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GO WILD VI FISH

a publication of the Virgin Islands' Division of Fish & Wildlife, Department of Planning & Natural Resources



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Message from the Governor



Albert Bryan Jr.

It gives me pleasure to introduce the third issue of *Go Wild, Go Fish VI*, the latest magazine by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources' Division of Fish & Wildlife. As a proponent of the blue economy of the Virgin Islands, the natural resources across our landscape provide ample opportunities to sustainably build and promote wellness and harmony within our environment and our territory.

It is also with a sense of accomplishment that under the leadership of Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol and his team, I was able to sign off on the landmark Comprehensive Land & Water Use Plan highlighted in these pages. After half of a century of effort to develop the Plan, the document will serve as a guide for the development of our islands.

From fisheries and wildlife management to archery trainings and sustainable seafood workshops, to conducting research on the health of our fish stocks and working with our community partners, the division is here to serve the needs of the public, as part of our territorial government.

I extend my congratulations to all 2025 Employees of the Year, including DPNR's Maria Taveras and Charles Maynard, and DFW's Tia Rabsatt and Charleen Isaac, whose tireless public service helps the government to run more efficiently.

We encourage all to join us in becoming better stewards of conservation, as we protect our home for future generations.

Message from the Commissioner



Jean-Pierre L. Oriol

Our collective mission at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources focuses on safeguarding and managing our natural and cultural resources of the Virgin Islands.

In this edition of *Go Wild, Go Fish VI*, we delve into some of our roles in preserving this material culture.

Our most notable accomplishment this past year is the approved Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan.

This plan offers a comprehensive roadmap for managing the Virgin Islands' lands and waters while honoring our stakeholders and respecting the fish and wildlife coexisting with our communities.

Over the last 36 months, we have collectively reviewed historical and current materials on zoning, natural resources, geography, and development, culminating in a plan approved by the 35th Legislature.

Our commitment remains unwavering: to protect and conserve our material culture through the voice and vision of our people.

Message from the Director



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DPNR Deputy Commissioner — Athneil "Bobby" Thomas
DPNR Assistant Commissioner — Jozette Walker
DPNR Commissioner — Jean-Pierre L. Oriol

Each issue of *Go Wild, Go Fish VI* that I review creates such a feeling of pride in me. I reflect on the work that the staff of the Division of Fish and Wildlife are conducting. Their professionalism, collaborations, and knowledge support a huge range of services for the Territory. Our employee of the year features and the stories in this issue detail the ways that our staff move natural resource management forward in different ways – not all of our staff are in the field, as we're also attending regional meetings, working on federal grants compliance, and supporting our border control's agricultural inspection units.

As always, we support our sister divisions in DPNR. The Division of Libraries, Archives, and Museums has opened the Florence Williams Library with two additions from the Division. First, a mural featuring our native wetland plants and birds, and second, the first residency of the traveling exhibit of the DFW natural heritage collection.

This weekend, I will be choosing one of the two recipes from the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council's underutilized fish recipe in this issue to cook something new with the fish that I like to purchase at a certain roadside stand. While I eat, I'll be contemplating our advocacy for fishers in the artisanal queen conch fishery, the work of the Local Food and Farm Council, and the Reef Responsible Sustainable Seafood Initiative. Together, we can preserve, protect, restore, promote, and manage the fish and wildlife resources of the Virgin Islands.



Division of Fish and Wildlife

What We Do



FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

- Register 900+ recreational & commercial fishers annually
- Enter 6,000 Commercial Catch Report into a national database annually
- Conduct ~275 scientific sea life surveys annually
- Measure an average of 155 fish at each fishing tournament



WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

- Respond to a dozen public wildlife incidents monthly
- Coordinate a network of 45 rapid response volunteers
- Support 2 local artists to design educational murals annually
- Collaborate with local and international scientists
- Manage 32 offshore cays for endangered species, invasive species, and migratory birds



RECREATION

- Maintain 22 moorings, 5 boat access points

- Provide educational materials for restaurants and fishers

- Teach 800+ FREE archery lessons annually



- Fund 500 kayak and wetland tours to Virgin Islanders annually



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

- Engage ~100 exotic pet owners annually

- Support ~dozen community partners to engage in a ~\$1 mil+ habitat restoration and outreach annually

- Issue 100+ permits for:
 - ~Research
 - ~Collection

- ~Mangrove trimming
- ~Endangered species
- ~Wildlife control

- Mentor ~10 high school & undergraduates annually



- Manage federal funds for disaster relief



Department of Planning and Natural Resources

Division of Fish and Wildlife

<https://dpnr.vi.gov/fish-and-wildlife/>



Linked 

Planning for the Future



Land and water use plan signed into law



photos courtesy of DPNR staff

Consider the beautician who wants to set up an at-home salon for clients. Or the non-profit residence for disadvantaged children that wishes to make minor repairs to its building.

Due to the territory's outdated zoning laws, which date back to 1972, and a lack of overarching regulations touting a vision for development in the Virgin Islands, well-meaning projects often faced roadblocks when it came to navigating the local permitting process.

In many cases, applications submitted to the Division of Comprehensive & Coastal Zone Planning for rezoning consideration came in piecemeal fashion, leading to a pervasive challenge of spot zoning requests that comprised half of CCZP's workload.

"We are delighted to push through this Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan," DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol said. "It incorporates extensive feedback gathered throughout the planning process."

In all, the 198-page plan included contributions from 91 resident volunteers, 15 town hall meetings, approximately 1400 participants, and an online survey. With the newly passed USVI Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan, hailed as 54 years in the making, signed by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. into law in December, formerly disjointed development can now be streamlined. The far-reaching legislation was part of a historic move to end the often-cumbersome approach to development in the Virgin Islands.

Spearheaded by DPNR through a contract with Horsley Witten Group LLC, a series of townhalls, one-on-one meetings, and surveys were conducted to gain public insight into their vision for the territory.

Other consultants on the project included Camoin Associates for economic developments; Dover Kohl & Partners for community design; Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism for heritage and culture; Jaredian Design Group for community design and planning; NT Media Productions for media and communications; and St. John Heritage Collective for heritage, culture, and design to provide technical expertise.

Some of the pressing concerns were to put an end to spot zoning, resolve conflicts between public and private use, protect natural resources, and provide enhanced public access to the coast.

The plan identifies needed reforms to the 2-tier permitting system, establishment of local planning boards, which are guided by accountability, transparency, and consistency with access to training and education.

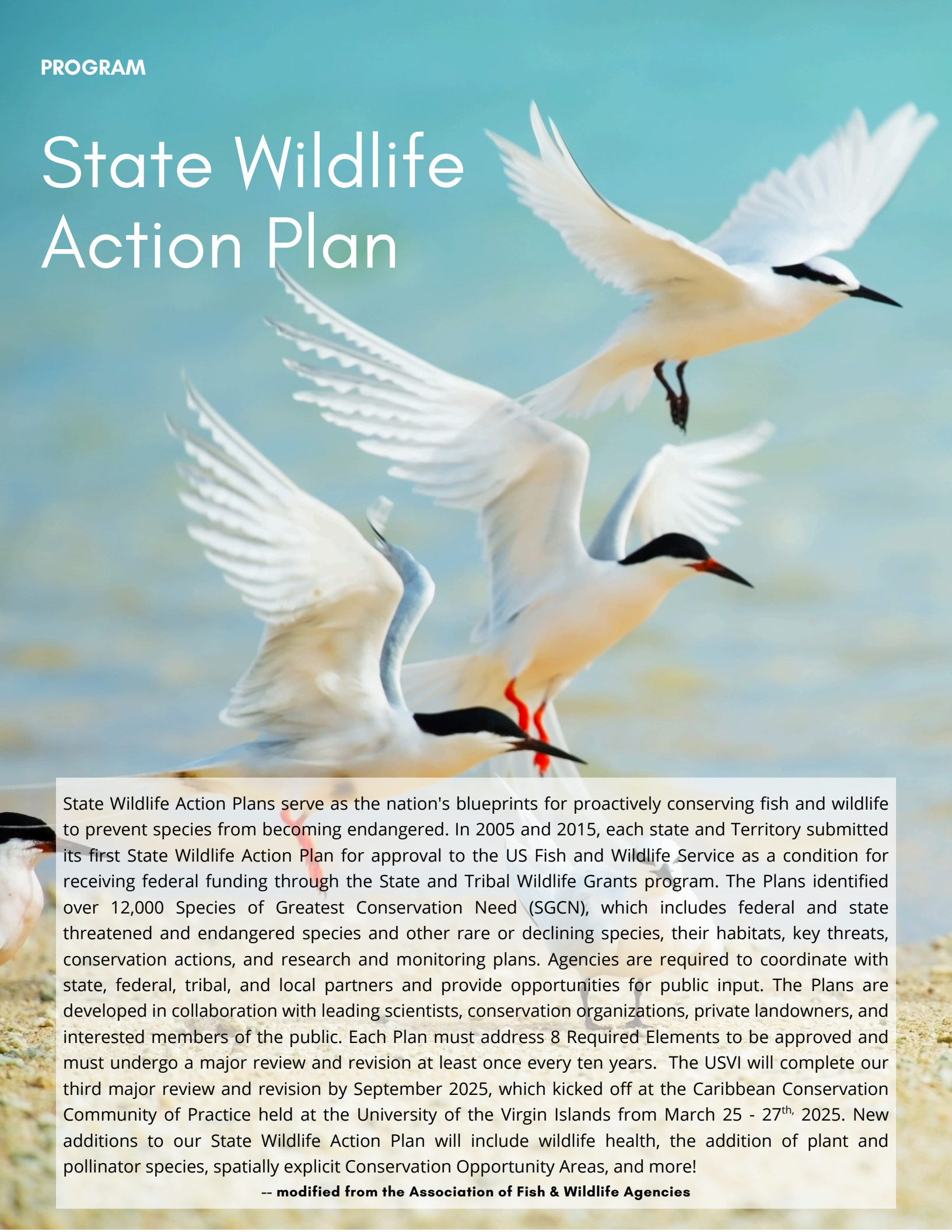
As a guiding document, the plan pinpoints planning goals to outline what Virgin Islanders see as the landscape of the future. It considers how to protect environmentally sensitive areas, waters, coastlines, and historic sites. It is meant to prioritize future investments in community services and infrastructure, create sustainability for local businesses and tourism, and ensure residents have a say in the decision-making.

The plan was developed from foundational research including a 1990/2004 draft comprehensive land and water use plan, a 2014 VI development law, and a Vision 2040 plan for economic development, along with an assortment of others for various segments of the government and community.

As stated previously, the Plan is a guiding document and DPNR, as well as other government agencies and non-profits, now have the task of implementing many of the goals, policies, and strategies identified by the public and memorialized in the Implementation Matrix.

Implementation of the Plan takes a multi-year, multi-agency approach due to the number of factors that go into development: identification of desired density, capacity of agencies (manpower, finances, etc.) to develop the infrastructure needed, the development of public-private partnerships, and the political atmosphere needed to adopt new policy and laws. As the territory steps into a new chapter - implementing the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan - the momentum gained by adopting it cannot be lost as the public's involvement is paramount to getting many of the reforms visioned come to fruition.

State Wildlife Action Plan

The background of the entire page is a photograph of three white seabirds, likely frigatebirds, in flight. They have white plumage, black caps, and red bills. They are flying over a sandy beach with a blue sky in the background. The birds are in various stages of flight, with wings spread wide.

State Wildlife Action Plans serve as the nation's blueprints for proactively conserving fish and wildlife to prevent species from becoming endangered. In 2005 and 2015, each state and Territory submitted its first State Wildlife Action Plan for approval to the US Fish and Wildlife Service as a condition for receiving federal funding through the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program. The Plans identified over 12,000 Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), which includes federal and state threatened and endangered species and other rare or declining species, their habitats, key threats, conservation actions, and research and monitoring plans. Agencies are required to coordinate with state, federal, tribal, and local partners and provide opportunities for public input. The Plans are developed in collaboration with leading scientists, conservation organizations, private landowners, and interested members of the public. Each Plan must address 8 Required Elements to be approved and must undergo a major review and revision at least once every ten years. The USVI will complete our third major review and revision by September 2025, which kicked off at the Caribbean Conservation Community of Practice held at the University of the Virgin Islands from March 25 - 27th, 2025. New additions to our State Wildlife Action Plan will include wildlife health, the addition of plant and pollinator species, spatially explicit Conservation Opportunity Areas, and more!

-- modified from the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies



Whether monitoring sea turtles, water birds, or vulnerable American eels, the Division of Fish and Wildlife works within the Virgin Islands State Wildlife Action Plan to accomplish goals created in collaboration with the public to manage the fish and wildlife resources of the territory.

The division works closely with federal, state, and community partners to monitor, assess, and enhance forests, wetlands, and shoreline habitats, wildlife species like freshwater fish, reptiles, birds, sea turtles, and sport fish like groupers.

Goals of the plan include creating goals that connect back to specific improvements that benefit Species of Greatest Conservation Need, to reduce stressors to them, and to enhance their populations.

The Virgin Islands is currently working on revising its 2018 version of the plan, which needs to be updated every ten years. The eight elements include: species information, habitats, threats, actions, monitoring, review, partnerships, and public input! Among the 2025 changes, DFW will be looking at new additions this year, detailed below:



Identify plant species of greatest conservation need and develop strategies to conserve and enhance these populations



Identify invertebrate species of greatest conservation need and develop strategies to conserve and enhance these populations



Identify pollinator species of greatest conservation need and develop strategies to conserve and enhance these populations



Create a strategy to assess and monitor wildlife health with the Southeast Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study



Prioritize actions and habitats for our dynamic environment that are resilient to storms, invasive species, and natural disasters



Identify freshwater species of greatest conservation need list and strategy based on recent partnerships with the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership.



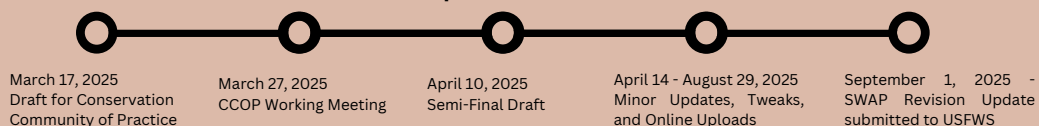
Working with partners to identify and update USVI species of greatest conservation need using a quantitative framework



Planning resulting in specific action items and timelines, while incorporating progress related to previous goals and objectives

Proposed Timeline

**STAY TUNED
TO LEARN
HOW TO
PARTICIPATE!**



An aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. The image shows a steep, lush green cliff on the right side, covered in dense vegetation. At the base of the cliff is a narrow, pebbly beach. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, with white foam from the waves washing onto the shore. In the distance, a small, rocky island is visible in the blue ocean. The overall scene is a beautiful representation of a natural coastal environment.

PARTNERSHIP

photo by Island Conservation

Savana: A New Wildlife & Marine Sanctuary

photo by Island Conservation

Located to the west of St. Thomas, the offshore cay of Savana Island is now part of a global challenge. In April 2024, it joined a network of 17 islands across the world to include locations such as the Galapagos, French Polynesia, Tonga, and Palau to be a center point of restoration.

The Island Ocean Connection Challenge is a project coordinated by Island Conservation, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and Re:Wild with a mission to restore and rewild 40 globally significant island-ocean ecosystems by 2030.

The organizations see the restoration activities as a nature-based tool to combat global climate change.

Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources called this unique partnership an opportunity to bring attention to conservation efforts in the territory, and subsequently named Savana Island a new wildlife and marine sanctuary in 2024.

"In addition to protecting threatened wildlife species such as the Virgin Islands tree boa, the added benefit of this collaboration is restoring important habitats including marine ecosystems such as our coral reefs, seagrass beds, and mangroves," Oriol said.

Under the partnership, DPNR pledges to explore the feasibility and identify a portfolio of invasive species eradications and rewilding initiatives to restore islands in the territory by 2025.

The department also agrees to eradicate rodents, implement rewilding of the Virgin Islands Tree Boa, and implement terrestrial and marine monitoring on Savana Island by 2030.

Other initiatives under the agreement are to fundraise with IOCC partners; share knowledge through knowledge sharing about the role of islands in the surrounding marine ecosystems; and to foster meaningful connections between the growing consortium of partners.

Recognizing Savana Island for both its local and global importance, the Commissioner hereby declares that:

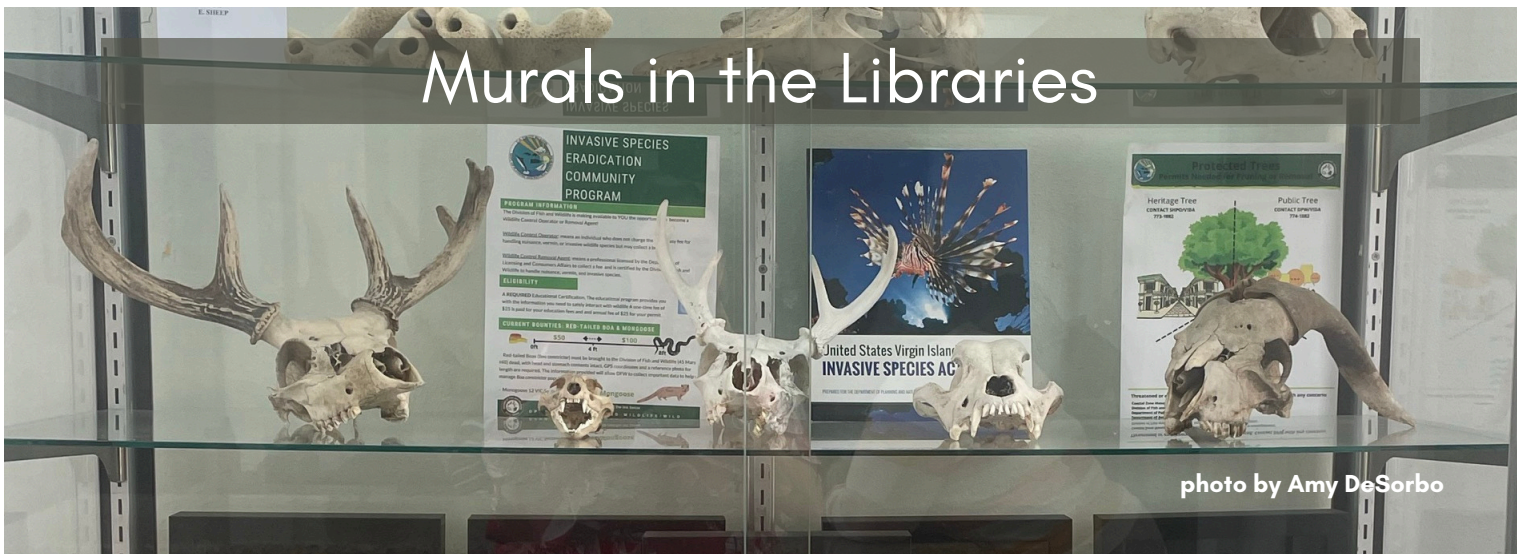
1. The Virgin Islands of the United States has historically recognized and protected special areas in its public domain, including the named islands and cays of Capella, Carval Rock, Cas, Cockroach, Congo, Cricket, Dog, Dutchcap, Flanagan, Frenchcap, Kalkun, Pelican, Shark, Stevens, Sula; the game preserves of Flat and Little Flat, Ruth, Saba and Little Saba, and Turtledove, and the Wildlife and Marine Sanctuary of Frank Bay;
2. The offshore cay, Savana Island, located west of St. Thomas at latitude 18.34097 N, longitude -65.0794 E, constitutes a distinct and valuable natural resource of vital importance to the people of the Virgin Islands.
3. Savana Island and its surrounding area is locally important for biodiversity to thrive, with dense forests of *Coccothrinax barbadensis* and stands of *Tabebuia heterophylla*, dry shrublands of *Lantana camara*, and cliffs with *Puffinus lherminieri* and other migratory shore birds, possesses ecological and aesthetic qualities that give this area special territorial and international significance for restoration and rewilding.
4. Restoration of islands by removal of invasive species of flora and fauna improves habitat for seabirds, a group of animals that act as ecosystem engineers linking our lands and seas through nutrient cycling essential for the construction of coral reefs, to benefit ecotourism, fisheries, and marine industries.
5. Designation of Savana Island as a Wildlife and Marine Sanctuary as an inviolate sanctuary to facilitate the objectives of the Department to protect, preserve, manage and regulate an area of special territorial significance.
6. Therefore, designation of Savana Island as a Wildlife and Marine Sanctuary will fulfill the policies, goals, and purposes of V.I. Code Title. 12, Chapter 1, Subsection 94.

Dated, April 8, 2024



murals by Barbara Gelardi
photos by Amy DeSorbo

Murals in the Libraries



Great egrets peek out from the mangrove. Wild ducks fly across a sunset-glazed body of water. And bats emerge from their roost to explore another evening. These outdoor scenes from the Virgin Islands are the subject of murals adorning the Florence Augusta Stevens Williams Library in Christiansted, St. Croix, as part of its beautiful renovations unveiled last spring during a grand reopening and restoration.

The art, which depicts typical settings in territorial wetlands was painted by artist Barbara Gelardi, as part of a mural project in collaboration between the Division of Fish & Wildlife, Horsley Witten Group, LLC, and the Division of Libraries, Archives, & Museums.

Gelardi's brightly colored murals can be viewed throughout businesses and homes on the island. She operates an art studio and gallery in Christiansted, St. Croix.

The tranquil imagery on the wall joins another painting of the library's namesake - Florence Augusta Stephens Williams, who is hailed as the first native Crucian librarian. With its early beginnings in the 1920s, the public library in St. Croix developed under the administration of various government departments.

"The mural of St. Croix mangroves with native birds has educated hundreds of USVI Public Library patrons and guests already," Amy DeSorbo, director of DLAM, said. "The amazing local artist Barbara Gelardi paints with love, and you can feel the love when you look at her beautiful work."

In addition to the mural project, DFW has also assisted with the installation of a display of local wildlife artifacts that visitors can view on site at the library.

"There is a long history of natural history investigation and outreach in the Division of Fish and Wildlife since its inception in 1942," DFW Director, Nicole Angeli, Ph.D., said, adding that the collection includes artifacts from invasive and domestic herbivores, bird eggs, and marine artifacts for longitudinal study of the natural resources of the Territory's material culture

While most of the states across the country have natural history programs, the Virgin Islands does not, she said.

Some of the division's artifacts date back to the time when Harry A. Beatty, an early employee of Fish & Wildlife who had observed birds on St. Croix, for example in 1939, walking through the mangroves of Krause Lagoon and recording sightings of white-crowned pigeons, golden-cheeked warblers, and eastern willets, noting their size, color, abundance, and nesting patterns.

"Now, we're using those historic collections as tools for education and there's no better place to display them than in a public library," Angeli said.

"It's almost fitting that the eggs are coming back to the library, since Ms. Florence Williams herself used to support Mr. Beatty in his work, including keeping the eggs safe in the original building. They are the result of 80 years of study."

Library Hours of Operation

Tuesday: 9:00 AM – 6:00 PM

Wednesday: 9:00 AM – 6:00 PM

Thursday: 9:00 AM – 6:00 PM

Friday: 9:00 AM – 6:00 PM

Saturday: 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM

For more information, contact 340-773-1082 ext. 2277 on St. Croix and 340-344-6047 on St. Thomas.



photo courtesy of Taylor Brunson

PROFILE

SEAS Islands Alliance Workforce Fellow: Taylor Brunson

Sea Turtle Coordinator

Taylor Brunson started out with a love of dolphins, before her interest turned to sharks. But one summer when her shark internship didn't materialize, she got redirected to a turtle program, and her first time watching baby hatchlings scurry from the sand to the shoreline made an impression that stuck.

Originally from Southaven, Mississippi, Brunson grew up outside of Memphis, Tennessee, landlocked. She fed her interest in the ocean by watching shows like "Planet Earth."

Her first thought was to become a dolphin trainer, then she considered wrangling sharks and aiding in their conservation as a career.

"It just never worked out," Brunson said. Before completing her bachelor's at the University of Tampa in Florida in marine science and biology in 2020, she joined nighttime turtle activities on Casey Key Beach and Keewaydin Island which sparked an interest in sea turtles that continued to grow.

"Nesting females are very large creatures that seem so ancient," Brunson said.

She came to the Virgin Islands to do her master's degree in marine and environmental science at the University of the Virgin Islands, graduating in 2023.

For her thesis project, she tracked green sea turtles in Brewer's Bay to figure out what species of seagrass they were eating.

The research involved placing 60 acoustic array receivers into Brewer's to determine which areas sea turtles frequented and to determine their positions.

After spending a summer tagging 17 turtles and tracking them over a year, she found that they were preferring to eat native seagrass.



Taylor Brunson

In October 2023, through a partnership between UVI and the SEAS Islands Alliance program, Brunson was able to be funded for a fellowship at the Division of Fish and Wildlife.

Her main duties involved coordinating a USVI Sea Turtle Meeting from Aug. 26 to 28, 2024 on St. Croix for researchers, management agencies, volunteers, and fish and wildlife staff.

Additionally, she reviewed 165 sea turtle strandings over the last 5 years, reported by the Division of Fish and Wildlife and the Sea Turtle Assistance & Rescue Network, compiled by the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network.

The data seemed to reflect that the majority of green sea turtles are killed by boat strikes, leading to damage too severe for them to be saved, Brunson said. Other causes of strandings were entrapment in fishing gear and shoreline vegetation.

Another recurring issue is the rise in cases of turtles developing fibropapillomatosis, a type of herpes.

It is important for the public to note that all sea turtles in the Virgin Islands are federally protected.

Green and hawksbill sea turtles nest from August to the end of November, while leatherbacks nest from May to July.

"They're super cute, but don't touch them," Brunson said. "They're docile, but that's not an excuse to harass them."

To report an injured sea turtle, contact STAR at **340-690-0474**.

PROGRAM

Designs to restore the Virgin Islands' wetlands



Donning chest waders and traversing through Smith Bay Pond while on a site visit, Brian Daley, Ph.D. a senior ecologist at Horsley Witten Group, an engineering, design, and environmental consulting firm contracted by the Department of Planning & Natural Resources' Division of Fish & Wildlife, recalls feeling like he stepped into another world once the beach taxis and tourists faded from view.

Gallinules with baby chicks quickly caught his attention in the quieter landscape of the mangroves. He also noted the feeling of serenity from witnessing other birds across the territory including white cheeked pintail ducks and blue winged teals paddling, and osprey hunting fish in the territory's tropical waters.

Smith Bay Pond is just one of the sites on a top 10 list of the largest and most ecologically important wetlands of the Virgin Islands identified for restoration following the devastation of the 2017 hurricanes.

Other wetlands including Salt River and Great Pond on St. Croix and Compass Point and Red Hook Pond on St. Thomas, are also the subject of new design plans meant to help assess the stressors and preserve these important ecological habitats.

Daley said that after the storms, the focus eventually turned to the environment after building roofs and electricity were restored to the Virgin Islands.

Horsley Witten Group assembled a team of bird specialists, civil engineers, and storm water experts to evaluate drainage systems, clogged culverts, and additional challenges to the territory's wetlands, while proposing design solutions that take into consideration the ways in which mangroves divert storm surge and coastal flooding.

"We hosted public meetings in the afternoons and evenings to let everybody comment on the design potential," Daley said.

The top 10 sites were selected for 33% design phases. Out of those, a handful were chosen for advanced design proposals. The intent is that these designs can be used as a mitigation action tool, which is successful in other places worldwide and are called wetland mitigation banks.

"Once we restore the mangrove forests and their associated ponds, they will continue to offer habitat to wildlife and provide ecological services to human communities that live adjacent to the wetlands," Daley said. "I hope that these designs lead to our restoring the health and balance the wetlands once had."

Enhancing boating access for the territory



photo courtesy of Alfonso Garcia

Dock improvements across the territory, accessible boating ramps, and kayak launches that assist persons with disabilities, are just some of the project plans underway to help enhance the recreational boating experience in the Virgin Islands.

No more hauling gear from parking lot to the dock or worrying about toppling into the water due to wave action.

Alfonso Garcia, Jr., DFW's Special Projects Coordinator for Boating Infrastructure, envisions improvements that everyone can benefit from once the projects are complete, adding that the upgrades are mandatory for federal compliance with the Americans Disabilities Act.

"We also want to find ways to improve access to our waters to all residents, and for those increasing participation in various water activities within the territory," Garcia said.

Renovations are evident at facilities in Frederiksted and Gallows Bay, with ramps being repaired or replaced across St. Croix. Loading structures are planned for Frederiksted and Altona Lagoon, to expand to other facilities in the future. ADA kayak launches are also in the planning stage for persons with disabilities, with slides, elevated steps, and retractable planks to allow them to maneuver without assistance.

"Anyone can use these kayak launches without any assistance, from taking your kayak from the parking lot, to launching it into the water," Garcia said.

Several locations within the territory are being considered to include Salt River, and Molasses Pier; on St. Thomas at Brewer's Bay and Red Hook; and potential spots on St. John.

Additional enhancements include plans to add fish cleaning stations and replace monofilament collectors at the territory's beaches.

The recreational boating community also now has in-depth guidance to apply for multiple community grants aimed at improving and constructing access points to the water. The new project proposal manual and application packet created by the Division allows prospective program applicants to learn about eligibility and requirements for grants relating to Boating Access, Boating Infrastructure, and Clean Vessel Act Programs, three programs available to states and territories.

"From recreational boaters to charter operators, and non-profits to marinas, DPNR is invested in assisting all community-led initiations to improve recreational boating access facilities. This new easy-to-read guide leads Virgin Islanders through the application process," Commissioner Oriol said. "It is our hope that this guide will help the recreational boating community take advantage of the opportunities available for funding these important projects."

The 30-page manual offers step-by-step insight on funding available for activities ranging from construction and renovation of boating infrastructure; completion of engineering designs, permits and permitting; pump-out facilities; navigational aids; and outreach materials. The manual includes timelines for consideration, eligibility requirements, and ranking criteria, in a user-friendly format, accompanied by an 11-page application to standardize the information provided by interested applicants.

This program is funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Sport Fish Restoration Program by collections from excise taxes on gasoline, boats, and fishing tackle.

To access grant guidelines, visit [BASG-BIG-CVA-Project-Proposal-Guidelines-for-USVI-V10.2.2023.pdf](#).

PROFILE



Employee of the Year 2025:

St. Croix District

CHARLEEN ISAAC was contracted as a hurricane disaster assistant for DFW, ensuring that over \$9 million dollars were distributed to fishers and appropriately catalogued for auditing purposes. She joined the Department after that program ended and today facilitates the procurement of goods and services that allow our staff to get out into the field, work safely, and travel regionally for resources that benefit the Territory. She has shown great resilience to complete tasks and follow-up on work needed for purchases to be made and paid. This past year, she attended an off-island training to learn more about NOAA disaster funding to benefit our fishers, and she has suggested that we create a new tracking system for our budget which will be implemented this coming year!

PROFILE

Employee of the Year 2025:

St. Thomas – St. John District



TIA RABSATT was a graduate of the University of the Virgin Islands when she came to the Department in 2020, and she was promoted from an Environmental Specialist Trainee to a Fisheries Biologist this past year. Her ability to work well with all staff, in addition to facilitating many projects for the fisheries and wildlife bureaus, like the plant working group and the conch dive surveys, shows dedication to the mission of the Division, to the staff, and to the resources of the Virgin Islands.

photos by Danielle Olive

PROFILE

Port Sampler
St. Croix District



photos courtesy of Norberto Davis

PROFILE

Norberto Davis

Port Sampler, St. Croix District

When Norberto Davis was 14, his love of big cats led him to want to become a felinologist. His dream to work with lions, tigers, and jaguars stemmed from watching countless episodes of the *Discovery Channel* and *Animal Planet*. But deep inside he also harbored a love of the ocean, liked corals, and enjoyed being in the water.

He graduated in 2018 from St. Croix Educational Complex, joined the Virgin Islands National Guard, and by 2020, took on a job with the VI Fire and Emergency Management System. At 23, he became a sergeant in the military, and the newest portsampler on board at the Division of Fish & Wildlife.

While visiting the Department of Planning & Natural Resources for an earth change permit one day, Davis saw an advertisement for the position and thought he'd be a good fit.

Born and raised on St. Croix and going out fishing with his uncles as a teenager, he was accustomed to the marine environment. He started in August 2024.

Day one on the job, Davis thought he was going to have a seat at the office and watch a powerpoint presentation on how to do the job.

Instead, he was fully immersed in field work at Molasses Pier, with fishers bringing in 70 to 100 fish in the span of an hour that he and former port sampler Liandry De La Cruz Quinones had to weigh, measure, and identify an assortment of parrotfish, barracuda, and snappers.

"I got to meet a lot of the fishermen. It's been good working with them and learning," Davis said. "I thought it was actually pretty fun," he said.





Fisheries liaisons work with fishers across the territory to explain Division of Fish & Wildlife rules and regulations, in the Virgin Islands, and to serve as an intermediary between the sub-agency.

Fishers who would like to get in touch with the liaison can call fisheries biologist Maggie Rios at 340-775-6762 ext. 5206

Nicole Greaux, Fisher Liaison,
St. Thomas - St. John district
photo by Tia Rabsatt



Greaux: Making fishing resources fun

Tough skin. A balancing act. And the ability to translate gobbledy gook into layman's terms. Nicole Greaux is all about breaking down fisheries management into relatable wording.

Over the past four years, since joining the Division of Fish & Wildlife as a fishery liaison, she knows it is a careful balancing act between the agency's wants, fishers' demands, and management needs.

"The fishermen - they don't hold punches," Greaux said, calling them a "passionate and opinionated group."

But what started as a hesitant relationship has blossomed into a trusting interaction that includes sometimes fielding fisher phone calls between 6 a.m. and 9 p.m.

Greaux has fished since she was six growing up on Hassel Island, and both her father and grandfather were fishers. One day, longtime captain Jimmy Loveland put a fishing rod in her hands and she became hooked.

"I would just go out around the rocks. It was a means to get meals. The ocean was our menu," she said. "When I got older I started harvesting whelks, conch, and lobster."

With the seafood she brought home, her mother would make dishes such as fish callaloo, fried fish in a curry sauce, lobster salad, whelks and rice, and steamed fish in a tomato-based sauce. But her all time favorite was fish prepared with pigeon peas and coconut milk, a method she still replicates today.

By age 8, Greaux began cooking her own seafood meals for the family, learning what to do from her mother and aunt.

It was at that age that she got her first boat, a 6.5-foot dinghy with a Seagull engine from her neighbor Fernando.

The boat helped her return home from her outings where she fished easier and prevented her from getting in trouble for staying out too long. She would go to Honeymoon Beach, and Coconut Grove, and all around Hassel Island, she recalled.

Later, as a student attending Charlotte Amalie High School, Greaux realized she was different. She had a boat, snorkeled regularly, and took a hotel ferry to get home sometimes.

She took her dive gear and equipment to her Marine Biology class, as well as slides to do fish ID and wanted to pursue marine biology at the University of the Virgin Islands after graduating.

Greaux did not finish that degree and instead, got married, and took on a job on Main Street in retail to help support her growing family. eventually a job became available as a Greeter at Coral World and she was connected with her passion once more, being promoted to aquarist once the aquarium Curator Donna Nemeth realized her skill level. The rest is in the books.

She joined the Division of Fish and Wildlife in 2021 as a fishery liaison, responsible for interacting with fishers and providing their feedback on federal regulations to managers of the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council, as well as running the Reef Responsible activities and education for Fish & Wildlife.

PARTNERSHIP



Division of Fish & Wildlife fisheries biologist Tia Rabsatt and environmental specialist Julia Plotkin sort shells confiscated by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol from the territory's beaches.

photo by Ayesha Morris



LEAVE PARADISE IN ITS PLACE

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T TAKE SHELLS/CORAL OFF THE BEACH



DID YOU KNOW?

Shells and corals become the white sand beaches we love and also provide homes and shelter for other sealife
From 2008 to 2016 and 2020 to present, U.S. Customs & Border Patrol
in partnership with the Division of Fish & Wildlife has confiscated, then returned to sea:



FOR MORE INFO ON PROHIBITION OF THE COLLECTION AND REMOVAL OF NATIVE WILDLIFE
CAN BE REFERENCED AT: TITLE 12 V.I.C. § 105

Concealed & Carried: VI's Shells Removed From Beaches

It comes in wrapped in layers of plastic bags. Sometimes it's covered up in empty Pringles canisters. And in other instances, shells and sand from the beach are stored in plastic water bottles, with one intention – the plan to conceal and carry.

"It smells to high heavens because there was a snail, or a crab inside," says environmental specialist Julia Plotkin, who along with fisheries biologist Tia Rabsatt, on another weekday morning, sorts through the mounds. "It's nasty and decaying."

They untie one of several plastic bags filled with a variety of sea life, sort the contents, and place them into a bin, weigh, record the type of marine life, and discard the plastic.

The team of DFW scientists repeat the process for each shell, coral, and collection of sand that U.S. Customs and Border Patrol seizes from persons wishing to take a piece of Virgin Islands beaches with them.

With enhanced crackdowns at the territory's ports, their calls to the Division of Fish and Wildlife to pick up items taken from the shore have ramped up.

"Whenever Customs has a lot, they'll ask us to come pick it up. We will first sort the shells into major groups," Plotkin said.

Protected species such as cone shells and flaming helmets are grouped back at the office. Others such as queen conch, whelks, sponges, algae, and crustaceans. Other items like pottery, plastic, and rock are retrieved among the piles.

"We separate everything so that we can weigh them and understand just how much pounds of some of these really important species of habitat are attempted to be removed and taken off island," Plotkin said.

"One person is thinking that if they take one shell it can't have a large impact, but if it's our thousands of tourists, it adds up."

Scientists within the division use the numbers to spread educational awareness.

"Thousands of visitors are doing it and are not educated on the impacts it can have on ocean chemistry, stability of beach habitats and marine habitats, and the usage of shells by invertebrates," she said.

Once the contents are sorted, the Division of Fish and Wildlife returns them to the ocean setting.

"We return the natural resources back to the environment at an undisclosed location so they may once again be a part of our marine ecosystems," she said.

Sorting shell seizures from the airport is one of the activities often assigned to interns with the division.

"Organizing of shells is a great way to see what happens when you try to take things out of the territory," Plotkin said. "It allows them to practice their identification at the same time and is a good way to engage our interns."

Students have helped with creating infographics in the past, with an ultimate goal of developing signage at beaches throughout the territory and putting displays at the airports that summarize the numbers and state the illegality of removing items from their habitats.

"Take photos and memories, and let nature have what's theirs," Plotkin said. "It does no good removing things from their natural environment. You can always just come back and see it again."

Capturing fishers' stories of resilience

photo by Ayesha Morris

Anthropologist Brent Stoffle has worked in St. Thomas with the local fishermen since 2003 and knows that to get better data it is important to build strong relationships with fishing communities.

That is why as an applied fishery anthropologist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), he felt it was important to collaborate with fishers and those who have businesses with direct or indirect ties to the fishing industry. He does this to learn their approaches to fishing and its importance to the local community. During a July 2024 visit to the Virgin Islands, Stoffle set out to conduct oral histories to record and preserve information which could be applied to improving fisheries science and management.

"The purpose was to bring a variety of perspectives to the table to talk about how to improve NOAA's service to local communities," Stoffle said. "We're looking at improving NOAA's service, to make sure that everybody's concerns, opinions, and perspectives are understood, to make sure that people feel involved in the process, that they feel that there's collaboration...A lot of them have many years of thriving in the industry and have seen changes as it relates to major disasters."

From the hurricanes of 2017 to the Covid-19 pandemic, the territory has navigated through a changing landscape in recent years, with several stakeholders, including fishers, dive shops, and environmental groups changing the way they conducted their business based on changes expressed in the community and the environment.

"The whole purpose is to be better civil servants to the people that we serve," Stoffle said, adding that his goal was to preserve and incorporate their knowledge, ensuring that it is a part of the policy process.

The knowledge that is shared from many of the local community members spans multiple generations of involvement in the local fisheries and fishing industry.

While in St. Thomas, Stoffle attended DFW's commercial and recreational fishing license registration meetings and Bastille Day events, speaking with members of both recreational and commercial sectors.

Earlier in the year, he was invited to speak at the Marine Resource Education Program workshop on St. Croix where he met with fishermen who he has worked with for over 20 years. In addition, the workshop provided him an opportunity to meet and get to know the next generation of St. Thomian fishermen and their families.

His oral histories usually last on average around an hour, and during that time fishermen and others engaged in the local fishery have shared with him a wealth of information regarding the innovative ways people have adapted to an ever-changing social and environmental landscape.

A common focus of the interviews is how fishermen share the culture of fishing to a more youthful generation, and the educational and outreach programs made available to local community members. In addition, the oral history project provided Stoffle with the opportunity to train community liaisons on the method to conduct oral histories so that in the future individuals will be able to document and preserve their own stories.

Similar oral histories are housed at NOAA's Voices website at <https://voices.nmfs.noaa.gov/> which provides access to over 2,400 firsthand accounts as part of an archive of stories conducted since 2003 relating to a variety of issues such as changes in the environment, climate, oceans, and coasts throughout the entire nation.

"Oral history is a unique example of qualitative data that is co-created by the narrator and interviewer," the website states. "Through deep engagement and active listening, oral history helps us answer, in profoundly intimate and detailed ways, fundamental questions."

Those questions include who we are, how we connect and relate to each other and the world, and how we know what we know.

"The stories are the people's opportunity to tell us about how they survived, managed, and create stability in their local communities, especially in times of crisis," Stoffle said.

PARTNERSHIP

VI Local Food & Farm Council



photo courtesy of VI Local Food & Farm Council

Local fishers are invited to apply for grants, loans, and other opportunities such as assistance programs for purchases and reimbursement of equipment and materials, to help expand their operations, improve infrastructure, and adopt sustainable practices as part of several initiatives by the Virgin Islands Food and Farm Council. Established in accordance with Act No. 8716, the Council is dedicated to fostering the growth and sustainability of agricultural productivity in the Virgin Islands. This includes advancing the goals of the Virgin Islands agricultural plan adopted by the 35th Legislature and enhancing food security for the territory. Through policy advocacy, data collection, community engagement, and strategic partnerships, their mission is to promote the development of a resilient local food system that benefits farmers, fishers, the community, and the environment.

The Council, co-chaired by University of the Virgin Islands President Safiya George and Department of Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen, Jr., is made up of 11 members, including six from government, 3 farmers from St. Thomas, St. John, & St. Croix, and 2 individuals from each district representing the food industry. DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol serves on the council, represented by designees Nicole Angeli, Ph.D., DFW director; and Sennai Habtes, Ph.D., DFW chief of fisheries; respectively. Honorary members include fishers Winston Ledee and Mavel Maldonado. Congratulations to Alexander Zimmerman, of Fishwater Charters on St. Croix, for receiving a \$55,000 grant to enhance the VI fishing industry through the Public-Private Partnership Investment Fund. For more information, contact **340-693-1003** or vilocalfoodandfarmcouncil@doa.vi.gov

Virgin Islands Good Food

Nestled among the pages of Viya's 2024-2025 USVI Telephone Directory is an eight-page section appealing to the public's craving for locally produced food. That includes a range of seasonally caught seafood from the waters surrounding the territory, and everything from lobster, conch, and whelks to a variety of reef fish. The 11 fishers from St. Thomas-St. John, and 42 fishers from St. Croix are listed along with their specialties and contact numbers as part of a wider initiative to support food security.

Be it yellowtail, grouper, tuna, mahi, wahoo, or ole wife, the range is endless as commercial fishers offer a selection that supports the local industry and encourages all to purchase seafood sustainably.

Sharing space in the phonebook with local farmers, approximately 10 percent of the Virgin Islands' food producers are included in the guide as part of a collaboration between Viya, Reef Responsible, and Virgin Islands Good Food.

VI Good Food is a nonprofit dedicated to building a thriving and just food system that supports USVI farmers, fishers, and food producers, and ensures healthy good food is accessible to every resident in the territory.

For more information, visit goodfoodvi.org, email info@goodfoodvi.org, or call 340-727-8443.

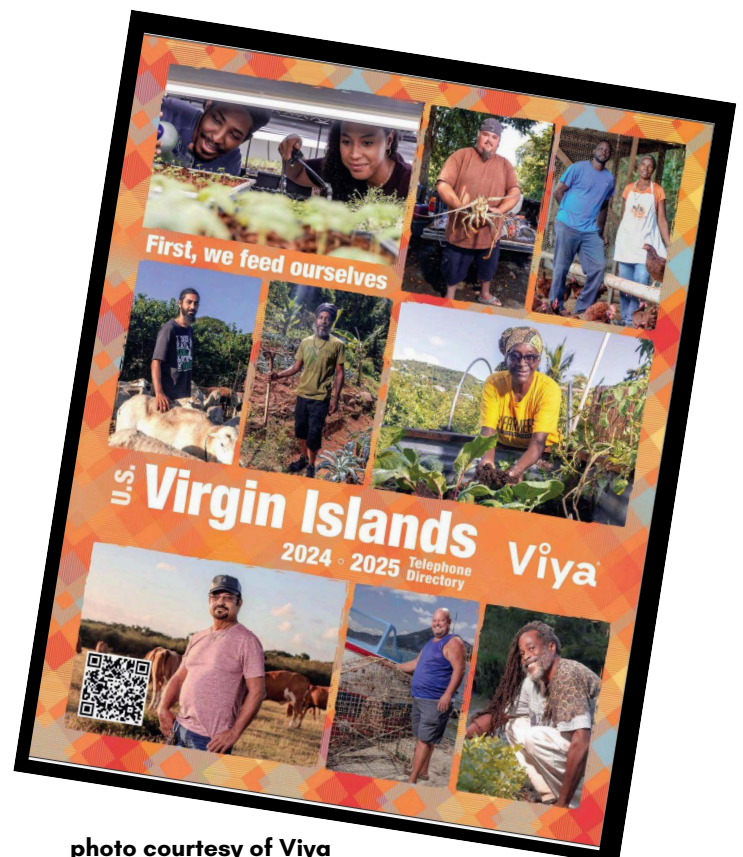


photo courtesy of Viya



Queen Conch listed as threatened species

Paired with a buttery sauce or curried in an aromatic soup, queen conch (*Aliger Gigas*) is a popular Virgin Islands delicacy. This staple of cultural festivals throughout the Caribbean, from food fairs to carnivals, leaves an explosion of flavor on the palette, and is connected to a deeper heritage.

As of March 15, 2024, the large marine gastropod is now federally listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, which means that while it is not currently at risk of extinction it is likely to become so in the foreseeable future.

According to the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the most significant threat to queen conch is overutilization. NOAA also found that “existing regulatory mechanisms were insufficient to protect the species from growth, overfishing and poaching throughout the Caribbean; [and] that the majority of jurisdictions are below the minimum adult density threshold required to support mate finding (i.e., 100 adult conch/hectare)” among other findings which reflected that “those adverse impacts, while not yet fully realized, could have devastating implications for queen conch over the next century.”

DFW stated in its review comments that the listing could cause “potential unnecessary barriers to research, restoration, and sustainable harvest of the species primarily in the US Caribbean with limited impacts in other countries of the Caribbean, South and Central America that occupy a much larger percentage of the species range.”

The division also noted that “a large portion of the harvest occurs outside of the US, and the disproportionate impact a listing will have on US Caribbean fishers is great.”

Queen conch slowly grows up to 12 inches in length and lives up to 30 years. It is found throughout the Caribbean Sea, the Florida Keys, and around Bermuda, and feeds on algal and plant material.

Adult conchs can be found mostly on sandy, flat seabeds with algae, but are also attracted to gravel, coral rubble, smooth hard coral, and beach rock bottom. Juveniles are primarily associated with seagrass beds.

The queen conch is one of the Caribbean’s most valuable species, NOAA notes on its website.

In 2013, the Legislature of the Virgin Islands passed legislation making the queen conch shell the official sea shell of the Virgin Islands.

Under current Virgin Islands fishing regulations, it is illegal to harvest or possess conch between June 1 to October 31 annually, which coincides with their reproductive cycle.

During other times of the year, a minimum shell length of 9 inches or lip thickness of 3/8 inch is required. Licensed commercial vessels are limited to harvest 150 conch per day, and they must also be landed alive and in the shell.

Additional regulations state that sale and transportation of any species of fish that is included in the closed season is permitted during the closed season if such fish is imported from outside the US Virgin Islands. No sale of undersized conch shell or meat from undersized conch is allowed. No sale of imported conch meat is allowed unless shipment is accompanied by a Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) export permit.

For information on importing wildlife, contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement - Southeast Region at www.fws.gov/le/ or call 703-358-1949.

Porgy with Pigeon Peas and Coconut Milk

by Nicole Greaux

4 portions Ingredients

2 ea large porgy cleaned,
scaled and fin clipped.
Head attached optional,
scored twice on each side.



Seasoning

3 tbsp / 18 g fresh oregano,
minced
3 tbsp / 18 g fresh thyme
leaves
5 ea large garlic cloves, minced (or put
through garlic press)
4-6 large leaves of cilantro (shado beni)
finely chopped
1/2 tsp/3 g salt
1 ea whole hot pepper (scotch bonnet,
local)
or 2ea seasoning peppers

1. Pound all ingredients together in
mortar/ or use food processor
2. Rub paste on both sides of fish, making
sure to get some in the cuts. Put seasoned
fish aside

Pigeon Peas & Coconut Milk

1 ea small onion, sliced in rounds
8 oz / 227 g pigeon peas, cooked
4 oz / 118 ml coconut milk
2 oz / 59 ml water
3 tbsp / 45 g butter
1 ea whole hot pepper (scotch bonnet,
local)
or 2ea seasoning peppers.

Preparing the Fish

1. In a pot large enough to hold both fish
laying flat (sauté pan is what I use) put 4
tbsp of butter on low heat.
2. Make a layer of onions rounds over the
melted butter on bottom of pan.
3. When butter starts to bubble, lay fish
in pan, side-by-side. Turn heat up to
medium, cook fish for 5 minutes and
then flip over.
6. Carefully add whole scotch bonnet
pepper or seasoned pepper between the
fish filets, add pigeon peas and cook
covered for 5 minutes.
7. Add water and coconut milk. Cover and
lower heat, once again bring to a simmer for
8 minutes.
8. Uncover pan gently, flip fish over.
9. Turn up heat to medium for 3 minutes
and then turn off heat. Very carefully
remove hot pepper and serve with side of
your choice.



Fresh Herb-Roasted Mahi-Mahi & Fruit Salsa by Cory Magras

photo courtesy of
Cory Magras, Caribbean Fisheries
Management Council

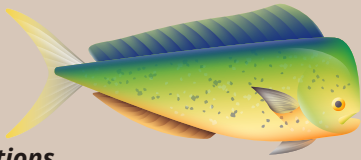


Illustration by Canva

4 portions Ingredients

Mahi-Mahi

*4ea 7oz/ 198 g portions of fresh mahi-mahi
(typically bull mahi-mahi are larger with
better portions; chicken mahi-mahi are
smaller with very thin portions)
1/2 ea bunch scallions (root ends trimmed off)
4ea sprigs thyme (stems removed)
1 fl. oz / 30 ml white vinegar
1 ea garlic clove (crushed)
1 fl. oz / 30 ml olive oil
1 tsp/ 2 g pepper flakes
1 tbsp/ 15 ml honey
1 tsp/6 g sugar
1 tbsp/ 18 g salt*

Fruit Salsa

*1/2 ea green bell pepper (diced)
1/2 ea ripe mango medium size (peeled and
diced)
1/2 ea ripe papaya small size (peeled,
seeded and diced)
1/2 ea red onion small size (diced)
1/2 ea lemon (juice)
1 fl oz / 30 ml olive oil
salt and pepper*

Preparing the Mahi-Mahi

1. In a blender, place the scallions, thyme, garlic, pepper, salt, sugar, and white vinegar. Blend until smooth. Slowly add the olive oil to form an emulsion.
2. Pour over the mahi-mahi portions and let it marinate for at least 1 hour.
3. In a 450 degrees F/ 232 degrees C oven, place the mahi-mahi portions on a lined roasted pan, with marinade covering the fish. Roast for 10 to 15 minutes or until the fish is firm to the touch. Serve with fruit salsa.

Preparing the Fruit Salsa

1. Combine all ingredients in a mixing bowl and refrigerate.
2. Spoon cold salsa over the roasted fish at the time of serving.



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