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GO WILD FISH VI

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

"Catch & Conserve"



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Message from the Governor



Albert Bryan Jr.

The Virgin Islands is defined by its water, wildlife, and the enduring traditions that connect people to the outdoors. Recreational fishing is one of those traditions—bringing families together, supporting local economies, and building a deeper respect for the natural world and the species that depend on it. This issue of *Go Wild, Go Fish VI* highlights how fishing, conservation, and wildlife-preservation efforts are essential to protecting our shared environment.

Buying a new recreational fishing license can help lead to healthy fisheries and thriving ecosystems. Protecting habitats that support fish also safeguards birds, marine life, and other wildlife that rely on our reefs, mangroves, and coastlines. These conservation efforts strengthen shoreline communities, enhance outdoor recreation, and help ensure our natural resources remain resilient for the future.

It is encouraging to see the dedicated anglers, wildlife rehabilitators, and educators who understand that stewardship plays a vital role in preserving biodiversity across our territory. That same spirit of service, excellence, and commitment is reflected in the public servants who work tirelessly to support the environment and strengthen our communities.

In that spirit, I am proud to congratulate all the 2026 GVI Employees of the Year, including DPNR's Shyra Raymond Henley and Jeneva Lawrence, and DFW's Raymond Petersen and Eva Collazo Montanez. Their dedication, professionalism, and passion for public service exemplify the very best of our government. We encourage everyone to join us in working together to protect our natural beauty for generations to come.

Message from the Commissioner



Jean-Pierre L. Oriol

As a planning and resource management agency, our role at the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources is often behind the scenes: collecting data, informing about seasons and size limits, monitoring wildlife populations, restoring damaged habitats, and balancing recreation with long-term ecosystem health. These decisions are grounded in research and shaped by the voices of commercial fishers, anglers, charter operators, residents, and conservation partners. When management is done right, healthy fisheries and thriving wildlife populations are the result of careful planning and consistent stewardship.

Recreational fishing depends on more than fish populations alone. Many of the same places that support fish also shelter seabirds, sea turtles, and other wildlife. This magazine highlights how anglers contribute to that broader system—not only through license support and compliance, but through volunteerism, advocacy, and a shared respect for the natural world.

I encourage you to read this issue of *Go Wild, Go Fish VI* with an eye toward involvement. With informed participation and responsible recreation, we can ensure our fisheries and wildlife resources remain strong, accessible, and sustainable well into the future.

Message from the Director

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Additional images courtesy of Canva.

Cover Photo: Captain Randy Brewington and DFW special projects coordinator Rukiya Plaskett Andrews show off a barracuda caught on a recreational fishing tour with Down South Charters outside Christiansted, St. Croix. Photo by Maggie Rios.

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DPNR Commissioner — Jean-Pierre L. Oriol



The work that we highlight in this issue of *Go Wild, Go Fish VI* reminds me of a quote from Mahatma Gandhi: "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated." I am constantly inspired by our staff, interns, fellows, and colleagues who are conserving populations of lizards and bees, supporting individual animals through rehab on St. Croix and St. John, and creating access to habitats by constructing miles and miles of hiking trails to pair access with conservation.

Strong partnerships deliver these results for individuals, populations, and species of fish and wildlife. With staff scientists collecting data at fishing tournaments, forecasting sargassum, and promoting sustainable seafood, these collective efforts keep our resources — and our communities — strong and informed. Use the articles here to learn about our STAR Sea Turtle Stranding Hotline, find out where to view new invasive species murals at air and sea hubs, and cook a new dish!

We also recognize our DFW employees of the year and honor those we have lost. Staff are the cornerstone of our key programs — from announcing fishing seasons and new recreational licenses to conducting outreach for commercial fishers to retain their rights. These programs, partnerships, programs, and people are tied back to our purpose — treating our wild spaces with respect, care, and intention.



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



- Fund 500 kayak and wetland tours to Virgin Islanders annually



- Teach 800+ FREE archery lessons annually

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

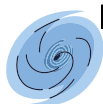
- Engage ~100 exotic pet owners annually

- 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://dpr.vi.gov/fish-and-wildlife/>



Linked 

PARTNERSHIP

Trails of Tomorrow: From Altona to Little Bay



photos courtesy of VI Trail Alliance

Local partners develop VI's first wildlife habitat corridor



photos courtesy of VI Trail Alliance

Majestic 360 degree views. A lookout for rare sea birds. And, a future home for the indigenous St. Croix ground lizard. These are just a few elements that make new trails extending from the Altona Lagoon to Little Bay special.

Through a 2023 America the Beautiful grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Division of Fish and Wildlife engaged multiple partners to create one of the first hiking trails across the Virgin Islands that connects two wetlands with a habitat corridor.

The result is a haven where ecotourism, heritage tourism, and natural beauty intersect overlooking the Christiansted harbor. With new footpaths, signage, and seating areas extending for almost 5 miles, the public is invited to meander through nature trails created by a new USVI Conservation Corps in collaboration with the Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism, St. Croix Hiking Association, the Nature Conservancy, and VI Trail Alliance.

From the site, there's a view of Buck Island, Green Cay, and Buccaneer Hotel. Signage at the top speaks to the distant history of Fort Augusta, the relics of a French fort dating back to the 1600s.

"I feel great because the bottom line to me is it's just very spiritual," Olasee Davis, of the VI Trail Alliance, said. Davis was involved in researching the history of the site.

For Catherine Prince, president of the St. Croix Hiking Association, the project was a chance to expand the organization's mission and build capacity.

"We were just doing hikes," Prince said, adding that they were finding new areas to hike and decided to work with the VI Trail Alliance on writing grants, getting funding, and clearing new areas to make trails.

The work is less than glamorous, involving chain saws, loppers, and transporting discarded vegetation across long distances.

Tough invasives like mother-in-law tongue and snake plant, along with tree stumps embedded into the landscape have to be uprooted manually. Practically, it often involves using weed eaters in the rain, then carrying them and the plant debris for a mile until reaching a clearing.

"It's all by hand. It's tiring," she said, adding that the outcome is worth it. "What we're trying to do is make it more accessible and get people to use the outdoors."

For Alma Winkfield, vice-president of the VI Trail Alliance, there was something rewarding about clearing the grassy knoll at the site, putting in four benches, and four shorebird signs on a portion of the project backed by the USFWS Coastal Resilience Fund.

"We're very concerned with creating public spaces, places where people can come into the natural environment," she said. "The views, the vistas are magnificent. There's the western shoreline, Columbus landing. You can see the lagoon itself, the beach, and the park. You have a wonderful 360."

She credits assistance from the St. Croix Hiking Association, DFW, AARP, the Department of Public Works, and My Brother's Workshop for helping make the project a reality.

Partnerships like these help diversify reach while providing job skills, she said. The group has worked on storytelling circles, the Christiansted bypass, and twelve trails on land owned by the Department of Agriculture.

"We really enjoy it and we completed a project," Winkfield said. "We hope the community comes out and makes it their own."

PROGRAM

Rooted in Resilience: Mangrove Park takes hold in Red Hook



photos by Ayesha Morris



Improving the environment while getting in touch with nature is the idea behind a new Mangrove Park nestled in the heart of Red Hook on St. Thomas' east end.

The site, owned by the Division of Fish and Wildlife, received a much-needed facelift in 2025 through a subaward to BioImpact, Inc. to restore natural wetlands to enhance the natural and recreational use of Vessup Bay. The environmental consulting company designed boardwalks to encourage public access to the mangrove forest, allowing visitors to engage with wildlife while the mangroves have a chance to recuperate from previous hurricane damage, sargassum encroachment, and the impacts of human misuse of the site.

The first step was to clear out all the debris that had accumulated over decades and washed in from adjacent waters. That part alone required the use of 40-yard garbage bins to remove close to 1200 cubic yards of trash from the water and the park. From huge amounts of sargassum that had collected to disposable food containers tossed in from the roadway, sailboat keels to boat engines, and 20 years-worth of glass and plastic bottles, the task of clearing the site was intensive over the span of several months and involved trimming dead and mangled mangroves.

"We found an entire building ruin amid the debris, as well as boat trailers, and pieces of old docks," Amy Dempsey, BioImpact, Inc. owner, said.

The resulting transformation, supported by youth hired by Lester Browne and crew of VI Marine Services and others, was dramatic.

A walkway was created, new mangroves planted, and benches and picnic tables installed to create what she described as a very small linear mangrove park. Meanwhile, mangroves once covered by flotsam and debris are slowly growing back. Crews had to carefully cut out badly broken branches and remove dead trees.

Night herons and other birds are making the area their home, with an ultimate goal for avifauna and marine fish species, particularly pelagic sportfish, to use the habitat as a nursery.

With land cleared, it is easy to spot several heritage trees, including huge almonds, gris-gris, coconut palms, and turpentine.

The Virgin Islands landscape has suffered through four category 5 hurricanes in the last 40 years, but resilience has brought it back.

"There's so much potential in this area," Dempsey said. "Mangroves are our interface between ocean and land habitats. They provide great nursery grounds."

Fiddler crabs, land crabs, and birds find places to hide in them.

"They protect our lands. They are holding our coastlines while providing for land and sea animals. They are quiet and very, very peaceful," Dempsey said.

Started in 1986, BioImpact provides services related to development, permitting, and mitigation.

Dempsey is a marine biologist and former aquanaut for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) who got offered a job in Salt River on St. Croix in 1985 and ended up staying.

"We really try to protect the environment," she said. "I really want to see us preserve the mangroves so people can see how incredible they are."



Centris smithii, Virgin Islands
photo by USGS Bee Lab

Unsung Pollinators: A look at VI Wild Bees

Virgin Islands wild bees are elusive. Instead of buzzing around the territory's beloved flowering plants and fruits, wildlife biologist Sam Droege of the U.S. Geological Survey. He is part of the USGS Bee Laboratory at the Eastern Ecological Science Center based at the Patuxent Research Refuge in Laurel, Maryland, and has spent over two months in the last two years staking them out at unlikely places such as the territory's dumps.

Unlike the more popular honeybees, these wild pollinators do not defend their nests. Wild bees can range in size from a rice grain to a bumble bee, he said. They are highly specialized, attracted most often to a handful of types of flowers, and don't gravitate to the typical manicured lawn.

So far, of the 25 or so pre-recorded species, Droege has counted 2,135 wild bees across the Virgin Islands, the most populous being 703 *Lasioglossum enatum* encountered on all three islands. The rarest bees he has recorded are one each of *Lasioglossum ferrerii* on St. Croix; *Augochlora buscki* and *Lasioglossum rufopanticis* on St. John; and *Exomalopsis species*, *Mesoplia bifrons*, and *Lasioglossum rufopanticis* on St. Thomas. Several of them were found at the Bovoni landfill.

"It's really spectacular. There's this hill of trash with residual vegetation, and chunks of freshwater," Droege said. "It's a complex, a landfill surrounded by landfills of other kinds. There's 40 feet high of crushed cars with aisles of weeds, I say I'm going in."

The work can be hazardous, involving him slipping on metals, dodging wasps, and holding his balance.

Droege has been studying native bees across the world for the last 25 years, most recently to include on-site research in the Virgin Islands.

His studies include combing through academic libraries for scientific papers and digging through archival records.

During colonial times, the Moravians observed several bee species. But deforestation including fires set in clearing wide tracts of land to develop plantations has disturbed natural habitats, he said.

What's most surprising, he has found, are that VI bees seem to thrive on disturbance.

On St. John, Droege spotted two species found nowhere else but next to the Coral Bay general store.

On St. Thomas, they appeared at a place behind Home Depot with solar panels.

"They are places that people were going to develop, holes were made for lots, bulldozers came in, and weed wise, they just became grown over," he said. "I spend a lot of time walking on scrub."

Cowpea and yellow cedar are favorite plants he visits while on the search for VI bees.

"We're looking for the least common bees in these very disturbed sites," he said. "Maybe we need more of that kind of environment."

Places full of rocky piles and overgrowth might be worth acquiring or putting to use to lure native bees, he said.

Wild indigo can be trimmed into yard hedges, cowpea can be grown in local gardens, and tea bush can be cultivated to attract native bees, Droege said, along with flower species such as white bidens and tridax daisies.

Droege began coming to the Virgin Islands in 2024, spending 30 days on St. Croix, 30 days on St. Thomas in 2025, and will wrap up 30 days on St. John later this year conducting bee research.

He has two more visits planned to St. John, in June and November.

"People can spot me on St. John as I spend the day walking roads. I always wear a blue work shirt that says 'Oz,' camo army pants, and carry a big insect net," he said.



When Hooves Harm Habitats: The Hidden Cost of Invasive Goats

photo by Nick Morrison

Tourists visiting St. John might come across a picture-perfect setting – two goats, sitting next to each other on grassy pasture, framed by a sunny tropical landscape.

Some might wear a collar, others might wander at the beach, but their cute collective appeal belies a wider potential for impending danger, says Nick Morrison, co-owner of Wild Ecology Group, a team of professionals with a mission to rewild the planet that specializes in addressing complex ecological challenges.

Known for its rugged terrain, hilly island topography and rapidly expanding goat population, St. John has few remaining populations of *Solanum conocarpum*, a federally endangered, dry-forest shrub endemic to the island, among other rare native species.

In 2024, Wild Ecology Group worked with the Division of Fish and Wildlife to assist with mitigation.

“In St. John, many people own goats. They are an element that people enjoy,” Morrison said. “It’s important to note that they can also be negatively impactful. They have certainly gotten out of control.”

Currently there are no natural predators for goats – no wolves, foxes, eagles, or hunting seasons are in place to keep populations down.

Herds of 75 or 100 band together and rummage across the island on a feeding frenzy. Virgin Islands’ native plants and federally endangered species are prone to succumb to the risk of extinction, he says.

In 2015 and 2016, Morrison worked with a family business to get rid of invasive goats they’d been battling with for years through multiple unsuccessful removal attempts. The goats are a colonial era problem.

In 2017 and 2018, his company began working with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, USDA, North Carolina Zoo, and the California Institute of Technology on goat reduction, using a combination of data analysis, hiring more persons with expertise, and blending lean principles.

One of Wild Ecology Group’s major sites is Great Hans Lollick, which requires jumping from a boat onto a rocky incline, climbing up and hacking the way through thick jungle to access the critical habitat they are trying to protect, Morrison said.

On location, it becomes clear an over-population of these herbivores creates competition for habitat needed for flora, small ground lizards, birds, and other fauna such as Puerto Rican racers.

Using night vision glasses, team members have also witnessed rats in trees continuously bite chunks out of goats that lay down, he said, a cycle that can lead to the spread of over 30 types of disease.

“There’s a massive goat population and delicate flower populations that are severely impacted,” Morrison said. “They eat a lot of the greenery.”

Additional hazards come in the form of ammonia released from tens of thousands of pounds of goat fecal waste in some areas that creates what he called “an overwhelming stench.”

“That amount of chemical seeps down into the soil, gets into the ocean, affects fish and coral life,” he said.

While some argue the goats are heritage goats, he said their lifespan is 10 to 20 years and were originally introduced to the islands by privateers and pirates so that they would have easy access to a food source.

“Once a species is removed it’s gone forever. It’s our duty to take care of the native species,” he said.

For more info, visit: <https://www.fws.gov/species-publication-action/endangered-and-threatened-wildlife-and-plants-endangered-species>

Healing the Wild: Inside the Territory's Wildlife Rehabilitation



photo by Toni Lance, St. Croix Avian Sanctuary



photo credit: Craig Morris



Steve Simonsen Photography



Phyllis Benton

St. Croix Avian Sanctuary: Toni Lance

Weak birds, injured birds, and baby birds succumbing to the pressures of the environment are Toni Lance's specialty. For the past 45 years living on St. Croix, the wildlife advocate and rehabilitator originally from California has provided critical care to several birds over the decades.

Some have broken wings due to gunshots. Others have fallen out of trees due to heavy wind and rain. A few have made a migratory journey that has left them starved and exhausted.

"No one was rehabilitating birds in 1980 when I came," Lance said. "I started off with a little backyard thing with old cages and palm fronds."

She fills a gap where other service is lacking, as typically neither local animal shelters nor veterinarians accept birds, Lance said. Around 1995, she formalized her offerings into a nonprofit called the St. Croix Avian Sanctuary.

In her line of work, injuries such as broken wings, broken feet, sprains, or fishhook damage are common.

"If I can't fix it, I do that service," she said. "I put it out of its misery."

Part of the work involves obtaining food for the birds in her care. That could include anything from feeding injured, young or baby birds to larger ones in captivity. A dove struck by a car for instance was fed to a peregrine falcon. Lance acquired some sprat from a fisherman to give to a seagull. Her seabirds get lean fish such as mahi, tilapia, and wahoo.

For the falcon and red-tailed hawk, meals often range from chicken gizzards to beef hearts. Even dead deer, meal worms, cracked corn, cornmeal pellets, and dried crickets provide sustenance for a variety of birds.

The birds she rehabilitates include herring gulls, great blue herons, and a merlin.

Lance said she cares for about 5 birds per month and around 50 birds per year. The falcon and red-tailed hawk serve as educational animals.

"It's like a mob scene when I walk in with a red-tailed hawk on my glove," she said of taking the bird to places like the Ag Fair, Mango Melee, or summer camps on St. Croix. "You're trying to get it out there to these kids with a gun that 'you don't want to shoot the bird.'"

St. John Wildlife Rehabilitation: Pamela Holmes

Back in her native Rhode Island, Pamela Holmes recalls specializing in raccoons and having about six of them climb on her to reach the food she would provide at mealtime. The wildlife rehabilitator has been working with mammals since 2003 and brought her skills into play on St. John in 2019, following Hurricanes Irma and Maria two years earlier, when animals on the island were still fending for their survival.

"There really was no safety net," she said. "They needed water and a food source."

She paired up with another wildlife rehabilitator, Phyllis Benton, who had been rehabilitating birds on St. John since 2003, and also happened to be her neighbor in Coral Bay. Together, they provide response, rehabilitation, and release to mammals and birds territory wide, through Benton's permit from the Division of Fish and Wildlife. Benton is also federally permitted to treat migratory birds.

Today, the nonprofit organization known as St. John Wildlife Rehabilitation has grown to include 120 volunteers, eight educational campaigns, programs, including Wildlife Warriors, that teach children how they can help wildlife, and a new retail space at the Bayhouse in Coral Bay.

She said they answer roughly 200 to 300 calls annually and track the data.

Persons often call about deer, feral goats, bats, donkeys, and numerous birds.

Many of the birds they rehabilitate are migratory shorebirds and wild birds, including pelicans, red-tailed hawks, doves, and laughing gulls, as well as blue-footed boobies, Antillean night hawks, and flamingoes.

"Some have broken wings, can't fly or are just sitting on the ground. This often means the birds may have eaten some bad food which causes botulism and temporary paralysis," Holmes said. "They need intervention if they are to survive. Some are simply fledglings and learning to fly, so keeping pets indoors helps give that bird the time it needs and no intervention is necessary."

In the case of donkeys, she said they often get calls that the animal is lying on the side of the road by itself outside its herd, which is normal from time to time.

Holmes is also trying to spread a message that the public should not feed the feral donkeys. Even carrots are high in sugar content and feeding them people food can lead to "donkey metabolic syndrome" or Equine Cushing's Disease, which gives the appearance of "lumpy donkeys," she said.

STAR Hotline: Saving sea turtles one call at a time



written by Romina Ramos
photo courtesy of Canva

A call about a sea turtle or a nest hatching can come in at any time — late at night, during the afternoon, or at dawn — especially when sea turtle season is in full swing.

Currently, the Virgin Islands has a robust network of experts and volunteers from various agencies and nonprofits who work together under Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue (STAR) to facilitate the rescue of sea turtles throughout the Territory.

The nonprofit was started officially after 15 years of efforts by biologists from the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the St. Croix Environmental Association, U.S. National Park Service, and Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge. Initially named the Virgin Islands Stranding Network, they coordinated sea turtle rescues, secured funding for local rehabilitation, and recorded reports. The STAR network also organizes beach clean-ups, native tree planting, and debris removal to enhance and restore sea turtle nesting habitats to provide safe spaces for turtles at sea and on sandy beaches where female sea turtles lay their eggs. Additionally, they distribute rescue kits that provide essential care and guidance for sea turtle rescue procedures.

"It's so interesting to see the kinds of information that biologists and volunteers collected, and who was involved in documenting sea turtle activities and rescues," says Natalie Monnier, the organization's outgoing sea turtle stranding coordinator for the Virgin Islands. "It feels like looking back through time."

One ongoing threat on St. Croix is nesting female turtles and hatchlings on the beach become disoriented from bright white artificial lights along roadsides, beachfront properties, resorts, and condominiums, and are affected when coastal vegetation is aggressively trimmed or cut down.

"We don't have laws or lighting ordinances here like Florida that have guidelines of what types of lights and shields you need to have on coastal beaches," she says.

"We can only educate the community about it because we lack enforcement due to limited staff, which is why it is so important for us to participate in local and wildlife events to raise awareness," she said.

In the future, STAR plans to continue spreading ways to become sea-turtle friendly, Monnier, who has a master's degree in marine and environmental science from the University of the Virgin Islands, said. They also hope to hire additional staff.

"Having a lighting specialist would be a tremendous asset to STAR because it is a full-time job in other coastal states. Lighting changes can help prevent nesting turtles and hatchlings from crawling onto people's properties, pools, and roads, making them vulnerable to invasive species such as mongoose, dogs, and cats," says Monnier. "Additionally, lighting changes can help reduce energy costs in the Virgin Islands, where our current electric rate has been 33 cents per kilowatt hour since 2023. It's a win-win situation for sea turtles and the Virgin Islands community."

In the early years of STAR, rescue kits were not available to prepare biologists for stranding situations. Today, rescue kits funded by the Division of Fish and Wildlife and other grants are available for volunteers, providing essential care and guidance for sea turtle rescue procedures, which have strengthened STAR's efforts.

Monnier's work was funded through a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Her background includes working with marine turtles at South Padre Island, Texas, and Buck Island Reef National Monument, St. Croix. Her outreach events for STAR have included Agrifest, Ecofair, Mango Melee, FUN RUN!, EEMP Trunk or Treat, and Kidsville.

"Sea turtles in the U.S. Virgin Islands captivate everyone, whether they encounter them in the water or see them at free educational programs on Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge and at the National Park Service," she says. "We are proud of the work we have accomplished, and our goal is to create even more positive changes for the island of St. Croix."

**For more information or for help with a sea turtle inquiry,
call the Sea Turtle Assistance and Rescue (STAR) hotline at 340-690-0474.**



Walls That Warn: Murals Spotlight Invasive Species at Our Gateways

*mural and words by Eliana Schuster-Brown
photo by Ayesha Morris*

My name is Eliana Schuster-Brown. I am a native daughter of the Virgin Islands, a wife, a mother, an artist, and someone who cares deeply about my home.

A few years ago, I had the incredible honor of working with the Virgin Islands Division of Fish and Wildlife to create a mural that speaks to the beauty and the vulnerability of our islands. And like most passion projects, this one started where all great Caribbean dreams do: in my parent's garage, with no AC, lots of paint, and plenty of mosquitoes!

The mural I created is more than just a pretty picture. It's a love letter to home and a warning sign. Notice some of the native species we hold dear -- the regal brown booby bird, the gentle green turtle, the vibrant parrotfish, all symbols of our natural identity. But look a little closer, and you'll notice.... they're fading! Disappearing into the background. Being pushed out by invasive species like lionfish, coqui frogs, and yes, the ever-mischievous mongoose.

Let's talk about that mongoose for a second. Cute? Maybe. Fast? Absolutely. Destructive? Without a doubt. These little creatures were introduced to control rats, and now they're out here living their best lives while our native species pay the price. Well maybe not so much their best lives ever since the red-tailed boa slithered in! Classic invasive behavior.

This project taught me something profound! Invasive species aren't just an environmental issue, they're a cultural one. Our ecosystems are part of our heritage, and when they change, we change.

These outside species, no matter how small or sneaky they may be, disrupt the delicate balance of our land and sea. They outcompete our native species for resources, throw off the food chain, and in some cases, threaten the very survival of what makes the Virgin Islands the Virgin Islands.

Art gave me a way to process all of this. It helped me transform concern into creation. It's easy to feel helpless in the face of environmental change, but through this mural, I found my voice. And I used it to tell a story, one of beauty, danger, and the urgent need to protect what's ours.

And let me be real. Working on this mural was hard. There were long nights, paint-splattered crocs, and many moments where I questioned whether anyone would "get it," but I kept going. Because this isn't just a project, it's personal. I want young Virgin Islanders to look at this mural and feel both pride and responsibility, to know our species by name, to recognize their role in preserving our natural world, and to feel empowered to take action.

We are not separate from our environment, we are it. And I hope that this mural sparks curiosity, conversation, and maybe even a little bit of conviction.

Thank you to the Division of Fish and Wildlife for trusting me with this vision. Thank you to my parents Ernest and Elaine Schuster for letting me turn their garage into an art studio-slash-eco-war zone. And thank you to everyone here who continues to protect, educate, and uplift the beauty of our home.

Let's keep creating, keep learning, and keep fighting for the wild places we call home!

PROGRAM



Artist Heidi Gonzales, known for her vibrant murals of marine life and tropical animals, used vivid acrylics in “Unwelcome Guests: Invasive Species in the Virgin Islands,” a mural commissioned along with Eliana Schuster-Brown’s “Invasive Species: Native Wildlife Under Threat,” by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources’ Division of Fish and Wildlife. Both pieces were unveiled across the territory’s ports for Exotic Pet Amnesty Week from June 23 to 27, 2025.

The observance included ribbon-cutting ceremonies to bring attention to the impact of invasive species on the natural environment of the Virgin Islands.

The Indo-Pacific lionfish, small Indian mongoose, Cuban tree frog, and white-tailed deer spotted in the piece are not native to our islands, but instead were introduced either deliberately or by accident, often arriving through ships, planes, or other human activity.

While they may seem familiar or even beautiful, these animals pose real threats to the local environment. Invasive species can prey on or displace native wildlife; compete for limited food and habitat; spread diseases; and disrupt delicate ecosystems.

Their impact can be seen in everything from declining fish populations to damage in agriculture and increased strain on public health and tourism.

This mural invites us not only to admire the artistry but also to reflect on how human actions shape our islands.

Through awareness and action, we can help protect the Virgin Islands’ native species and natural beauty.

The murals were installed at the Svend Aage Ovesen, Jr. Seaplane Terminal on St. Croix and the Charles F. Blair Seaplane Terminal on St. Thomas, through coordination with Seaborne Airlines. A third mural by Gonzales was later put up at the Urman V. Fredericks Marine Terminal in Red Hook, St. Thomas in partnership with the Virgin Islands Port Authority.

“We are excited to work with local artists, Seaborne Airlines, and other stakeholders to spread awareness that while invasive species are some of the most common wildlife you see across the territory, they can spread diseases, disrupt delicate ecosystems, and harm fisheries and coastal habitats,” Nicole Angeli, Ph.D., director of the Division of Fish and Wildlife, said. “DFW encourages everyone to do their part to help control these challenges.”

During the awareness week, residents were invited to bring in or walk with a photo of their rare, non-native animal species from birds to snakes for a free permit, without penalty, to DFW offices at Mars Hill on St. Croix and at Tropical Marine on St. Thomas.

The public is reminded that exotic pets do not include livestock such as chickens, ducks, and other farm animals permitted through the Department of Agriculture.

Activities were held in conjunction with National Pet Preparedness Month and funded by the Office of Insular Affairs.

For more info, call 340-773-1082 on St. Croix and 340-774-3320 on St. Thomas or visit www.dpnr.gov.vi/fish-and-wildlife



U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
AND NATURAL RESOURCES
CONGRATULATES
EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR 2026



Geneva Lawrence & Shyra Raymond-Henley

★ EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR ★
2026

Administrative
Assistant Supervisor
St. Croix District

Office Manager
St. Thomas District

Thank you both for your outstanding
dedication, hard work, and commitment
to the Department of Planning and
Natural Resources!

PROFILE

Employee of the Year: Raymond Petersen St. Thomas–St. John District



photos by Ayesha Morris

Raymond Petersen considers himself a maintenance magician. The 49-year-old maintenance specialist with the Division of Fish and Wildlife has a broad set of duties under his belt, to include working closely with fishers, facilities upkeep, and manning marine vessels during scientific research surveys.

Born and raised on St. Thomas, his early life drew him to love the water. After days spent at Yvonne Bowski Elementary School, All Saints Cathedral School, and Charlotte Amalie High School, he would go spearfishing, diving, and free swimming in the ocean, sometimes going the distance from Neltjeberg on the North Side of the island to Inner Brass.

At 16, his father, a member of the U.S. Air Force, insisted he get his pilot license. But instead of flying, Petersen, who naturally developed a love of the ocean, decided at 21 to go for his captain's license. After that he worked for several charter companies and private yachts.

Things were going well until 2019, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

"It changed everything for us," he said. "The BVI closed its borders."

A fellow fisherman suggested he apply for a position with DFW and in 2022 he started with the government agency. By the following year, he was voted by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources as the 2023 Employee of the Year.

"It does feel good that your coworkers respect you enough to nominate you," Petersen said. "I like the camaraderie of the employees that we have all together. The working relationship is generally good."

His most challenging days involve dealing with a myriad of issues at the Gustave Quetel Fish Market in Frenchtown, he said.

To offset the stress, he looks forward to other days out on the water, helping to complete lobster and finfish surveys. Petersen's suggestions to improve their efficiency has had a lasting impact on their effectiveness over past surveys.

"We've refined it down to science," he said. "We can do it in a minimum amount of time."

What used to be the ability to go out and only survey one site per day has sped up to multiple sites a day by tweaking the methodology. By adding weights in various intervals to the transects, it has allowed them to stay in one place, not go missing, and avoid them floating off, he said.

In addition to assisting with fisheries-independent surveys, Petersen's work also involves day-to-day tasks such as landscaping, vehicle and boat maintenance, and offering assistance to commercial fishermen.

"It does help to have one of their own as a face to look to for help in the Division," he said.

Things such as towing boats back into shore, helping with moving coolers, and trouble-shooting electrical issues are among the associated tasks that come up.

Petersen's work also involves coordinating with other divisions within DPNR to lend technical support.

He also collaborates with other government agencies, such as the Department of Public Works on renovations for the Gustave Quetel Fish Market such as repainting, plumbing, and roof repairs.

His work extends to other agencies as well, including the collection of confiscated shells.

In the future, he looks forward to getting some of DFW's older vessels surveyed out, and acquiring another vessel to do fisheries surveys.

PROFILE

Employee of the Year: Eva Colazzo Montanez St. Croix District



photos courtesy of Eva Collazo Montanez

Born in Humacao on the eastern side of Puerto Rico, Eva Colazzo Montanez has always been around the beach and enjoyed camping. Her mother's background in teaching complemented her father's livelihood in mechanics.

As a young girl, Montanez attended private school in a rural community, but in 6th grade she switched to the public school system.

In high school she attended scientific fairs. One project on bioremediation involved trying to clean water that was contaminated by oil spills with microorganisms.

"You could find them at the dumpster," Montanez said, adding that she collected soil samples, saw the bacteria under microscopes, cultivated it, then released it into the water. "That's what got me into microbiology at first."

But her main interest was in marine biology, she said. Back then she knew she wanted to dive, collect data, and interact with people.

Montanez went on to study at the University of Puerto Rico, Humacao, and in 2020, graduated without a ceremony in the middle of the pandemic.

"That year I was doing research on the impacts of covid on fishermen," she said. "It guided me to have an interest in the fisheries field."

"We were on a total lockdown and seeing how that impacted their prices. Those projects put a light on what's actually happening with them. It's a community with not a lot of resources available to them," she said.

Montanez said she felt a sense of satisfaction knowing that she was not just taking data and leaving the fishers there.

"They were able to apply to grants when they were available," she said.

A few months after graduating, she started her master's degree in August 2020 at the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico, studying environmental sciences with a specialization in conservation, in 2023 obtaining her advanced degree. While there, she did a student exchange in Alaska, which allowed her to work with fishers. She later accepted a teaching position at the Bayamon campus, instructing in general biology labs, animal sciences, and marine botany.

Between 2021 and 2023, Montanez worked as a port sampler for recreational fishers in southeastern Puerto Rico at the territory's Department of Natural and Environmental Resources.

Desiring more stability, income, and to broaden her experience, she saw a position open up for a fisheries biologist II at the Division of Fish and Wildlife. She applied, got accepted, and in December 2024 started working with the agency.

She now works with the Southeast Area Monitoring & Assessment Program (SEAMAP) and Cooperative Statistic Program (CSP), including coordinating surveys for lobster and finfish, and doing port samples for fishermen.

"I just like talking with them. They tell me their stories, and creating that bond," she said, adding that they need someone to vent to about what's happening. "I like having that trust and knowing that they have someone they can talk to."

Montanez often translates between languages for them.

"There are a lot of fishermen who feel more comfortable speaking in Spanish, a lot of the older fishers," she said, adding that many of them are from Vieques and Fajardo with family histories of working in sugarcane. "It helps us in our data collection."



PROFILE

SEAS Fellow: Drake Nemeth St. Thomas – St. John District

photo by Ayesha Morris

Drake Nemeth enjoys working in nature. The 23-year-old SEAS Navigating Home Fellow takes comfort in camping in the outdoors and working with animals.

Born and raised on St. Thomas, he graduated in 2021 from the Virgin Islands Montessori School and Peter Gruber International Academy.

From there he went to Drexel University in Philadelphia to study mechanical engineering with a desire to learn how things might work and go together but realized he didn't like it, nor being in a big city.

"I've always enjoyed the ocean and being in a more animal-focused environment," Nemeth said, adding that he switched his major a few times before deciding to move back to St. Thomas in 2022 to pursue a major in marine biology with a minor in environmental science at the University of the Virgin Islands.

While there, he worked in Kristen Wilson Grimes, Ph.D.'s lab for a year, graduating in 2025 before she invited him to apply for the fellowship. Funded by the National Science Foundation, the program offers real-world experience and training in the workplace in science communication and engagement.

"I knew I wanted to do something in the ocean, but didn't have a set path," Nemeth said.

Last September, he started with the Division of Fish and Wildlife, helping the agency to transition to an updated wildlife incident reporting system and conducting lobster surveys for the Southeast Area Monitoring & Assessment Program.

He also assisted with boa surveys on an offshore cay, giving a hand to cut back bushes, make transect lines, capture snakes, mark the places they were found, and release them into individual pillowcases.

During the day, work included taking measurements of the boas, to include weight, length, and sex, then scanning the animals to see if they possessed tags.

He also participated in a rat eradication project on Savana Island with DFW and Island Conservation, an environmental nonprofit.

The mission included, "dispersing poison in hopes of removing rats from the island and reintroducing the tree boa," he said.

"I'm looking forward to more fieldwork and opportunities to be more hands-on outdoors," Nemeth said.

The workforce development initiative supports recent graduates through marine and environmental science placements.

For more information, visit <https://www.seasislandsalliance.org/>

PROFILE



SEAS Fellow: Elisa Webbe St. Thomas-St. John District



photos by Danielle Olive Heyliger

Elisa Webbe likes listening to fish sounds. While studying for her undergraduate degree in marine biology at the University of the Virgin Islands, she spent time considering how acoustics affected their larvae settlements.

"We don't really look at how sound affects the ocean. We look at how physical stuff like trash, different particles can affect it," Webbe said. "A lot of people tend to think it's quiet underwater but it gets really loud down there which is also a reflection of how healthy the reefs are."

Webbe said she compiled research papers to see how noises such as construction at building sites could affect different species of fish because they use sound to help them know where to settle.

Born and raised on St. Thomas, she attended Yvonne Bowski Elementary School, Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, and graduated in 2019 from Eudora Kean High School. A lot of her childhood was spent swimming and free diving with her father at Vessup Bay.

In 2017, she became a student with the Youth Ocean Explorers program, gaining scuba and lifeguard certifications. In 2018, she joined the SEAS Alliance program through UVI and served as a mentor for the youth program, a role that in 2024, she also took up.

Learning fish identification, to coastal restoration, Webbe said she got to strengthen her swimming abilities and pass that along to younger students she worked with.

"I just got a good feeling that I could go down and swim whenever I wanted and they could as well," she said, adding that she enjoyed seeing students embrace snorkeling and watching the initial fear dissipate.

She started on August 11, 2025 with the Division of Fish and Wildlife as a fellow under the Navigating Home Program, as a recent UVI graduate.

The program, funded by the National Science Foundation, is a workforce development initiative that supports recent graduates through marine and environmental science placements.

One of her activities was to analyze data by counting and identifying fish from remote underwater video surveys for the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP). The video was collected by DFW scientists in 2024, during fisheries-independent finfish surveys. She looked at population, abundance, and composition of every finfish observed in the videos taken by an underwater camera.

Analyzing this data helped her create a research project she presented as a poster at the 2025 Coastal & Estuarine Research Federation (CERF) conference in Virginia. Her research looked at the difference in distribution of Graysby, Red Hind, and Coney groupers in two different depth zones - 0-66 feet in Zone 1 and 66-132 feet in Zone 2.

Her fellowship also included helping to conduct port samples of catch landed by local fishers.

"I'm enjoying it. I think I'm really learning a lot," she said. "I'm learning that there's a lot I still don't know. I like the fact that I'm able to surround myself with people in the field."

One of her favorite experiences was getting to hold and take photos with two live lobsters.

"It's a really good program. I didn't get to get much hands-on experience while I was at UVI," Webbe said. "This helps me to gain that experience. These are things I probably wouldn't have encountered at UVI."

In her spare time, Webbe hosts sip and paint events and sells handmade resin craft. In the future she is potentially considering full-time employment at DPNR, be it as an environmental technician, officer, fisheries biologist or similar profession.

The fellowship experience provides valuable on-the-job insight to feel out different career pathways, she said.

"I always enjoyed figuring out the why behind a lot of stuff. I'm a very curious person," Webbe said.

For more information, visit <https://www.seasislandsalliance.org/>



In Memoriam: Alejandro Torres

Port Sampler
St. Croix District

*photo by Patrisia Torres courtesy of WTJX,
words adapted and excerpted from obituary*

Alejandro “Alex” Torres III was hired by the Division of Fish and Wildlife to serve as a port sampler for the district of St. Croix. In this role, he would have worked closely with fishers of the community to assist in measuring their catch after landing ashore.

Outspoken and eager to assume his duties, Torres attended the 2025 Commercial Fisher’s Pre-Registration meeting in June.

Unfortunately, a month later he tragically lost his life on July 17, 2025.

Torres was born in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, on October 20, 1977. As the first child of Alejandro Torres II and Luz Carrasquillo, he shared his childhood with his younger siblings: Lisandro, Patrisia, Zuraima, Zudelkey and Zuleyka Torres.

He was a proud father to Destiny Nicole Torres and a loving grandfather to Kylun Harris and Rhea Torres.

Torres enjoyed running, was passionate about learning, and achieved excellent grades throughout his academic career.

He was a true lover of animals, especially dogs. He found great satisfaction in helping many of them find loving homes where they would be well cared for.

As a child, Torres would accompany his mother Luz to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In January 2025, Alex experienced a deep reencounter with his faith and was baptized at the Sunny Acres Adventist Church.

Deepest condolences are extended to his mother, family, siblings, colleagues, and friends.

PROGRAM

Timing the Catch: The Science Behind Fishing Seasons

To help protect the fisheries of the Virgin Islands and ensure the sustainability of fish populations and overall health of the territory's aquatic ecosystems, closed seasons are restrictions put in place that specify important periods when it is illegal to catch and keep certain species. These harvest prohibitions are in place to protect the populations of these species during critical reproductive periods. This allows these populations to add the maximum number of new recruits into their populations and improve the fisheries of the Virgin Islands. Limiting access during these sensitive times helps ensure that fish populations can reproduce successfully and maintain healthy numbers for future generations.

SEASONAL SPECIES CLOSURES	
<u>FEBRUARY 1 - APRIL 30</u> FEDERAL AND TERRITORIAL WATERS  RED GROUPER  BLACK GROUPER  TIGER GROUPER  YELLOWFIN GROUPER  YELLOWEDGE GROUPER * * NOT APPLICABLE IN ST. CROIX FEDERAL WATERS	<u>APRIL 1 - JUNE 30</u> FEDERAL AND TERRITORIAL WATERS  MUTTON SNAPPER  LANE SNAPPER <u>OCTOBER 1 - DECEMBER 31</u> FEDERAL AND TERRITORIAL WATERS  BLACK SNAPPER  BLACKFIN SNAPPER  VERMILLION SNAPPER  SILK SNAPPER
<u>APRIL 1 - SEPTEMBER 30</u> TERRITORIAL WATERS ONLY  WEST INDIAN TOPSNAIL (WHELK)	<u>JUNE 1 - OCTOBER 31</u> FEDERAL AND TERRITORIAL WATERS  QUEEN CONCH

For more information regarding seasonal species closures, please visit the website of The Division of Environmental Enforcement at <https://dpnr.vi.gov/environmental-enforcement/>.



Casting Forward:

A New Era of Recreational Fishing Begins

photo by
Randy Brewington

The Virgin Islands of the United States has joined the ranks of the other 50 states in becoming the first U.S. territory to have a recreational fishing licensing program. While it may seem like just another arbitrary requirement for those who want to enjoy the natural resources of the USVI, the reality is that they are under new and increasing threats that require new tools to manage them.

The new recreational fishing licensing platform (www.GoOutdoorsUSVI.com) is one of those new tools, that can help provide necessary data that improves our ability to manage fisheries resources in an era of increasing pressures, threats, and uncertainty.

Through the program, the division will now be able to utilize information on the number of recreational fishers, estimates of what species of fish and how much are being caught, and understanding of where and how often people are fishing to improve management, conservation, and sustainable harvest of USVI fisheries.

Additionally, it is all data that is identified as necessary for management of any harvested fishery in the United States by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act or MSA, the primary law governing marine fisheries in the United States.

While data collection from the commercial fishery has been standardized for decades in the USVI, data on recreational fishing was only collected through intermittent surveys separated by many years.

However, that all changed in 2017 when the Division of Fish and Wildlife launched an online survey where recreational fishers could voluntarily provide information, and, in partnership with the Caribbean Fishery Management Council, created a website where recreational fishers could sign up for a recreational fishing license at no cost. Both sets of data are essential to fishery management.



New recreational fishing licenses encourage visitors and residents to Go Outdoors

The form encourages recreational fishers to provide info on fishing or fishing activities resulting in the harvest of fish that are not sold, traded, or bartered, which can only be done by licensed commercial fishers. This data is aimed at filling a large data gap necessary for managing the health of fish populations in the Virgin Islands.

In 2021, the territory announced its intent to promulgate rules and regulations for recreational fishing, making a license mandatory and requiring reasonable license fees that can go back into supporting fisheries in the territory.

By February 2022, the Division of Fish and Wildlife had completed an extensive public comment period. In October 2022, they were signed into law by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. To support this legislation, the DFW partnered with Brandt Information Services to develop the GoOutdoorsUSVI platform, which in August 2025 was soft launched. On the platform, persons of all ages can purchase or, if they qualify, register at no cost for recreational fishing license products online.

The internet-based platform for recreational fishing licenses allows visitors and residents to purchase between ten different recreational fishing licenses to suit their needs and qualifications.

The system, a first for the U.S. Caribbean, offers 24/7 public access and accurate transaction recording and reconciliation. It also provides instant access to compliance data for users across DPNR's divisions, enhancing oversight and enforcement of licensing regulations.

The platform gives DFW the ability to collect information on anglers for the National Saltwater Angler Registry (NSAR) required by the MSA and used to distribute a national recreational fishing effort survey and enable sustainable management of U.S. Fisheries.

In addition, the platform will have an online harvest reporting tool to allow the mandatory reporting of harvest data from the for-hire/charter sector. It will allow scientists to collect landings data from the for-hire charters.

The platform is based on the GoOutdoors platform system used in several other states and is designed with easy-to-understand drop-down menus and fillable forms to guide users through the process of obtaining a recreational license. If at any time users need help in the process, they can call a Customer Service helpline at 1-833-340-0012. In addition, there are a host of additional resources for recreational fishers, including rules & regulation summaries, and infographics on closed seasons, bag limits, and marine protected areas, among other educational resources.

DFW scientists work closely with organizations such as the Virgin Islands Game Fishing Club, Golden Hook Fishing Club, Virgin Islands for Veterans, Northside Sportfishing Club, and CORE as official weighmasters for local tournaments.

Recreational fishing licenses for Virgin Islands residents are \$15; while persons over age 62, active military stationed in the territory, and those USVI residents receiving SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, or who have a disability, or are current Virgin Islands commercial fishers can obtain one for free.

The fee for non-residents is \$20 for 7 days, \$30 for 30 days, and \$45 for an annual license. Charter licenses are available at \$225 for 6 passengers or less and \$500 for more than 6 passengers.

For more information, visit www.gooutdoorsusvi.com and sign up for a free account, or call the toll-free hotline at 833-340-0012.

PROGRAM

Sustainable Seas: Compliance Counts in Commercial Fishing

photo by
Ayesha Morris

In the USVI, June is marked by warming weather, lower rainfall, and the start to hurricane season. But it is also when the Division of Fish and Wildlife holds its annual Commercial Fisher's Pre-Registration Meeting.

Even in pouring rain, rooms fill to capacity as hundreds of fishers pack into auditoriums or event halls to attend.

The purpose is to give fishers an opportunity to get updates from the division on management and compliance and to get all of their administrative ducks in a row prior to registration and the start of the 2026 fishing year in July.

For most, it is an opportunity to jumpstart the process to renew their commercial fishing licenses. At various stations they can check on their compliance, which includes completing required quarterly port samples and submitting catch reports for each trip.

Fisheries biologists are on hand to scan through computer databases and confirm they are up to date as part of the initial steps to help get their necessary paperwork sorted.

DFW works closely with the Division of Environmental Enforcement, which assigns dedicated staff during the week of registration to provide fishers with their license ID cards. Other agencies invited to participate and be present to limit administrative work for fishers during pre-registration are the VI Departments of Agriculture and Licensing and Consumer Affairs.

The annual meeting allows fishers the opportunity to double check that they are compliant, pick up new resources, and learn about upcoming research, survey schedules, and opportunities, and to finalize the first steps in the license renewal process.

As a reminder, the Division suggests that commercial fishers who still need to schedule port samples or submit commercial catch reports this fishing year, do so at the earliest possible convenience to ensure a smooth license renewal process.

Commercial Fisher's Pre-Registration Meeting

SAVE
THE
DATES



Pre-Registration

St. Thomas: June 16th, 2026
Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library

St. Croix: June 24th, 2026
Great Hall, University of the Virgin Islands

Registration

St. Croix: July 13th - 17th, 2026
Division of Environmental Enforcement,
Anna's Hope

St. Thomas: July 20th - 24th, 2026
Main Conference Room,
Department of Planning and Natural Resources

Reeling in the Numbers: Tech-Driven Insights from Fishing Tournaments

photo by Maggie Ríos

Children's footsteps heard racing across the dock. Excited squeals as a fish grabs bait from a hand line. And the neck-breaking pace of keeping up with kids, their catch, and making sure they return it to the water all in a morning of outdoor recreation.

A single kids handline tournament joins larger ones held for adults throughout the territory several times a year. The Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) serves as weighmasters, collecting data that, once analyzed, can help determine the status of Virgin Islands fisheries.

DFW attends tournaments held by local fishing organizations such as the Virgin Islands Game Fishing Club, Northside Sportfishing Club, Golden Hook Fishing Club, and Caribbean Oceanic Restoration and Education (CORE) Foundation throughout the year to offer their skills at recording data on size, weight, and effort (how much was caught and how long it took to catch it) to enter into a growing database of information from the last 25 years.

"We have been collecting tournament data since 2000 to include St. Thomas and St. Croix, and a wide variety of tournaments from kids tournaments on the dock or shore, to large tournaments such as for wahoo and billfish," Danielle Olive Heyliger, fisheries biologist, said.

Pelagic fish such as dolphinfish (mahi-mahi), wahoo, tuna, marlin as well as reef fish such as groupers and snappers are all game, depending on the target of the tournament.

"Tournament data is useful for observing trends in the species that are caught and their size, as well as how much effort and participation our community has put forth in these tournaments, and how that's changed over time," she said.

"Typically, one or two staff members are taking fish measurements while another is collecting fishing effort information."

One biologist might yell out the numbers, another record, and a third transmit the data to the tournament organizers to get fisher prizes ready. "Another person still, might be running back and forth to boat captains and asking them questions about their day," Heyliger said. "It's usually a lot of work."

For a kids tournament, the pace quickens.

"That's always like an all-hands-on-deck situation," Heyliger said. "It is a catch and release tournament with an ongoing weigh-in, as opposed to the offshore tournaments where the entire catch is brought to the dock and weighed at one time. The kids are actively fishing, keeping the fish in a bucket, running up the dock, getting them weighed, and then releasing them."

Mangrove snappers, yellowtail snappers, puffer fish, and a big tarpon have been some of the lucky catches in tournaments past. Some of the tournaments are species specific such as the Wahoo Windup and the Dolphin Derby.

For the Bastille Day Kingfish Tournament, prizes are given for the largest king mackerel.

DFW comes prepared with data sheets, tournament-certified and scientific scales, measuring tapes, and fish boards to measure fish length.

"Partner organizations are very accommodating when we explain why we want to collect data. They are very happy to work with us," Heyliger said. "This allows us to collect information at these specific fishing events on targeted species, which can help us to better understand the catch and the effort data associated with it."

Navigating Knowledge:

Empowering Communities Through Marine Resource Education

*photo courtesy of
Marine Resource Education Program*

From recreational to commercial fishers, and scientists to bait and tackle shop owners, the list of stakeholders invited to participate in workshops held by the Marine Resource Education Program (MREP) is broad. The aim of the federal program is to give fishers information that will empower them to navigate and engage in fisheries management, through workshops organized by fishers for fishers.

"It's a nice diverse group. They get to learn together and share meals together and build relationships that continue into the future," said MREP Program Manager Courtney Pickett.

She said the workshops bring fishers, fish scientists, and managers together to share information on how they can get more involved in resource management.

The last MREP workshop held in the USVI, in May of 2024, brought together 32 participants and about 20 presenters on St. Croix.

"We had a really good turnout with 15-20 presenters. It seemed very successful," Pickett said.

Participants have a chance to dive into scientific data that's used to make decisions, learn how it is processed, and gather basic understanding of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and the reasoning behind the District Advisory Meetings.

"It's complex to know where you can get involved and what's the language to use," Pickett said.

To MREP Caribbean Program Principal Julian Magras, the program excels at giving fishers the training they need to understand the rules they must abide by within federal and territorial waters.

"It's the only program we have to be able to bring fishers in a room on an annual basis and learn their issues. They walk around and are able to ask questions," Magras said.

Fishers also have an opportunity to break bread together during shared meals and participate in activities and exercises that spread awareness of annual catch limits and closed seasons through workshop presentations.

Other experiential training includes the dissection of fish to get to the otoliths, or ear bones, which can be used to determine important information about them.

During the May 2024 workshop on St. Croix, Division of Fish and Wildlife Biologist Danielle Olive Heyliger and fisheries liaison Liandry De La Cruz Quinones gave a presentation which showed the process she and other scientists use to remove fish otoliths, or ear bones, which are used to measure the age of fish.

She also shared an insider's perspective on how to conduct fisheries surveys.

MREP was developed in the Northeast region in 2001 by two Maine fishing community leaders, councilmembers John Williamson and Mary Beth Tooley, with input from regional fishermen to enhance the regional dialogue on fishery management.

Attending an MREP workshop is free for accepted applicants.

For St. Croix District Advisory Panel Chair Gerson Martinez, of the Caribbean Fishery Management Council, MREP workshops are all about broadening education and helping to encourage others to become a part of the decision-making.

"The workshop is basically to let the participants know the process of the regulation making," he said. "We want other participants to experience it and get the knowledge of using the resources."

An added benefit comes about when persons want to sign up for related fishery management committees.

"We have people who are now being interested and want to get involved," Martinez said.

The next MREP workshop scheduled for the U.S. Caribbean is slated for June 2 to June 4, 2026 on St. Thomas.

Additional information on the program can be viewed through the following English- and Spanish-language videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSfFGLVgIU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXUZCJ2ww7s>

For more information on MREP visit: <https://mrep.gmri.org/>

Forecasting the Float:

The Science Behind Sargassum Predictions

photo by
Tia Rabsatt

Yellow brown algal blooms blanket a number of the territory's shorelines during high sargassum season, inundating beaches, releasing harmful toxins as they decay in the open.

A tourism nightmare. A government headache. A smelly soup of hydrogen sulfide that outpaces the time it takes to haul in heavy machinery to remove.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife has partnered with the University of South Florida and other entities on a new grant to monitor and improve prediction models of sargassum influx, to provide better clarity on when blooms may hit and their exact locations.

As part of the NOAA Monitoring & Event Response for Harmful Algal Blooms program, the Virgin Islands has joined Florida Atlantic University, Caribbean Coastal Ocean Observing System, and the NOAA Atlantic Oceanographic & Meteorological Lab, in a project led by the University of South Florida Optical Oceanography Laboratory that organizers hope will eventually provide real-time data to illuminate the effects of sargassum.

Tools such as satellite imagery, oceanographic models, and water quality data are being used to develop higher resolution tools that will help people in South Florida, Puerto Rico, and the USVI better predict where and how much sargassum will be appearing.

Scientists hope these tools will help affected areas better prepare for a sargassum influx.

The \$3.2 million award to USF is the first time that NOAA has recognized Sargassum as Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB) through the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science HAB Forecasting and Monitoring Program meant to help coastal communities mitigate the impacts of the seaweed on local economies.

The purpose of an operational Sargassum HAB monitoring and forecasting system for the southeastern U.S. and U.S. Caribbean waters is to develop an improved system to predict and notify stakeholders of sargassum inundations through (1) improving existing Sargassum detection and forecasting technologies, (2) better understanding of the associated impacts of Sargassum HAB inundation and beaching, (3) autonomous delivery of timely, accurate information on current conditions and forecasts, and (4) engagement and collaboration with end-users to ensure transition of the project outputs to management action.

The project focus is to develop an improved system to track and map daily sargassum distribution at coarse to fine spatial resolutions in the southeastern U.S. and U.S. Caribbean, and to get the new products developed from this system to stakeholders to improve their ability to prepare for and mitigate against sargassum inundation events or SIE's.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife is supporting the research under this project through field research to collect in situ sargassum distribution and biomass data, and outreach and stakeholder engagement.

Sargassum is a brown, free-floating macroalgae that naturally thrives in tropical and subtropical regions of the Atlantic Ocean and supports a variety of marine organisms. Large masses of the algae were usually only seen in the Sargasso Sea and the Gulf of America. Since 2011, the amount of sargassum across the tropical Atlantic has increased steadily, leading to what is known as the Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt. Now, there are repeated large-scale accumulations throughout the Caribbean. When beached, decomposing sargassum releases hydrogen sulfide, producing a strong "rotten egg" odor and causing irritation to the eyes, nose, throat, and respiratory system—effects that are more severe for individuals with asthma. Avoiding beaches with significant decaying sargassum is the most effective precaution.

For larger accumulations, beachfront businesses may apply for permits from DFW and the Division of Coastal Zone Management to use mechanical equipment. Other mitigation includes use of containment booms which require Army Corps of Engineers approval. Presently, in water removal of sargassum is not permitted in the USVI. DFW provides mandatory training in best ecological removal practices to comply with V.I. Code.

RECIPE

White Grunt Fish Balls by Nicole Greaux

(*Haemulon plumieri*)



Illustration courtesy of CFMC



REEF RESPONSIBLE SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD INITIATIVE



photo courtesy of
Nicole Greaux

White Grunt Fish Balls

3 lb / 1.36 kg grunt, scaled and cleaned
3 ea garlic cloves
1½ tsp / 6 g all-purpose seasoning
½ tsp / 1 g smoked paprika
10 oz / 283 g panko
1 medium egg, beaten

Spicy Mango Chutney

1 lb / 453 g mango semi-ripe, grated
4 oz / 113 g white sugar
4 oz / 113 g dark brown sugar
2 tbsp / 30 ml water
2 oz / 57 g ginger, grated
2 ea garlic cloves, minced
2 ea red chilies fresh, sliced
1 tbsp / 6 g red chili flakes, hot or sweet
3ea cinnamon stick
1 ea star anise
2 ea cardamom pods
3 ea cloves
2 tbsp / 30 ml white vinegar
1/4 tsp / 1.25 g salt

Preparing the White Grunt Fish Balls

1. Fry grunt in hot cooking oil, about 4 minutes on each side.
2. Put aside to drain off excess oil and blot with paper towel.
3. Flake fish meat off all grunts into bowl (no bones).
4. Add garlic, all-purpose seasoning, and smoked paprika.
5. Mix well, let sit for 10 minutes. Make into balls of desired size.
6. Heat cooking oil to hot.
7. Place panko in soup bowl or a tray and coat fish balls thoroughly with it and egg mixture.
8. Place coated fish balls gently into oil and fry to golden brown.
9. Eat with dipping sauce of your choice - Spicy mango chutney is mine.

Preparing the Spicy Mango Chutney

1. Combine all ingredient in a saucepan and cook on medium-low for 25 to 30 minutes.
2. The sugar will melt and become thick and syrupy at first, then the mixture will reduce to almost half.
3. Remove from heat and remove the whole spices. Let cool in the pan for 10 minutes and store in jars. Refrigerate until use.

-excerpted from Fish and Seafood Recipes for Underutilized Species of Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, by the Caribbean Fishery Management Council

Part of the Responsible Consumer = Sustainable Fishery Campaign to develop awareness on the importance of responsible seafood consumption.

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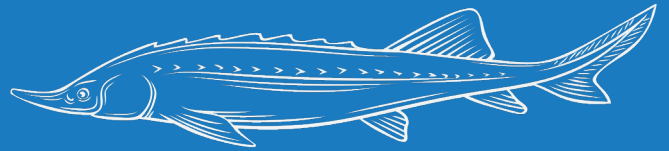


NATIONAL FISH HABITAT PARTNERSHIP



ABOUT US

The National Fish Habitat Partnership works to conserve fish habitat nationwide, leveraging federal, state, tribal, and private funding resources to achieve the greatest effect on fish populations through priority conservation projects of 20 Fish Habitat Partnerships under NHFP. Since 2006, the National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) has supported over 1,700 projects benefiting fish habitat in all 50 states. The National Fish Habitat Partnership is codified through The America's Conservation Enhancement Reauthorization Act of 2024 (PL 118-198).



OUR MISSION

Is to protect, restore, and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people.



CONSERVATION IMPACT

Since 2006, the USFWS has provided over \$65.6 million to conservation projects which were leveraged at a 5:1 ratio to provide over \$335 million in funding support for fish habitat conservation projects that improve angling and recreational opportunities across the nation. NFHP assembles the collective expertise of federal, state, and non-governmental organizations to identify and prioritize conservation work to achieve significant benefits for fish and other aquatic resources for the American people.

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