



YOUTH EDUCATION PROGRAMS REPORT 2026

The Friends of Virgin Islands National Park Youth Education Programming aims to create a pipeline of environmental education experiences for youth from preschool to college, and beyond! We offer classroom sessions, swimming lessons, field trips, summer programs, internships, scholarships, and employment opportunities to Virgin Island youth. This report runs from October 2025 to September 2026.

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SUMMARY

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park believes that the future of conservation on St. John resides in our youth. As such we are focused on building a pipeline of concerned and engaged citizens with programs that include School Kids In The Park (SKIP), Learn To Swim and Learn To Fish as well as scholarships, summer job opportunities, and internships.

The **School Kids in the Park (SKIP) program** works to get the youth of the Virgin Islands into their National Park to explore, learn, and connect with our natural and cultural resources. In coordination with Virgin Islands National Park interpretation department and independent field experts, Friends offers over 11 field trip options led by trained and experienced guides or rangers. This past year, **SKIP hosted 1,145 students and 190 adults from four different schools on 59 educational experiences** including field trips, in-class presentations, and Earth Day Fair.

Over the summer some **234 students** attending 9 summer programs participated in **Learn to Swim** program swimming and water safety lessons as well as onshore education sessions. The **eco-lessons** included topics on sea turtle biology, sea turtle nest protection, sea turtle stranding response, marine ecosystems, phyla of marine animals, and more.

In 2026, **27 children participated in the Learn to Fish** program across 3 week-long summer sessions and 2 winter workshops. They learned fishing rules and regulations, skills and technique, species and habitat identification, and more! At the end of each session, each student receives their own tackle box and fishing pole to take home.

The Youth Summer Trail Crew is a summer job opportunity for Virgin Islands youth ages 15-18. This season, the **14-strong Summer Trail Crew contributed a total of 2,640 hours** of work and participated in **22 educational and community-oriented activities**.

1,145

students participated in 59 SKIP activities

234

summer campers engaged in swimming and eco-lessons

27

kids learned to fish

14

Summer Trail Crew youth

8

scholarship students in 2 programs.

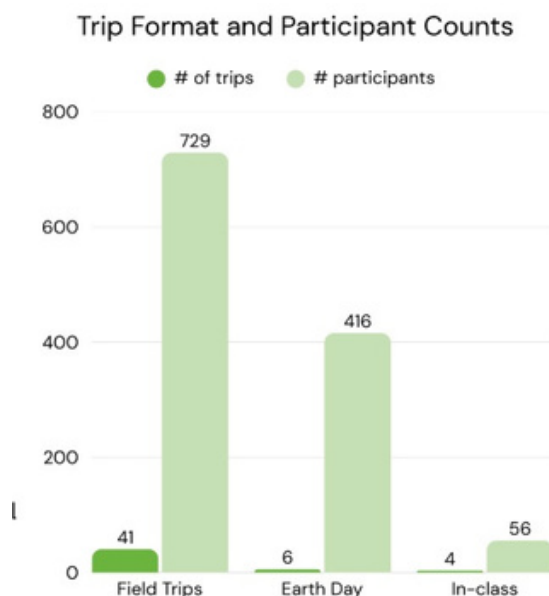
SCHOOL KIDS IN THE PARK

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This past year, **SKIP hosted 1,145 students and 190 adults from 4 schools from St. John and St. Thomas on 59 educational experiences** including field trips, in-class presentations, and Earth Day Fair. Of those numbers, 416 students and 35 adults attended the Earth Day Fair.

Field Trip Options and Content

In coordination with Virgin Islands National Park interpretation department and independent field experts, Friends offers over 11 field trip options led by trained and experienced guides or rangers. The well loved and classic Learn about Sea Turtles received a major upgrade with higher level technical activities for older students which was well received. Ram Head Guided Hike and Learn about Climate Change were new offerings in the 2025/2026 school year.

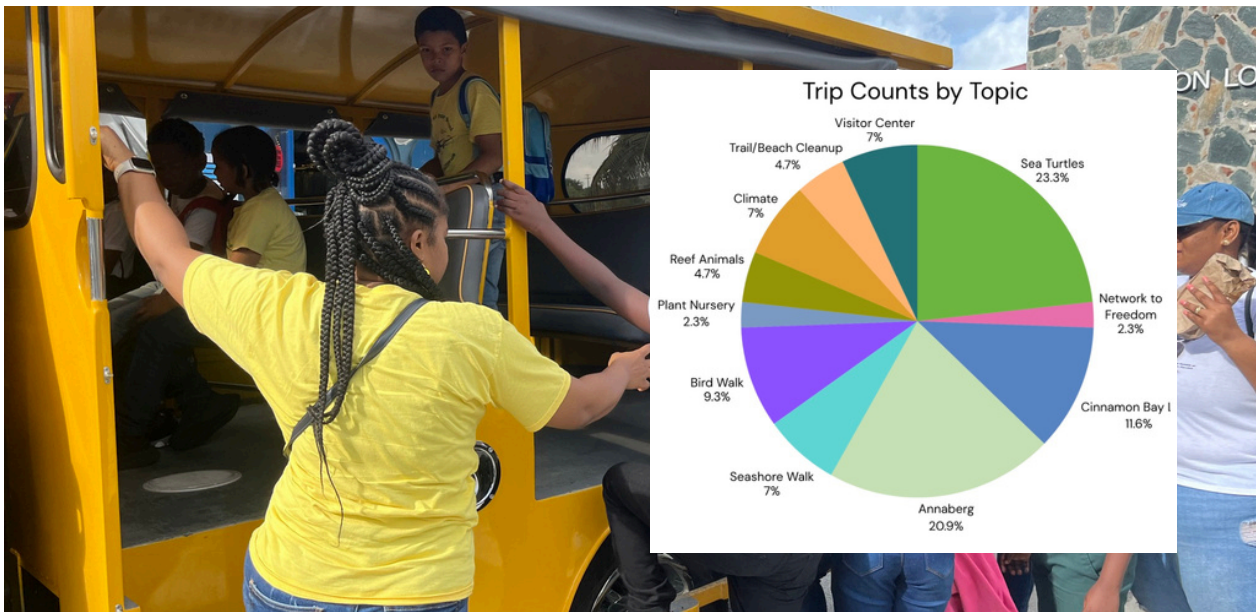


**“The Field trips were second to none.
Well accommodated and thoroughly engaging.”**

Teacher from St. John Seventh-Day Adventist School, St. Thomas

Field trips and in-class presentation topics include:

- Network to Freedom Hike (NPS) 1
- Ram Head Guided Hike (NPS) 0
- Cinnamon Bay Interpretive Loop Trail (NPS) 5
- Explore the History and Heritage of Annaberg (Friends) 9
- Learn about Sea Turtles (Friends) 10
- Leinster Bay Seashore Walk (Friends) 3
- Francis Bay Bird Walk (Friends) 4
- Volunteer with the Trail Crew (Friends) 2
- Tour the Friends Plant Nursery and Learning Lab (Friends) 1
- Animals on the Reef (Friends) 2
- Learn about Climate Change (Friends) 3



All of these field trips can be paired with an in-class presentation prior to the in-field day. This mode allows us to reach the “Three Touch Model,” which begins with an in-class presentation, followed by a field trip into the National Park, and concludes with follow up materials and a discussion with the educator. The benefits of each step is listed below:

- In-class presentation: Prepares students for what to expect on a field trip. Introduces students to the topic so they can get even more out of their in-field day.
- Field Trip to Park: Exposes kids to the endless natural and cultural resources that exist right in their backyard! By allowing local youth to take pride and ownership in the island's resources, SKIP works to create the next motivated and inspired generation of environmental stewards!
- Follow Up: Follow up materials/worksheets are sent to the teacher to ensure and continue comprehension of topics learned on the trip.

Demonstrators

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park works with the Virgin Islands National Park's interpretation department and independent expert demonstrators to bring engaging programming to Virgin Islands students. This past season, National Park programming was run by 5 interpretation rangers (four of which were seasonal rangers). Friends program demonstrators including retired VIIS interpretation ranger Laurel Brannick, culture bearers Ital Anthony, Olivia Christian, and Charles Jacks, and Friends staff Mark Gestwicki and Kaitlyn Cummings.

4th Grade

The 4th Grade focus point for the SKIP program mirrors National Park Service priorities and aims to get every 4th grade class into the Park! This includes engaging them with the Junior Ranger program where students complete a workbook book, take a field trip into the park and are then able to be sworn in as official Jr. Rangers! When the kids are sworn in they recite the Jr. Ranger oaths to "Protect parks, continue to learn about parks, and share their own ranger story with friends and family!" NPS Rangers then sign the certificates in their workbooks, they receive their official Jr. Ranger Badge, and they also receive their Every Kid Outdoors pass, which allows the kids and their parents to access federal lands without paying an entrance fee. This year, **40 4th grade students on St. John** were engaged in this program and received their Junior Ranger Badge.



"The students were engaged and excited to learn. It was a wonderful hands-on experience."

Teacher from Joseph Sibilly Elementary, St. Thomas

Earth Day Fair

The Earth Day Fair is a celebration of conservation and community with hundreds of school students from St. John and St. Thomas gathering for a fun day of learning. In its 17th year, Earth Day includes a Litter Stomp Parade and the 4th grade Junior Ranger swearing in ceremony.

St. John schools are invited to send their entire school to the Virgin Islands National Park ball field for the Earth Day Fair. The invitation is also extended to fourth grade classes from St. Thomas schools. This year, 416 students from Giffit Hill School, Julius E. Sprauve School, St. John Christian Academy, Joseph Sibilly Elementary, and three homeschool pods attended.

This field trip day is a true community event that brings together 18 environmental nonprofits and government agencies to share their passion for conservation and protection of our islands. Our thanks to the following incredible organizations, teams and individuals who share our passion for educating and engaging our youth and host booths at the Fair: Coral World Ocean and Reef Initiative, Rotary Club of St. John, ITAL Delroy Anthony, DPNR (Territorial Parks & Protected Areas), Island Green Living, Jaguar Project, St. John School of the Arts, VI Audubon Society, Coral Bay Community Council, Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority, UVI Coral Conservation/Reef Response, CORE Foundation, UVI 'Strong Coasts Program', GRROE USVI Mangroves, WAPA, St. John Wildlife Rehab, Friends of The Park Trails Program, and Friends of the Park Turtle Program.

In addition, a number of sponsors and partners help make it all possible: Liberty Foundation, USVI Department of Tourism, VI Waste Management Authority, VI Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation, and the National Park Service.



SUMMER CAMP PROGRAM

During the summer, Friends of Virgin Islands National Park provided swimming and eco lessons to a record 234 individual children ranging in age from 3-18 years attending 9 St. John summer camps including:

- Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation
- The Boys and Girls Club of St. John
- The Boys and Girls Club of St. Thomas
- Dr. Peet's Music Suite
- Dynamic Summer Program
- John's Folly Learning Institute
- Julius E. Sprauve School
- Giffit Hill School
- St. John Outdoor Love City Learning Summer Creative Arts and Literacy Workshop

Learn To Swim

Summer swim programming resulted in an extraordinary **795 swim education experiences for 234 participants**. Of those participants, 71 completed the American Red Cross requirements to advance to the next Learn-to-Swim level—a significant accomplishment requiring attendance at multiple sessions and successful demonstration of all required skills. While not every participant attended enough sessions to test for advancement, every child left with increased water confidence, stronger swimming skills, and a deeper connection to the ocean. Whether it is a child's first time putting their face in the water or their fourth visit building upon earlier successes, every experience contributes to increased confidence, safety, and enjoyment in the ocean.

Eighteen American Red Cross-certified Lifeguards, Water Safety Instructors, and Instructor Aides worked nearly every day to provide exceptional instruction, supervision, and support to our participants.



Summer Eco-lessons

Alongside Learn to Swim Summer programming, onshore educational presentations were offered in combination with the swim lessons, covering topics on sea turtle biology, sea turtle nest protection, sea turtle stranding response, marine ecosystems, phyla of marine animals, and more.

Students have participated in this programming for three or more years now and have demonstrated incredible information retention, citing specific ecosystem structure concepts learned in years past and reaffirmed this summer. Each group showed a passion for learning about the ocean and had specific requests to learn more about specific animals such as orcas, crabs, jellyfish, and deep sea creatures. While snorkeling, the children were able to see and name animals & corals they had learned about in the eco lessons. Some students even requested to complete research on topics to assist with the presentation.



LEARN TO FISH

Friends hosts Learn to Fish as a way to engage the next generation of conservationists with meaningful outdoor experiences and educate them on the fish species in our waters, safe and sustainable fishing practices, healthy living, and environmental protection.

In 2026, 27 children participated in Learn to Fish across 3 week-long summer sessions and 2 winter workshops. They learned fishing rules and regulations, skills and technique, species and habitat identification, and more! At the end of each session, each student receives their own tackle box and fishing pole to take home.

SUMMER TRAIL CREW

The Youth Summer Trail Crew is a summer job opportunity for Virgin Islands youth ages 15-18 to participate in trail maintenance, historic site clearing, marine debris cleanups, habitat restoration, community engagement, and educational workshops. This season, the **14-strong Summer Trail Crew contributed a total of 2,640 hours** of work.

During the 8-week long program, crew members worked at **19 sites within the Park (10 trails and 9 historic sites)** and **participated in 22 educational and community-oriented activities** including CPR Training, Coral ID & fragments of opportunity workshop, Traditional Baking & Gardening at Annaberg, Hurricane/Disaster Preparedness, Sea Turtle Monitoring and Protection, Sailing, Music and Plants, Coral Bay Community Council, Light Carpentry at the Cinnamon Plant Nursery, Coral World Tour, Marine Science Methods, Caribbean Folklore, Yoga, Kayaking, Paddleboarding, Reef Bay Educational Hike, VIERS Coral Research, Learn to Swim, Personal Finance, VIIS Archaeology Lab Tour, Bird Walk, Library Grounds Brush Clearing, and USDA Office Service grounds cleanup.



SCHOLARSHIPS

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park awarded **eight scholarships to Virgin Islands youth studying at the undergraduate level in the 2025-26 academic year.** The awards totaling \$37,500 fall under the auspices of the Friends' two scholarship programs: the Jeffrey Matheny Scholarship and the Noble Samuel Scholarship and Internship.

The two new scholarship recipients were Justin Richards and Valorie Gore. Justin Richards, a graduate of Giffit Hill School, was awarded the Jeffrey Matheny Scholarship to study marine biology at the University of the Virgin Islands. Ivanna Eudora Kean High School graduate, Valorie Gore, was awarded the Noble Samuel Scholarship and Internship to study biochemistry and microbiology at the University of South Carolina.

The Jeffrey Matheny Scholarship was established in 2010 by his family in recognition of Jeffrey's love of St. John and supports Virgin Islands students at the university level studying fields related to natural resource management and protection. Recipients of this scholarship in the 2025-26 academic year were Una Alexander (Howard University), Lindsay Barr (Colorado State University), Dennis Bigrigg (University of the Virgin Islands), Justin Richards (University of the Virgin Islands) and Lyric Vacharat (University of North Carolina Wilmington).

The Noble Samuel Scholarship and Internship launched in 2021 is endowed by anonymous donors inspired by the life of Noble Samuel who was a beloved park ranger known for generously sharing his love for the Virgin Islands National Park with passion and humility. The 2025-26 recipients of this scholarship, which is inclusive of a paid internship, were Kaj Gerard (University of the Virgin Islands), Valorie Gore (University of South Carolina) and Maxim McMahon (University of the Virgin Islands).



Noble Samuel



**THANK YOU TO OUR
VOLUNTEERS, MEMBERS
AND DONORS.**
YOU MADE THIS AMAZING
SEASON POSSIBLE!

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