

Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands
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I. Introduction

1.01 For more than 15 years, the St. Croix Environmental Association (SEA) has worked to preserve and conserve the vital resources of St. Croix. Our efforts have helped to preserve the Great Pond, Southgate Pond, Jack's and Isaac's Bays and, most relevant to this hearing, the Salt River watershed. Much time, money and effort have been given to the preservation of an ecosystem that endures both natural catastrophes and the pressures of economic development, along with a variety of infra-structural failures.

1.02 In spite of all of these difficulties, we have worked to develop plans that will ensure that there is an ecologically sound future for the citizens of St. Croix. Our efforts include the replanting of nearly 20,000 mangroves in the Salt River watershed, community forestry education, education of elementary school students and advocacy for sound environmental initiatives. We have also reached out to developers to ensure that plans for the growth of St. Croix's economy are sustainable and conserve resources. We will continue to pursue avenues of education and action wherever possible.

II. The importance of National Parks on St. Croix.

2.01 There are two specific benefits that National Parks provide: aesthetic improvement and ecological preservation. Aesthetic improvement is important for maintaining a higher quality of life, but on an island that desperately needs tourist dollars, aesthetic improvement can be the difference between success and bankruptcy for local businesses. Ecological preservation within the United States' park system is well documented. On St. Croix, many fishermen rely on a steady harvest of fish for their livelihood; thus ecological preservation is crucial to them to maintain the biodiversity that allows them to continue harvesting fish. The preservation of resources goes hand in hand with the preservation of culture and allows for independent sustainable growth on St. Croix.

2.02 Aesthetic improvement on St. Croix is most notable in Christiansted. The efforts of the National Park Service to preserve the fort, the customs house and various other Danish colonial structures has led to one of the most breathtaking views in the United States. While this site has a great historic significance, the creation of "green areas" around the buildings has increased the charm and usefulness of the site as a tourist attraction. Most importantly, the people of St. Croix have a location to enjoy and to view as a source of local pride. The efforts of Mr. Joel Tutein and his staff are to be commended for this marvelous local resource.

2.03 Ecological preservation is observed most notably at the Salt River National Park. This site was slated for the addition of a large resort hotel. The potential for ecological devastation was both real and enormous. Through preserving this site, the National Park service has prevented a catastrophic destruction of coral that could have easily placed the local fishing industry in grave danger.

2.04 Buck Island demonstrates the power of ecological preservation to provide aesthetic improvement. Through the preservation of coral reefs and attention to natural resources, the National Park Service has actually allowed a local industry to develop that specializes in tours to Buck Island. In Buck Island, we have an example of preservation that leads to economic development.

2.05 SEA has worked at the Salt River National Park to restore an entire mangrove system that was devastated by Hurricane Hugo. Mangroves provide a natural filter for non-point source pollution, prevent reef silting and provide safe cover for juvenile fish. Mangroves are “the roots of the sea.” Through our efforts, 16,500 red mangroves and 3,000 black mangroves have been restored at Salt River. We have provided an interim sketch of our efforts and are preparing a final report on the mangrove restoration effort. (See exhibit 1) With the amount of work that we have done in this watershed, it is natural for us to take great pride in it and to seek the well being of the park.

III. The future of National Parks on St. Croix.

3.01 Two National Park Service locations are the current focus of our attention. Buck Island and Salt River are, as we have previously stated, vitally important to St. Croix. This importance cannot be overstated. The opportunity to enhance their facilities and increase their size should not be overlooked. This is an opportunity to improve two sites and increase ecological preservation in the Virgin Islands.

3.02 At Buck Island, we endorse without reservation or qualification the expansion of the park by 18,135 acres. Given the record of success of the National Park Service at Buck Island, we believe that expansion will not only preserve the environment, we believe that it will enhance an already thriving ecosystem. We recognize that some groups have contested this expansion; but we must insist that the overall benefit of this expansion would be far more beneficial to local interests.

3.03 In addition to our support for the expansion of Buck Island’s area by 18,135 acres, we strongly urge the Subcommittee to explore the possibility of increasing the area to include the waters up to and surrounding Green Key (See Exhibit 2). There are three practical reasons for this suggestion. We believe that this expansion would provide critical protection for marine species in the proposed area, we believe that a potential for collaboration between the National Park Service and SEA exists and we believe that, ultimately, the restoration of marine life to sustainable levels would provide a more stable future for local fisheries.

3.04 The seabed between Green Key and Buck Island once was filled with rich biodiversity. Conch thrived along the floor of the sea there. Unfortunately, with an export value of approximately \$14 per pound and little or no enforcement of catch limits, this area has become a conch graveyard. To quote a friend and local Federal Enforcement Officer, “if it is not behind a boundary sign, kiss it goodbye.” The authority, creativity and resourcefulness of our local National Park Service personnel could easily reverse this trend.

3.05 SEA has purchased nearly 100 acres of land bordering Cheney Bay and Southgate Pond. We are currently in the planning phase of creating a comprehensive nature park on this property. We would be happy to explore the potential of working with the National Park Service to provide resources and facilities

should the Service be able to create the area of protection that we have suggested.

3.06 This proposed area of protection, if managed by the National Park Service or the United States Fish and Wildlife Service would restore the conch population, enhance biodiversity and would lead to larger future fish and conch harvests. The increase in harvest size would improve the economic position of local fisherman. Also, the increased protection would ensure that future generations would have access to the resources that are the core of local industry.

3.07 At Salt River, we endorse without reservation or qualification the proposed expansion of the Park. Our own experience with our Southgate Pond property has shown us how difficult it is to site facilities without harming the surrounding ecosystem. If the National Park Service could acquire land with buildings in place for their facilities, they could reduce expense in planning and quickly have operations in place. With the growing importance of the Salt River National Park, it is important for the National Park Service to have a fixed and permanent presence there.

IV. Threats to National Parks on St. Croix.

4.01 In spite of all of the efforts of our local National Park Service staff, our National Parks face three imminent and potentially dangerous threats. Discharge of raw sewage into coastal waters, non-point source pollution and lack of a comprehensive solid waste management system place our National Parks at risk for serious to severe health hazards. We must advise the committee that the failure of the current local administration, as well as the cumulative failures of past administrations, to address these issues opens the door to potential disaster.

4.02 In the past six months, discharge of raw sewage into coastal waters has forced the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources on several occasions to issue warnings to avoid contact with seawater. We have included two of these warnings, issued on January 15th and April 9th, in our testimony, because the waters that are contaminated reach the Christiansted National Historic Site at Fort Christianvern. The Government of the Virgin Islands is under a court order to repair the wastewater system, however, action has been slow and problems persist.

4.03 A visitor to a National Park should not be confronted with the potential of contracting a serious disease as a result of their visit. Sewage contaminated water can contain hepatitis A, cryptosporidium, cholera and E coli bacteria. These are only a few of a much larger list of potential contaminants. Furthermore, contraction of any one of these diseases by a tourist or tourists could smear the good name and reputation of our National Park Service.

4.04 The Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources is a recognized leader in mitigating non-point source pollution. Commissioner Dean Plaskett has demonstrated commitment to address this serious problem. Unfortunately, the lack of a comprehensive land and water use plan in the Virgin Islands leads to development that is poorly planned. This poor planning requires greater efforts to protect the fragile systems that it endangers, such as Salt River National Park.

4.05 Solid waste management in the Virgin Islands is the threat, which most directly affects the aesthetics of our National Parks. The presence of solid waste containers at Columbus' Landing that are not emptied, detract from the experience of the visit. Although the National Park Service does not control this area, if it were there would be no problem of this nature, it is a part of the general experience and should be addressed.

V. Conclusion

5.01 It is the position of the St. Croix Environmental Association that our National Park Service should be expanded on St. Croix. This agency has affected positive change on the island as a whole by providing an excellent service to the citizens. To the extent that it is possible, this committee would be well served to increase funding, personnel and equipment available to this National Park Service staff.

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