

THE
FUTURE
OF
AMERICA'S
NATIONAL
PARKS

First Annual
Centennial Strategy for

Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument

August 2007

CENTENNIAL INITIATIVE



Site: VICR

Year: 2007

Vision Statement

Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument was established in January 2001 when a presidential proclamation designated 12,708 acres of federally owned submerged lands to preserve and protect all the elements of a Caribbean tropical marine ecosystem, and further the protection of the habitats essential for sustaining and enhancing the coastal and submerged ecosystems in Virgin Islands National Park; to facilitate research by qualified scientists and members of the academic community to support Monument management and promote scientific knowledge; and to promote understanding and stewardship by providing educational and partnering opportunities for local, national, and international communities. The Monument includes submerged lands within the 3 mile belt off of the island of St. John and its waters support a diverse and complex system of coral reefs, and other ecosystems such as shoreline mangrove forests and seagrass beds that contribute to their health and survival. The biological communities of the monument live in a fragile, interdependent relationship and include habitats essential for sustaining and enhancing the tropical marine ecosystem and several threatened and endangered species. Humpback whales, pilot whales, four species of dolphins, brown pelicans, and the hawksbill, leatherback, and green sea turtles all use portions of the monument. Countless species of reef fish, invertebrates, and plants utilize these submerged lands during their lives, and over 25 species of sea birds feed in the waters.

To fulfill the mission of VICR, the Centennial Vision for the Monument is to increase activities which are critical to the protection and conservation of its natural resources. These activities include research and mapping, enforcement of regulations designed to protect the marine ecosystem yet allow the public to enjoy the resources, and increasing public education and stewardship in the preservation of our planet's precious ocean resources.

Park/ Superintendent/ Program Manager

Mark Hardgrove

Site: VICR

STEWARDSHIP

Provide inspiring, safe, and accessible places for people to enjoy - the standard to which all other park systems aspire.

Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

VICR was established 2001 to manage and protect 13,000 acres of submerged lands, which more than doubled the acreage that VIIS manages. VICR provides access to numerous tropical marine ecosystems and significant historic and cultural resources (e.g., ship wrecks which are rare in the Caribbean). In order to provide an inspiring, safe and accessible visitor experience while accomplishing resource protection, funding for basic operational programs are needed to fulfill mission responsibilities such as resource inventories, delineating boundaries, managing and protecting significant species including marine mammals and T&E species, and increased law enforcement activities [the illegal entry of undocumented aliens has increased dramatically, and the detection, apprehension, and transport of these individuals has been handled almost exclusively by VIIS Rangers]. (OFS 12878, 9998, 11238)

The work described currently is supported by OFS and/ or PMIS

Site: VICR

STEWARDSHIP

Improve the condition of park resources and assets.

Restore native habitats by controlling invasive species and reintroducing key plant and animal species.

The loss of more than 50% of coastal mangroves in the Virgin Islands over the past 100 years has greatly impacted recruitment of fish to our coral reefs. The health of coral reefs and other hard bottom ecosystems depends on a balanced community of fish and invertebrates, and it is well documented that mangrove proproot habitats are important nursery areas for many fish and a number of invertebrates found on coral reefs. Hurricane Hole and Mary's Creek are the most significant remaining nursery habitats on St. John. As such, it is critical to assess their value and health. A proposed study will compare the present coral reef fish nursery value of Hurricane Hole and Mary's Creek to historical values to determine stability and trends in this community. Results will enable the Park to develop management measures to further protect and enhance these largest remaining relatively pristine examples of valuable marine community in VIIS and the northern Virgin Islands. PMIS 49069

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Improve the natural resources in parks, as measured by the vital signs developed under the Natural Resource Challenge.

Vital Signs for VICR have been identified through the South Florida/Caribbean Inventory and Monitoring Program. Park staff and other collaborators (NOAA, universities, scientists) are monitoring water quality, coral reef health, reef fish populations, mangrove fish nursery habitat, etc. Approximately 19 moorings in monument waters are protecting coral reef and seagrass communities in several areas. Storm refuge moorings for approximately 80 vessels are protecting shoreline mangrove communities from the damage associated with attaching vessels to them. Continued funding of the I&M Program and funding of several PMIS projects are necessary to ensure continued improvement of natural resources in VICR.

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Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

With the creation of the VICR, areas previously used for traditional safe refuge for boats during hurricane events are no longer accessible due to a no-anchoring restriction. This has caused extreme concern among the marine community as their boats represent their homes and in many cases, their livelihoods. Hurricane Hole represents the most pristine and valuable nursery habitat for juvenile reef fish remaining in the US Virgin Islands, and provides the source of reef fish for most of the reef systems along the east and south coasts of St. John. Seagrasses and many corals also grow in the shallow waters around the mangrove prop-roots. Traditional methods of

Site: VICR

STEWARDSHIP

- Improve the condition of park resources and assets.

securing boats cause significant damage to the mangrove and nearshore marine resources. We must ensure that there is space for the secure attachment of approximately 100 vessels from winds and waves generated by tropical storms and hurricanes

By ensuring safe, environmentally sensitive access to this site, traditional users will support the establishment of the Monument and be less likely to engage in illegal or destructive use of it, as well as increase community support and stewardship of the Monument. PMIS 118605

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Site: VICR

STEWARDSHIP

- Serve as the Preeminent resource laboratory by applying excellence in science and scholarship to understand and respond to environmental changes.
- Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

VICR strives to solicit and encourage scientific research in natural resource fields to better understand the processes and dynamics involved in tropical biology and ecology. Considerable work is being done at VICR in understanding changes in coral reef ecosystems as it relates to changes in local, regional and global variables. Coral reef changes due to bleaching and disease, and changes in reef fish populations due to habitat changes and fishing pressures are being monitored to better understand and respond to environmental changes. VICR is also providing an opportunity to determine the effects of establishing a no-take Marine Protected Area and the ecological connectivity between VICR, VIIS, and Territorial waters.

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Site: VICR

ENVIRONMENT

- Engage partners, communities, and visitors in shared environmental stewardship.
- Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

In partnership with NOAA and USGS, the park will develop maps of submerged habitats and monitoring the park's resources.

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Site: VICR

EDUCATION

Cooperate with educators to provide curriculum materials, high-quality programs, and park-based and online learning.

Other Park/ Program performance goal(s)

Partner and collaborate with other governmental and non-governmental entities to provide curriculum based programs regarding the natural resources of the Park.

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Site: VICR

EDUCATION

Introduce young people and their families to national parks by using exciting media and technology.

Increase the number of web hits through the introduction of advanced, interactive features that attract young people to national parks.

Expand the use of the VICR website by creating interactive tools and other media features that would enable visitors who are not able to travel to the Park to learn about the resources.

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