

US Virgin Islands Department of Planning & Natural Resources

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Development of Territorial Parks & Protected Areas Biological and Cultural Surveys and Database



Submitted by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Edwards", written over a horizontal line.

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1. Background and Introduction

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) is mandated to protect, maintain, and manage the natural and cultural resources of the US Virgin Islands. Recently, the Department has been tasked with the creation of the territory's first parks system which will combine many parcels of land with various degrees of development into one managed system. While the territory has enjoyed the benefits of having lands and waters managed by the National Park Service for many years, this will be the first effort under the Government of the Virgin Islands. In order to help ensure the best success for the new territorial parks system, we are seeking a Coastal Fellow to work in this new DPNR Division of Territorial Parks & Protected Areas to inventory all natural and cultural resources now under its management and share the results with the community.

2. Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: Complete database of all properties designated to be managed by the Division of Territorial Parks & Protected Areas.

Objective 1.a – Within the first three months of the fellowship, a database will be created with parcel numbers, GPS coordinates, and descriptive names.

Objective 1.b – Within the first six months of the fellowship, all properties will have been designated a Conservation Class based on existing and planned development, level of public use, and conservation goals set by the Department and the Territorial Parks Division Board.

Goal 2: Develop biological inventory, with the assistance of the Division of Fish and Wildlife, to support consistent analyses of the park system status and health.

Objective 2.a – Within the first year of the fellowship, an inventory method should be established that will collect data consistently from all properties in the parks system.

Objective 2.b – Within the first year of the fellowship, at least one inventory should have been completed in order to test the accuracy and feasibility of survey methods and data collected.

Objective 2.c – After a year and a half of the fellowship, at least 50% of the properties should have received complete surveys to be entered into the database.

Goal 3: Share information on the resources and benefits of the park system to the Virgin Islands community.

Objective 3.a – Within the first three months of the fellowship, a social media strategy and tentative schedule should be developed.

Objective 3.b – Throughout the process of creating the database, at least 2 press releases should be released featuring an overview of all properties, an explanation of the Conservation Class designations, and be accompanied by graphics created for sharing on social media.

Objective 3.c – Throughout the entire fellowship, at least one public meeting should be held on each island to share information from the database, surveys, and progress of the parks division.

Goal 4: Integrate parks data with existing DPNR GIS datasets.

Objective 4.a – As objectives are complete, data should be published on the DPNR website.

Objective 4.b – Within the last three months of the fellowship, a section of the DPNR website should be completed with data from across the Department.

3. Milestones and Outcomes

As described in Goal 1, the first six months of the project will be primarily office based as the fellow completes the initial inventory of all parcels. This time will be useful to get to know the territory and attend meetings and events with the Director of the division. The fellow will be working with key personnel at DPNR as well as the Department of Property and Procurement, the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the Department of Sports Park and Recreation, as well as the University of the Virgin Islands and the National Park Service and NOAA.

The creation of the initial inventory and database will not only be the first deliverable for the fellowship, but it is also the first steppingstone in the development of a brand-new division within the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. As the fellow's task shifts to the development of the Conservation Class delegation, the work will move partially into the field to start getting to know the properties and potential future use of each location. At this point the fellow will be able to begin traveling between the islands accompanied by the Director.

Over the next year, collaboration within DPNR and community experts will be paramount as methods are developed and properties are prioritized to receive baseline biological surveys. As field work intensifies, more frequent travel between the islands will be necessary as major accomplishments will include the completion of property evaluations as well as outreach materials. While it is our goal to complete intensive surveys at 50% of the properties assigned to be managed by the Division, as the total number could change the final deliverables may have to be flexible as it strives towards a moving target.

The final accomplishment of this project will be public-facing map to be published on the DPNR website. This will incorporate the initial database of each property with parcel, GPS, and Conservation Class designation. Properties who have received full surveys will have those reports available on this platform as well as available as PDFs to be available individually or as a complete package. Throughout the two-year project, press releases and social media will be released at key milestones to keep the community informed and receive feedback on the development of the parks system.

4. Project Description

The Coastal Management Fellow chosen for this project will start along with a new initiative in the Virgin Islands. The information gathered and then shared with the community will be the building blocks of an initiative decades in the making. While the division is new, they will be joining a team at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources led by Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol. They will have the resources of the entire department and be collaborating with multiple divisions within DPNR as well as other departments within the Government of the Virgin Islands, the University of the Virgin Islands, federal government partners, and non-governmental agencies.

The work done in the first six months of this project will lay the groundwork for continued data gathering and sharing as the territory builds its parks system. Currently, the Department of Property and Procurement has identified approximately 30 pieces of property to be managed by the new parks division. It is anticipated that this number will grow slightly in the next few months so that the number of properties in the database will sit at approximately 40 when this project begins. These are located in the St. Thomas/St. John district as well as the St. Croix district and includes nearshore cays.

Once the initial properties are listed and named in the database, the process of Conservation Class designation will begin. All properties in the territorial parks system will be determined to be either Class 1 (high use with developed structures and amenities), 2 (low to medium use with limited development for trails), or 3 (no to low use with no development) depending upon current and future development, expected use level, and conservation goals. While this will be one of the first determinations to be made, it is possible that these may change due to findings during the survey process if ESA species or significant historical or cultural resources are found. For the purpose of this project, intensive surveys will be weighted towards areas designated 2 or 3, however in order to get a comprehensive view of the parks system, the final surveys will represent all classes of properties throughout the territory.

As the designations are taking place, the project will move towards preparation of field work. The fellow will collaborate with scientists and park professionals in the territory as well as other park systems outside of the USVI in order to determine the best methods. While this will be created by the fellow along with the Director and Commissioner's input, it is expected that they will follow the advice of professionals in the field and decide on the method best suited for our local terrain, flora, and fauna. Once the survey methods have been confirmed, the heavy-duty field work will begin. It is our hope that this will be synchronized with projects from the Division of Fish and Wildlife as well as the University of the Virgin Islands giving opportunity for multiple persons to be assisting at each location. The schedule will be created by the fellow with the assistant of the Parks Director as well as the DPNR Commissioner to ensure that funds are being spent responsibly and efficiently.

During this entire project, the fellow should be working on community outreach to share the deliverables and updates with the territory. This will include press releases, social media campaigns on Facebook and Instagram, as well as public appearances at community meetings and environmental outreach events. Outreach materials will include the final report of all properties which should be published on the DPNR website as well as PDF documents for each property and a summary introduction to be provided as a complete booklet.

The fellow will also represent the Division in meetings with the Virgin Islands Network of Environmental Educators (VINE) and host at least two Science Saturday events which are virtual educational shows run by the Department every month on Facebook Live. The fellow will also be expected to integrate themselves into the community and may be invited to participate in a variety of meetings and related projects.

When the fellowship is complete, the territory will be two years into an historic accomplishment of developing a territorial parks system. This will be challenging, exciting, and rewarding. During this time the fellow will gain a thorough understanding of the Virgin Islands natural and cultural resources. This is a unique opportunity that will never present itself again, to be a part of history and the development of something the territory has been working towards for decades. To be a part of this process, combined with the benefit of working within a successful and diverse department of the Government of the Virgin Islands, is an excellent opportunity that we look forward to offering to a Coastal Management Fellow.

5. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

To work with the Government of the Virgin Islands is to meaningfully engage with and support underserved and historically marginalized communities. The U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), a territory of the United States since 1917, suffers from a high level of poverty, with 22% of the population and 30% of families with children living in poverty; low educational achievement, with nearly 60% of students testing below standard for literacy and mathematics; lack of access to affordable fresh and healthy food, and limited access to health care. In addition, health disparities are some of the highest in the country (U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health, 2020). Over 80% of the population of the USVI identifies as Black or otherwise non-White, many of whom are direct descendants of the Caribbean slave trade. Virgin Islanders are excluded from the United States' participatory governance since they are not afforded the right to vote in national elections, nor a voting member of Congress. To work with DPNR is to work for and with these people.

This project is designed at Territory-scale to distribute DPNR's and NOAA's interests, resources, and intentions equitably across St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John. The scope of work includes regular meetings with stakeholder groups and the public at large, and the Coastal Fellow will utilize the US Virgin Islands Social Vulnerability Index map to help plan where and how to share information and hold meetings to include those who lack transportation, do not speak English well, are disabled, and more (Guannel et al, 2022).

6. Fellow Mentoring

Because of the special circumstances surrounding this fellowship project, we intend to provide a mentoring team to the coastal fellow. With the development of a new division there are still unknowns, which is exciting, but also leaves a blank on the team roster. The main point of contact for this project is K. Edwards, currently in the Division of Coastal Zone Management, who will be collaborating with the Directors of Coastal Zone Management (Director Marlon Hibbert) and Fish and Wildlife (Director Dr. Nicole Angeli). While Edwards will be the main mentor and project manager through this fellowship, having the support of these two directors is very important to the development of the survey protocol as well as having the support of two fully staffed divisions working on overlapping missions. The missing team member is the Director of the new division who, as of the submission of this proposal, has not been named.

The fellow will be working within the new division very closely with the Director, which is a territorial position allowing the project to work seamlessly from any office location, however it is expected that the fellow will be based on St. Thomas with Edwards and Director Hibbert. The fellow will work with the rest of the staff allowing for the development of a strong connection to the division and team. The fellow will also be encouraged to join other divisions in cross-training in order to learn about the territory and the individual programs at DPNR. This will help to develop a greater understanding of the territory and better accomplish the goals set forth in this proposal as well as to develop relationships with staff from other divisions.

The Coastal Fellow will also work closely to support the Division of Coastal Zone Management's Coastal Resilience Coordinator Hilary Lohmann, who is managing the USVI Comprehensive Land and Water Use project. Hilary was a supervisor-mentor for a NOAA Coastal Fellow 2020-2022, who subsequently stayed to continue working with CZM in the Territory, and Hilary will lend supervision, mentorship, and professional development support to this Fellow as well. The Fellow's project topic is of great interest and relevance to the Virgin Islands and how to organize for the responsible use of small island resources, and

the work the Fellow completes will directly inform the Land Use Plan project activities over the same two years as the Fellowship timeline.

7. Office Environment

The Coastal Management Fellow will be splitting their time between office and field work. This is a full-time position with many opportunities to learn about the US Virgin Islands, its natural resources, and the workings of a territorial government. They will be joining a large and well-established department in the Government of the Virgin Islands which offers an office environment that will have the support needed for somebody stepping into a new role. Because this position is focused on a territorial project, they will have the opportunity to work in both the St. Thomas and St. Croix offices with telework options available to assist with the transition and cost of living expenses. The mentors will communicate with the fellow daily through in-person interaction allowing for thoughtful collaboration on goals and plans, and online workshare platforms through the government email system. Basic supplies required for this position such as a laptop, camera, office space, and official DPNR email address will be provided with opportunities to upgrade based on the evolving needs of the project.

8. Project Partners

Key project partners on this project will be the Department of Property and Procurement, the Department of Planning & Natural Resources Divisions of Fish and Wildlife and Coastal Zone Management, the Department of Sports, Parks, & Recreation, the University of the Virgin Islands, NOAA's Office for Coastal Management, and the Virgin Islands National Park. Because this project focuses on providing the science behind creating a parks system and designating conservation levels, it will be important that the fellow work within the community to gather best practices and incorporate current and future research projects affecting the same or similar properties.

9. Cost-Share Description

DPNR will provide office space and supplies that are required for the coastal fellow, including a desktop computer, ArcGIS mapping software, and Microsoft Office. The Fellow will be granted a DPNR work email address and have access to the resources of the local government. As host agency, DPNR will provide meeting spaces for stakeholder engagement activities, historical data and documents related to STEER and its watersheds, and networking support to ensure the Fellow has timely access to a variety of stakeholders and partners. DPNR-CZM will provide \$15,000 in matching funds through the non-federal Reclamation Fund.

10. Strategic Focus Area

While the creation of this project has been focused on Healthy Coastal Ecosystems, we believe that the fellow will be working towards all three focus areas in the lifetime of the project. Working towards the Healthy Coastal Ecosystems focus area the fellow will be working with community scientific leaders in order to create a parks system using the best available science, and by creating the best available science. This information will be used by the Commissioner of the Department of Planning & Natural Resources and the Director of the Division of Territorial Parks & Protected Areas. The Conservation Class designations will determine future use, development, and protection of Virgin Islands parks effecting long

lasting change. This preservation of land, especially in the most coastal areas, will reduce impacts from severe storms and flooding as climate change impacts continue to increase in the region which also addresses the Resilient Coastal Communities focus area. The preservation and eventual restoration of these territorial parks will benefit the people of the Virgin Islands and provide additional opportunities for recreational and eco-tourism through hiking, biking, and horseback riding trails as well as education through demonstration sites and signage explaining conservation techniques such as restoration practices, rain gardens, and examples of endemic flora and fauna.

These educational and eco-tourism opportunities and recreational parks addresses the Vibrant and Sustainable Coastal Economies focus area. Some coastal properties evaluated will be in more populated areas such as downtown Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas or Frederiksted on St. Croix. The opportunity to designate smaller parcels for “pocket parks” which will increase appreciation for the connection to the environment as well as provide activities close to underserved communities who do not often receive the benefits of protected areas.