The Friends inspires philanthropy that enables the Park to meet challenges without financial compromise and secures matching federal grants. This interconnectedness of partnership, thought leadership, and financial support allows the Park to be nimbler and more dynamic as it faces 21st century challenges.

This strategic plan provides clear direction maximizing impact, optimizing resources, and ensuring success in line with the mission and values of the Friends. It was created by engaging staff, leadership, board members, and Park leadership in a professionally facilitated strategic planning process using the SOAR framework (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results). Planning criteria and the identification of clear, achievable objectives were established around four strategic pillars and four guiding strategies. It is our belief that these pillars, strategies, and objectives are meaningful, dynamic, and attainable.

Mission

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.

Vision

Friends' vision for the future is Virgin Islands National Park as 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.

Values

Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park partners with Virgin Islands National Park to protect, preserve, steward, and strengthen all that is treasured in the Park.

These values include:

- Integrity: Friends strives to operate transparently 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 value 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.

Support Request Decision Making Criteria

Each year the Virgin Islands National Park submits a support request to the Friends for review and acceptance.

Supported projects must:

- Align with the Friends' mission and vision
- Add value beyond federal responsibilities
- Provide public benefit
- Exceed what the Park can accomplish independently
- Include donor accountability through monitoring and evaluation
- Have approval from the Park superintendent and Friends' Board

Strategic Long-Range Planning Process

In early 2024, the Friends engaged staff, leadership, board members, and Park leadership in a professionally facilitated strategic planning process using the SOAR framework (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results). Note: Implementation of the 5-year plan was paused due to changes in U.S. Federal administration in January 2025.

The SOAR model, based on Appreciative Inquiry philosophy, uses strategic dialogue to identify what the organization does well and leverage those strengths for growth. Strategic committees aligned around four pillars (Sea, Land, Community and Culture, and Organization) and four guiding strategies (protect and preserve, connect and inspire, strengthen and sustain, explore and consider).

Over seven months, each committee convened to discuss opportunities and aspirations that could result in measurable value and support for the Park. This process identified a distinctive set of priorities leading to this five-year plan.

Strategic Pillars

- Sea
- Land
- Community and Culture
- Organization

Guiding Strategies

- Protect and Preserve: Help maintain the integrity and security of systems and sustain them over time
- Connect and Inspire: Engage diverse and inclusive communities including youth, seniors, residents, ancestors, stakeholders, visitors, persons with disabilities through education and outreach
- Strengthen and Sustain: Enhance existing programs and keep them vital
- Explore and Consider: Remain curious and open to opportunities as they arise

It is our belief that these pillars, strategies, and objectives are meaningful, dynamic, and attainable.

Strategic Pillar: Sea

St. John's waters are essential for food, transport, and recreation, yet face mounting threats from climate change and human population pressure. Storm intensity, coastal degradation, and declining marine biodiversity threaten our ecosystems. Coral reefs and mangroves mitigate climate risks but are themselves highly vulnerable.

With over 60% of St. John under National Park Service stewardship, the Friends plays a vital role in safeguarding our ocean ecosystems through:

- Research, education, and outreach to mitigate human and invasive species impacts
- Partnerships with universities, schools, agencies, NGOs, and the public
- Initiatives that educate, protect, and conserve marine resources

Protect and Preserve. Through partnerships with government, universities, and NGOs, we will expand marine ecosystem research, protection, restoration, and enforcement. We offer facilitation, thought leadership, convening capacity, and fundraising to support:

- Coral reef treatment and restoration
- Invasive lionfish hunting in surrounding waters
- Monitoring and mitigation of other marine invasive species
- Mangrove planting for coastal protection and resiliency
- Research, nest monitoring, and protection of critically endangered sea turtles
- Open exchange through shared data, research, and programming
- Improved inter-organizational communications

Connect and Inspire. Through our network, we will broaden support for marine education and conservation and inspire future environmental stewards by:

- Engaging our 100+ volunteers to support all programming
- Expanding outreach to residents, visitors, youth, businesses, and concessionaires
- Building upon our School Kids in the Park (SKIP) program
- Creating community awareness campaigns about various marine ecosystems and healthy fisheries
- Continuing public seminars
- Partnering with charter operators for on-water education and outreach
- Increasing on and underwater interpretive programming
- Expanding summer marine camp programs

Strengthen and Sustain. With three decades of experience, we will build upon successful programs and share lessons learned to ensure efficacy and efficiency. Sustaining effective programs provides stability and maximizes impact through:

- Supporting the Park bay host system to connect boaters with the Park
- Establishing a marine stewardship plan in partnership with the Park
- Amplifying the overnight mooring fee system
- Supporting marine enforcement capacity and vessel maintenance

Explore and Consider.

Exploring new opportunities enhances our mission impact, drives innovation, and promotes continuous improvement. A culture of exploration enables us to learn, evaluate, and improve through:

- Exploring a partnership with UVI and NPS to revitalize VIERS
- Considering restorative aquaculture opportunities
- Assessing a community mangrove propagation program
- Exploring marine exchange programs with other agencies for research and professional development
- Addressing lighting issues: dark sky programming, turtle-friendly lighting, and vessel underwater lighting impacts

Strategic Pillar: Land

Land protection and resource management advances the health and sustainability of the Park for future generations. Priorities include keeping trails accessible and safe, native plant restoration, and supporting archaeology—all while ensuring residents have a hand in their local environment's continued vitality.

Protect and Preserve. Protecting terrestrial assets is essential for biodiversity conservation, ecosystem services, cultural heritage, recreation, and climate resilience, ensuring sustainability for natural ecosystems and human communities through:

- Maintaining 27 miles of Park trails through volunteer and student programming
- Supporting Park access, maintenance, and protection of current and additional historic sites (including Hassel Island)
- Collaborating with the Park to advance trail connectivity
- Supporting removal of highly invasive or poisonous plants from public areas or providing caution signage

Connect and Inspire. Connecting people to the Park promotes deeper understanding and appreciation of protecting these ecosystems for future generations by:

- Enhancing outreach to visitors, residents, and students on "leave no trace" principles
- Supporting the walk-up trails program
- Reaching more student groups to stay at the camp
- Supporting Park signage programming
- Increasing seminars for residents on foraging, bush skills, and survival skills
- Elevating access, understanding, and protection of rare plants
- Advancing education on the importance of planting native plants
- Ensuring Park and Friends volunteer programming operates in lockstep with cross-training

Strengthen and Sustain. Strengthening terrestrial assets contributes to long-term sustainability and well-being of the Park and surrounding ecosystems through:

- Supporting and enhancing the Park's native plant and garden initiatives
- Supporting close collaboration of the Park's archaeology, trails, and native plant programs
- Working closely with the Park's volunteer coordinator
- Managing and maintaining all archaeological assets collaboratively
- Enhancing collaboration between Park cultural heritage staff and School Kids in the Park (SKIP)

Explore and Consider. As a nimble organization, we can explore opportunities that safeguard unique biodiversity, ecological resilience, cultural heritage, and recreational opportunities for current and future generations by:

- Working with Park concessionaires to support outreach efforts
- Expanding utilization of the camp
- Considering hikes and walks aimed at resident participation
- Supporting sanctioning of the Park's volunteer program as a VIP program for official volunteer credit
- Advancing the Park's archaeology program as a career path
- Exploring a year-round trails maintenance program
- Considering planting fruit trees and creating a community orchard/garden space

Strategic Pillar: Community and Culture

Our St. John community includes youth, residents, students, seniors, ancestors, visitors, businesses, and governmental agencies. By activating these diverse constituencies, we broaden innovation, inclusive decision-making, programmatic outcomes, empathy, resiliency, talent acquisition, and societal progress. Legacy programs like SKIP and Learn to Swim ensure meaningful connections as we advance the spirit of “One Community—One Island.”

Community and Culture current activities-programs include SKIP, Learn to Swim, Scholarships, Cultural Demonstrators, Interpretive Hikes, Folk Life Festival and Culture Days, Earth Day Plant Giveaways, Artist in Residence, Social Media, Newsletters, Impact Reports, Outreach Materials, Seminars, and Events

Protect and Preserve. Leveraging local community strengths and cultural traditions enhances conservation outcomes and deepens connections between people and nature. Collaboration, creativity, education, and inclusivity are essential for sustainable conservation and cultural heritage preservation through:

- Mobilizing and maintaining a strong volunteer cadre
- Providing diverse, meaningful, free community programs
- Maintaining weekly visitor programs at concession sites
- Supporting job skills training that can advance to careers, especially for scholarship recipients
- Using our community network to advance Park connections
- Ensuring store inventory reflects the Park's cultural and natural resources
- Leading events that encourage community participation

Connect and Inspire. Building relationships, creating educational opportunities, and valuing local knowledge and traditions protects the long-term success of our cherished landscape by:

- Supporting a positive Park image through community education
- Providing Spanish interpretation to encourage immigrant participation
- Supporting all-agility, all-ability opportunities in the Park
- Continuing work with island seniors
- Encouraging greater participation from the ancestral West Indian population
- Inspiring second homeowners to advance sustainable island living and responsible tourism

Strengthen and Sustain. Investing in cultural continuity, community cohesion, environmental stewardship, and youth leadership secures long-term sustainability, relevance, and resilience through:

- Formalizing content for all programs
- Solidifying Culture Days and Folk Life Festival programming
- Supporting modernized and accurate interpretive signage
- Ensuring SKIP programming includes students from St. Thomas schools and all 4th graders
- Expanding the Artist in Residency program
- Strengthening partnerships with other NGOs by providing convening capacity
- Supporting expanded use of the Park Visitor Center and playground area

Explore and Consider. Staying open to new opportunities allows Friends to adapt to evolving needs, emerging challenges, and changing landscapes while protecting biodiversity, preserving cultural heritage, and providing meaningful experiences by:

- Supporting recycling efforts in the Park
- Supporting alternate energy uses
- Advancing more sustainable transportation options
- Encouraging free programming in the Park for residents
- Considering expansion of summer programming

Strategic Pillar: Organization

As a highly functioning organization, we exhibit proficiency through strong governance and leadership, financial accountability, transparency, sustainable fundraising, engagement and membership growth, innovation, capacity building, professional development, and diversity in staff, board, and membership. The long-range plan includes annual audits of strategic pillars, goals, and objectives to monitor effectiveness and modulate as necessary.

Protect and Preserve. Ensuring mission clarity, strategic alignment, strong governance, diverse skilled staff and Board recruitment and retention, and financial management practices protects organizational integrity through:

- Recruiting, retaining, and developing diverse staff, Board, and Advisory Board members aligned with our mission and values, providing professional development, training, and mentorship
- Seeking GuideStar's "Seal of Transparency"
- Implementing a content library for critical documents and calendaring renewal dates and reports
- Developing and maintaining comprehensive risk management and compliance frameworks
- Working closely with Park leadership to develop meaningful annual support requests
- Ensuring insurance coverage accurately reflects needs
- Validating all Park-Friends agreements are current and compliant
- Maintaining open communication with Park leadership
- Calendaring all annual policy and licensing renewals (Certificate of Good Standing, VIDE letter for EDCs, insurance, grants.gov, etc.)

Connect and Inspire. Engaging stakeholders—including Park leadership and staff, Friends staff, Board, Advisory Board, donors, volunteers, and partners—builds stronger relationships, fosters collaboration, and enhances organizational impact. Cultivating strategic partnerships leverages complementary strengths and resources to achieve shared goals through:

- Including financial data in Impact Reports
- Reviewing employment policies, procedures, and benefits through team review and seeking to include mental health support and education

Strengthen and Sustain. Monitoring and evaluating organizational impact regularly assesses effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance. Using institutional knowledge, partner networks, experts, data, and insights informs decisions, improves outcomes, and demonstrates accountability through:

- Streamlining budget to align with the strategic plan and utilizing full cost budgeting where possible
- Creating an organizational scorecard for assessments
- Utilizing empirical evidence to make decisions
- Being open to sunseting programs or events that no longer serve our mission effectively and efficiently
- Strengthening Board onboarding and enhancing Board policies to include a "give-get" component

Explore and Consider. Embracing adaptive management, learning from experiences, adjusting strategies, and seizing opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement enhances our ability to support and advocate for the Park by:

- Considering cross-border exchanges that offer opportunities to share programmatic best practices
- Advancing federal funding opportunities
- Conducting endowment and asset review
- Pursuing legacy programming
- Adding staff position(s) focused on community and culture

Conclusion

This strategic long-range plan 2025-2030 intends to provide a roadmap for the Friends of Virgin Islands National Park's programming, community engagement, fiscal priorities, and organization as well as for the next phase of its partnership with the Park. While this plan represents current thinking for the future of programs, projects and standards of engagement, we will remain open to the worthy and unexpected opportunities that we can explore together. We acknowledge we are living in a highly dynamic time in our human history and must remain flexible to unanticipated circumstances. We believe the confluence of creativity, passion, community engagement, and resource protection will help us thrive and our spirit of goodwill will help guide our success.

Addendum

- History of Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument
- Economic Profile of St. John, US Virgin Islands (2023)
- Friends of Virgin Islands National Park Impact Report 2025

History of Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument

Located on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands, Virgin Islands National Park was established in 1956 and comprises more than half of the mountainous island's land area. The Park includes most of the north shore and most of the central and southeast portions of the island, including 7,259 acres of terrestrial and shoreline habitat and 5,650 acres of adjacent submerged lands (offshore underwater habitat, added to the park in 1962). The Park also includes 128 acres on Hassel Island in Charlotte Amalie Harbor on St. Thomas, which was added in 1978. In 2001, Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument was established to protect an additional 12,708 acres of submerged lands and associated marine resources around the island. In sum, the National Park Service manages almost 58 percent of the land area of St. John and more than 18,000 acres of offshore underwater habitat.

Virgin Islands National Park and Monument offer protection to coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves, and additional marine habitats that support sea turtles, corals, and other marine life. The Park also protects some of the last remaining native tropical dry rain forest in the Caribbean. In 1976, the Park was designated as an International Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), one of the first protected areas in the world to receive this designation. Of the hundreds of UNESCO biosphere reserves worldwide, the Park is one of only 30 reserves containing both marine and terrestrial ecosystems. It provides vital habitat for approximately 130 bird species, 400 reef-associated fish species, 17 whale and dolphin species, 13 reptile species, numerous sponges, and more than 45 stony coral species. Several marine and terrestrial species within the boundaries of the Park and Monument are federally listed as endangered or threatened.

The Park's cultural resources are abundant and diverse, including prehistoric archeological sites, hundreds of historic structures, offshore shipwrecks, and museum collections that encompass artifacts dating as far back as 840 B.C. The Virgin Islands have been inhabited for at least 3,000 years, beginning with hunter-gatherers of the Archaic Period. Settlement continued throughout prehistory and ended with the development of the Taino culture, the pre-Columbian people who were present when Columbus explored the New World. When Europeans arrived, the Virgin Islands became a melting pot, inhabited by people from around the world who came to make a new life on the islands. These colonial settlements date from the 17th century through the 19th century. Visitors can explore the ruins of hundreds of historic structures to get a sense of this rich history.

Sourced from <https://www.nps.gov/viis/index.htm>