



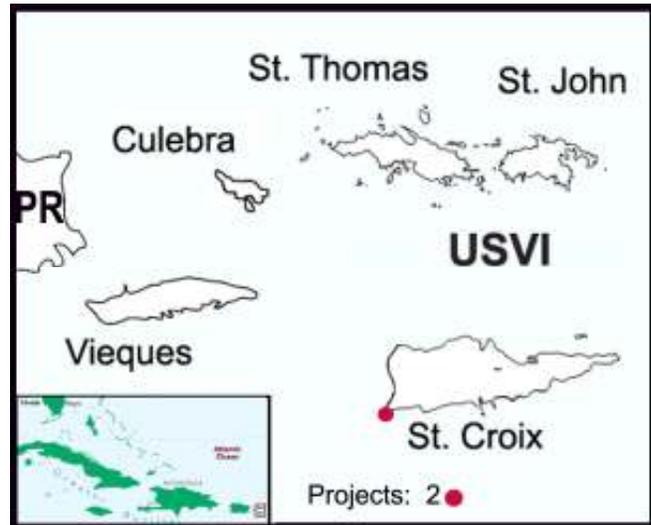
The Coastal Program In the Caribbean: *U.S. Virgin Islands*

Ridgetop...



...to Reef

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



General Description

The Coastal Program in the Caribbean (covering Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) recognizes the need to balance residential, tourist, commercial, and industrial needs with conservation of coastal habitats and species. Development pressure on coastal areas is intense in the Virgin Islands, and steep hills directly link land use in the upper watersheds to coastal habitats. Coastal habitats, particularly coral reefs and seagrass beds, are vulnerable to a variety of impacts from human activities and natural events. The mission of the Coastal Program in the Caribbean is to work with partners by providing assistance to restore and conserve the diverse coastal habitats and species.

Habitats of Special Concern

The Virgin Islands support a rich variety of coastal habitats that include coral reefs and colonized hardgrounds, seagrass beds, rocky shores, sandy beaches, mangrove forests, salt flats, salt ponds, and subtropical upland forest. Freshwater wetlands are increasingly rare in the Virgin Islands, and most streams are intermittent or ephemeral. Dry and moist subtropical forests provide superb erosion control within the steep watersheds, and support a wide variety of migratory and resident birds, reptiles and amphibians. Coastal salt ponds, flats, and mangroves support a variety of wildlife and filter sediment and nutrient runoff that affect coral reefs and seagrass beds. Beaches and low sand dunes are nesting habitat for endangered sea turtles. Steep rocky shorelines offer cliff nesting habitat for a variety of sea birds, including tropic birds. Almost all threatened and endangered species in the Virgin Islands (eight animal and five plant species) are directly associated with coastal habitats. Coral reefs and seagrass beds provide habitat for adult and juvenile fish and shellfish. Coral reefs are among the most diverse ecosystems in the world, provide actively growing shoreline protection, and serve as a major tourist attraction for the islands.

Threats

Coastal development has taken a heavy toll on sandy beaches, mangrove forest, salt ponds, and upland beach forest. Upland forests have minimal legal protection, and continue to be highly vulnerable to development. Erosion and resultant sedimentation has been identified by the Virgin Islands Coastal Zone Program as a leading

threat to near-shore water quality, coral reefs, and seagrass beds. Development on beaches and nearby uplands affects sea turtle nesting habitat directly and indirectly. Coral reefs and seagrass beds are affected by marina development, careless marine recreation activities, and over-fishing.

Conservation Strategies

Habitat restoration in the Virgin Islands presents challenges to balance conservation and development through positive and creative solutions. The Coastal Program geographic focus units (based on the USGS Hydrologic Units) are: 1) St. Thomas/St. John, and 2) St. Croix. Since National Wildlife Refuge benefits are a major focus of the program, current effort is concentrating on St. Croix. The new Virgin Island's

Wildlife Conservation Plan together with identified Areas of Particular Concern provides additional focus for the program. A GIS system is under development to track results. Projects benefiting multiple habitats or species (particularly coral reefs and threatened and endangered species) will receive priority. Education and outreach materials are under development for the program.

Partners

Existing:

- Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (Fish & Wildlife and CZM)
- West Indies Marine Animal Research and Conservation Service (NGO)
- Caribbean Islands National Wildlife Refuges, Sandy Point (SPNWR)

Developing:

- St. Croix Environmental Association (NGO)
- The Nature Conservancy (St. Croix Home Program)
- USDA Forest Service (Forest Stewardship)
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NGO)

Program Accomplishments and Activities

Current projects:

- Relocate endangered leatherback sea turtle nests at risk from erosion along 1.5 miles of beach (SPNWR and WIMARCS)
- Provide materials for a native tree nursery for (SPNWR)
- Participated in a coral grants workshop for Federal programs

Future projects are currently under development.

Future Needs

- Broaden and strengthen partnerships
- Promote watershed based programs
- Assist conservation entities carrying out viable restoration projects
- Prepare education and outreach materials to promote restoration of coastal habitats



Contacts

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For additional information, please visit our website at: <http://www.fws.gov/coastal/CoastalProgram/>