



Foundation Document Overview

Virgin Islands National Park | Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument

U.S. Virgin Islands



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK is to preserve and protect for public benefit and inspiration outstanding scenic features, Caribbean tropical marine and terrestrial ecosystems in their natural conditions, and cultural heritage from pre-Columbian through Danish colonial times.



The purpose of VIRGIN ISLANDS CORAL REEF NATIONAL MONUMENT is to preserve and protect coastal mangroves, shallow-water reefs, and sea grass beds spanning from the bays of Hurricane Hole to the deep water coral reefs, fish, and bottom communities of the shelf edge surrounding St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands—furthering the protection and stewardship of the resources in Virgin Islands National Park.

Significance

Significance statements express why Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument provide outstanding opportunities for education and scientific research that are essential to understanding Caribbean history and promoting the sustainability of tropical marine and terrestrial ecosystems.
- Virgin Islands National Park was designated in 1976 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as the first biosphere reserve representing the Lesser Antilles. Virgin Islands National Park is one of the few biosphere reserves in the world to have both significant marine and terrestrial resources.
- Virgin Islands National Park contains most terrestrial ecosystem types within the biologically rich Lesser Antilles, including the largest and most intact dry tropical forests remaining in the Caribbean. These ecosystem types provide key wintering habitat for neotropical migratory birds as well as a wide range of habitat for other plants and animals.
- Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument collectively protect Caribbean shallow and deep water coral reefs, including exceptional coral and mangrove communities at Hurricane Hole. These reefs provide habitat for hundreds of species of fish and uncounted species of invertebrates and form exceptionally diverse ecosystems that have evolved over thousands of years.
- Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument collectively preserve an exceptional array of prehistoric and historic sites that continue to define the human interactions and history unique to the region. The cultural heritage of the diverse peoples who inhabited the islands, from the first inhabitants to the prominent colonial powers and the African slave trade, speaks to today's visitors and community.
- Virgin Islands National Park provides unparalleled opportunities to experience scenic views of natural and cultural features of St. John and Hassel Island—from historic ruins and forested hillsides and peaks to undeveloped beaches. The clear turquoise water of the park and monument creates the backdrop for these iconic scenes.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Marine Ecosystems**
- **Terrestrial Ecosystems**
- **Hurricane Hole**
- **Evidence of Pre-Columbian Taino Indians**
- **Diverse Historic Landscape**
- **Hassel Island**
- **Scenic Viewscape**
- **Dark Night Skies and Natural Sounds**

Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Opportunities for Scientific Study**
- **Outdoor Recreation**



Interpretive Themes



Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument protect unique and diverse terrestrial and marine ecosystems representative of the Lesser Antilles and provide habitat critical for the survival of indigenous and migratory species, some of which are threatened and endangered.
- Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument provide outstanding recreational, educational, inspirational, and scenic opportunities for park visitors to deepen their appreciation, understanding, and connection to natural and cultural resources found only in the Caribbean.
- Virgin Islands National Park provides a setting for exploring the experience of the enslaved Africans and learning about the layers of history and patterns of change within the institution of slavery over time in the West Indies when the Triangle Trade flourished.
- Virgin Islands National Park chronicles the history of indigenous cultures and human habitation and use of the U.S. Virgin Islands, from Pre-Columbian people 3,000 years ago through the Danish Colonization in 1917.
- Climate change jeopardizes the natural and cultural resources of the U.S. Virgin Islands by degrading the environment with increasingly severe and possibly more frequent storms and droughts, rising sea temperatures, and inundation of the coastline, all of which have the potential to affect quality of life and visitor experience.
- Research and monitoring are the driving forces in preserving, educating, and understanding Caribbean natural and cultural history, as well as promoting the sustainability of tropical marine and terrestrial ecosystems at Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument for present and future generations.

Description

Located on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands, Virgin Islands National Park was established in 1956 and comprises more than half of the mountainous island's land area. The park includes most of the north shore and most of the central and southeast portions of the island, including 7,259 acres of terrestrial and shoreline habitat and 5,650 acres of adjacent submerged lands (offshore underwater habitat, added to the park in 1962). The park also includes 128 acres on Hassel Island in Charlotte Amalie Harbor on St. Thomas, which was added in 1978. In 2001, Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument was established to protect an additional 12,708 acres of submerged lands and associated marine resources around the island. In sum, the National Park Service manages almost 58 percent of the land area of St. John and more than 18,000 acres of offshore underwater habitat.

The park and monument offer protection to coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves, and other marine habitats that support sea turtles, corals, and other marine life. Virgin Islands National Park also protects some of the last remaining native tropical dry rain forest in the Caribbean. In 1976, Virgin Islands National Park was designated as an International Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The park was one of the first protected areas in the world to receive this designation.

Of the hundreds of UNESCO biosphere reserves worldwide, the park is 1 of only 30 reserves containing both marine and terrestrial ecosystems. It provides vital habitat for approximately 130 bird species, 400 reef-associated fish species, 17 species of whales and dolphins, 13 reptile species, numerous sponges, and more than 45 stony coral species. A number of marine and terrestrial species within the boundaries of the park and monument are federally listed as endangered or threatened.

The park units' cultural resources are abundant and diverse, including prehistoric archeological sites, hundreds of historic structures, offshore shipwrecks, and museum collections that encompass artifacts dating as far back as 840 BC. The Virgin Islands have been inhabited for at least 3,000 years, beginning with hunter-gatherers of the Archaic Period. Settlement continued throughout prehistory and ended with the development of the Taino culture, the pre-Columbian people who were present when Columbus explored the New World. When Europeans arrived, the Virgin Islands became a melting pot, inhabited by people from around the world who came to make a new life on the islands. These colonial settlements date from the 17th century through the 19th century. Visitors can explore the ruins of hundreds of historic structures to get a sense of this rich history.

