



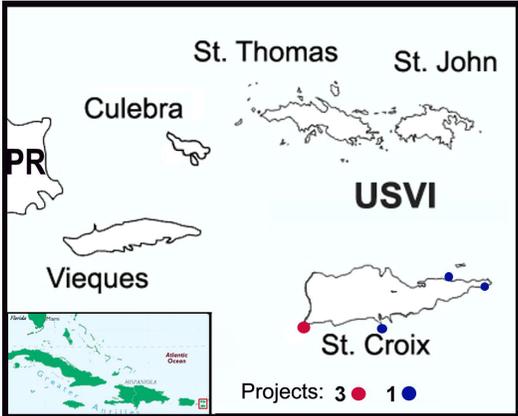
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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

Ridgetop...



...to Reef



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. 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 that support trust resource species.

Habitats of Special Concern

The Virgin Islands support a rich variety of coastal habitats that include coral reefs, 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 and reptiles. 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. Rocky and cliff shorelines offer nesting habitat for a variety of sea 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 are among the most diverse ecosystems in the world, providing shoreline protection, habitat for adult and juvenile fish and shellfish, 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, in particular, are 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. 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 USVI is divided into two USGS Hydrologic Units: 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 the St. Croix unit. The new Virgin Island’s Wildlife Conservation Plan together with identified Areas of Particular Concern provide additional focus for the program. A GIS system is under development to track results. Projects within the current geographic focus unit that benefit 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.

Existing and Potential Partners:

- 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)
- 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)
- National Park Service
- Private businesses and individuals
- Other NGOs

Current Projects in the USVI:

- Relocation of leatherback sea turtle nests at risk from erosion at Sandy Point NWR (WIMARCS)
- Materials for a native tree nursery for Green Cay and Sandy Point reforestation projects (SPNWR)
- Invasive vegetation control in leatherback nesting habitat (WIMARCS)
- Rat eradication on Green and Ruth Cays (SPNWR and DPNR)
- Reforestation of Jack & Isaac Bay Reserve for habitat restoration and erosion control



Future projects are currently under development for FY07:

On-the-ground habitat restoration projects within the St. Croix (and associated cays) geographic focus area will receive priority for the next 5 years. There is no formal proposal format, but a suggested format is included in the FY06 funding availability announcement (web page cited below). The new FY07 funding announcement should be available soon. Please contact the Caribbean program coordinator for additional information.



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Contacts

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