

Conservation Volunteers International Spruces Up St. John Trails, Ruins

Group Forges Long-term Relationship with Virgin Islands National Park

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— Mark Hardgrove, former VINP Superintendent



St. John Tradewinds News Photos

Conservation Volunteer International group works at the Francis Bay ruin.

By **JAIME ELLIOTT**
St. John Tradewinds
V.I. NATIONAL PARK — More than two years after retiring as Superintendent of Virgin Islands National Park, Mark Hardgrove returned this month with a group of volunteers who made a big impact on the island.

Hardgrove led a group of 22 participants in Conservation Volunteer International Program’s newest destination and first trip to the island November 2 through 12.

The group cleared miles of trails and spent hours removing growth from several ruins and grave sites within V.I. National Park. ConservationVIP participants stayed at V.I. Environmental Resource Station near Lameshur Bay and spent time on the Leinster Bay trail and ruins, the Francis Bay boardwalk, trial and ruins, Yawzi Point trail and the Lameshur Bay trail, ruins

and grave site. ConservationVIP is an all-volunteer non-profit group dedicated to the sustainability of some of the world’s greatest and most pristine landscapes. The group hosts trips to Patagonia’s Torres del Paine National Park, The Galapagos Islands, Yosemite National Park, Machu Picchu — where it is the sole volunteer group working in the ancient city — and now VINP.

The group has been in existence for about eight years and partnered with REI Adventures about four years ago. The partnership allows ConservationVIP to continue organizing and leading the trips while REI Adventures advertises, handles logistics of registering volunteers and assists with travel arrangements.

Hardgrove, who retired to Puerto Rico in August 2012, spent a few months relaxing before feeling the itch to get involved with

a service organization, he explained.

“I slacked off for about four months and then I realized that I have a whole ‘nother life,” said Hardgrove. “In retirement you really find your passions. And once I removed all the bureaucracies and red tape, I really found me and found what I’m passionate about.”

The former VINP Superintendent discovered ConservationVIP on a National Park Service retirees’ website and submitted his resume. Not only did he hear back, Hardgrove was asked to join the group’s board of directors.

deeper understanding of the historic sites they would help to maintain during their 10 days of work.

The group also worked with Friends of V.I. National Park’s new volunteer coordinator Anna Adams, who was an invaluable asset for the program, explained Hardgrove.

“Anna was great and she helped so much,” said Hardgrove. “She walked every trail with us and had everything lined up. All of the VINP staff was so accommodating to us.”

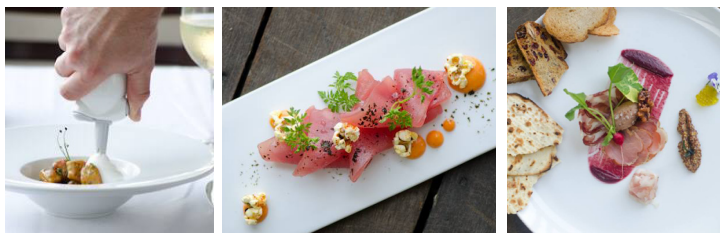
“I can’t tell you how proud I was every day working with this group in this very special place,” he said.

Not only did the group help to clear miles of trails and several historic structures in VINP, ConservationVIP adopted the Yawzi Point Trail and will host twice yearly trips to the island.

“Part of what this group does is form long-term relationships where they work,” said Hardgrove. “We’ll be back here twice a year from now on. We’ll be the first volunteer group here in early November and the last volunteer group here in April.”

All 22 participants in ConservationVIP’s recent trip also became members of Friends of VINP and had the chance to meet Friends’

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Volunteers Spruce Up St. John Trails and Ruins

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President Joe Kessler when he visited the group at VIERS.

While ConservationVIP participants faced a few rainy days during their trip, they were only forced to cancel one day of work. The group also enjoyed two planned days off, one of which was filled with a generous donation by V.I. Eco-tours owner Sybille Sorrentino, according to Hardgrove.

“Sybille saw that we were here on Facebook and she managed to find us and offer us a wonderful day with an eco-hike and kayak and snorkel trip and the use of her water sports equipment,” said Hardgrove. “It was the perfect day off for this group who worked so hard during this trip.”

Even with that their time off, the ConservationVIP participants spent nine full days cutting brush in heat to which many volunteers were not accustomed. For many volunteers, their reward is the sense of camaraderie only found after a hard day’s work.

“It’s really about the camaraderie,” said Peter Murphy from Bend, Oregon. “It’s the feeling you get working alongside people from around the world and around the country. It’s an extraordinary feeling when you can do that.”



St. John Tradewinds News Photo

A group member works near a coral chimney at Francis Bay.

“It’s really physiological,” said Murphy. “It’s more than psychological. It’s a connection you would never get otherwise.”

The program allows visitors to have an experience they simply would never have staying at a resort, explained ConservationVIP board chairperson Gene Zimmerman, who joined the inaugural St. John trip.

“There was so much cohesiveness with the volunteers,” said Zimmerman, a retired Forest Service employee and founding member of the group. “The things we come for are being with other peo-

ple and helping them have these experiences they wouldn’t have had otherwise. They are invested in this place now.”

For Hardgrove, the best part of his recent trip was seeing friendly familiar faces, he explained.

“This was my first time back to St. John and I was welcomed by taxi drivers, NPS staff and all these friends I didn’t realize I had,” said Hardgrove. “This is Love City not just in name.”

For more information about ConservationVIP, check out the group’s website at <http://www.conservationvip.org>.

Letters to St. John Tradewinds

Great Sadness in Regards to Coral Bay

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ing their attempt at advertising; a repetitive video of a woman in a bikini swimming around beneath the sea picking up conch shells. And, Sirensa, sorry, that will always be an eye-sore to us. We are not traveling to Italy or Miami, we are traveling to a jewel in the Caribbean, so please developers, Governor and Senators, consider the landscape and heritage of such a place and stop trying to make it into something that it is not!

If it is SEG’s goal to drive out long time tourists and replace them with a different style tourist seeking upscale restaurants, lodging and shopping, under the disguise of doing service to the residents of CoralBay then they are on the right track! And, if it is the goal of the Governor and senators is to approve this style of investment, then it is just heart-breaking and mind-boggling! We have invested in St. John with our dollars and appreciation for 22 years, returning year after year, but SEG’s approved mega-marina resort could change all that for us. We think that CoralBay is doing

OK and the folks there do not need some would-be developer to come in and fix things for them; work along side them, maybe, but not force a “fix” on this community. That has already been tried in the Middle East; and we can all see how well that effort is working?!

CoralBay Community, keep fighting the good fight and after you win, you will find the time and renewed energy to make the subtle community improvements that you are committed towards. And, when folks like what SEG and their investors stand for finally accept you for what you are, then you will all get along just fine! CoralBay is already a princess, royalty of a rare and beautiful breed; a treasured gift from Mother Nature. Let us honor and celebrate her existence, not drive pilings into her and pave her over!

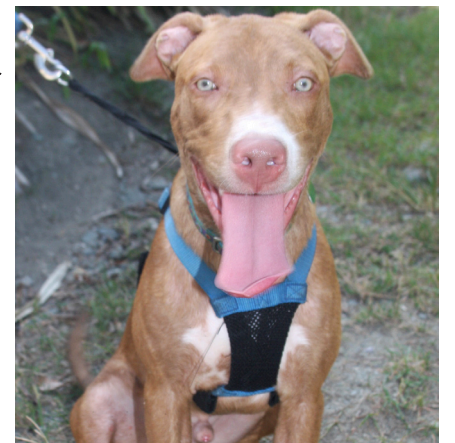
“They paved paradise to put up a parking lot” ~ Big Yellow Taxi, Joni Mitchell, 1970.

Lee Ann Gale
Wilbraham, MA

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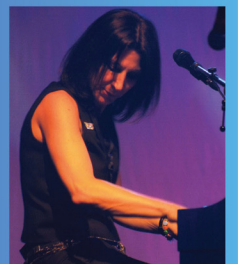
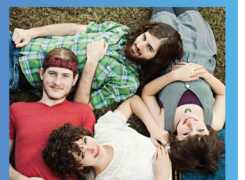
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