



# Environmental Assessment Scoping Newsletter

## Proposed Marine Research and Education Center, and Abandoned Hotel Demolition, Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve

The National Park Service (NPS) and the Joint Institute for Caribbean Marine Studies (JICMS) are developing plans for a proposed Marine Research and Education Center (MREC) at Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve (SARI), St. Croix, VI. The NPS is also planning to demolish and remove the abandoned hotel structure and return the hotel area to a more natural condition. Our plans are in the early stages of development. This newsletter is being distributed to our partners, neighbors, and stakeholders to inform them of the development of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for these projects.

### **Salt River Bay a Living Museum**

Salt River Bay contains prehistoric and colonial-era archeological sites and ruins that are found in a dynamic, tropical ecosystem that supports threatened and endangered species. In 1992 Congress created Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve as part of the National Park System.

Salt River Bay contains one of the most important and complex archaeological sites in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This area has witnessed thousands of years of human endeavor. Every major period of human habitation in the Virgin Islands is represented including South American



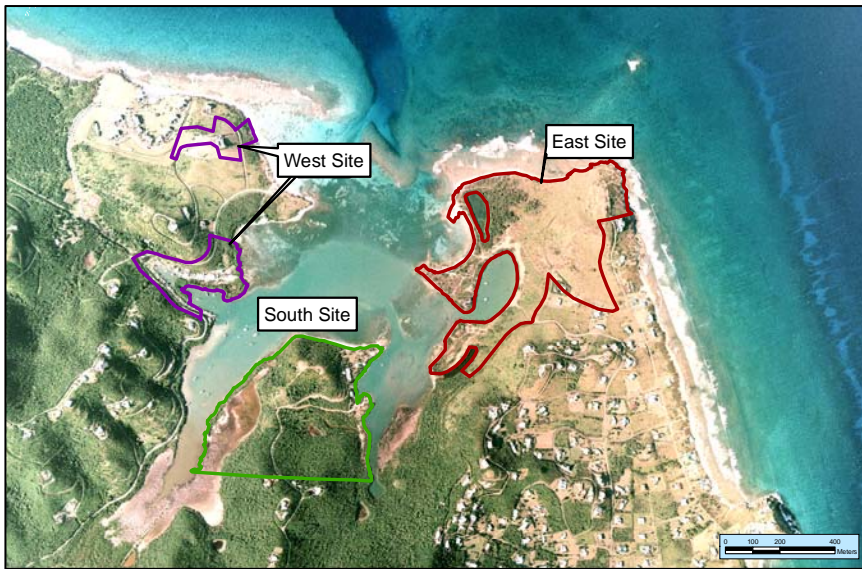
Indian cultures, an encounter with Columbus, Spanish extermination of the Caribs, attempts at colonization by a succession of European nations, and enslaved West Africans and their descendents.

Perhaps nowhere else in the Caribbean does a protected natural area exhibit so many of this region's important ecological relationships in so small an area. Here an upland watershed feeds into a bay fringed with mangroves and coral reefs. The mouth of the bay, with its undersea canyon and coral covered walls, opens to the sea, which falls away into the deep Virgin Islands Trough. The water acreage of the park was also designated as a National Natural Landmark (1980) that is home to 27 species that have

been listed as rare, threatened, or endangered.

**Mangrove Forests** - Salt River Bay is fringed by mangrove forests, creating a habitat that plays a critical role where land and sea meet. Mangroves in Triton and Sugar bays are still recovering from Hurricane Hugo (1989). Restoration is underway for red mangroves in Salt River Bay, which held (before Hugo) the last major natural mangrove stand set in an estuary in the Virgin Islands.

**Terrestrial Uplands to Estuarine Bay** - Salt River Bay includes an estuary, where fresh and salt waters mix. The diverse terrestrial environment is dominated by shrub land and much of the flora is adapted to dry conditions. This dynamic relationship between land and bay is ecologically important.



Proposed alternative locations for the Marine Research and Education Center.

The survival of the local fishery, for example, may depend on preserving healthy natural conditions both inside and outside Salt River Bay. Endangered hawksbill turtles feed and sleep along the coral canyon walls. Snappers and grunts hide among coral reefs by day and feed at night in seagrass beds. Threatened green sea turtles and queen conch thrive on turtle grasses.

**Coral Reef** - Coral Reefs have built up in the Caribbean over the past 13,000 years. Coral reefs are in decline in most parts of the world, so their well-being is of paramount concern not only locally but regionally and globally.

More than 400 species of reef fish are known in near-shore waters. Coral reefs, may support one-third of all fish species globally and possibly a total of a half-million animal species.

### Park Activities

Currently there are limited commercial visitor services authorized by the NPS at SARI. The park is still in the developmental stage. The Visitor Contact Station opened

for operation in January 2006 and is currently open Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 9 to 4 pm. It offers a bookstore and interpretative talks. Food, lodging, and other services are available in Christiansted, Frederiksted, and at other island locations. The park is five miles from Christiansted National Historic Site and can be reached by car via Rt. 75 from Christiansted, connecting to Rt. 80.

### Project Description

This project consists of two components: a proposed Marine Research and Education Center (MREC) and the demolition of an abandoned hotel structure. Three alternative locations for the MREC have been proposed:

- East Site, located west of Estate Judith's Fancy;
- South Site, location of the former NOAA Undersea Research Center; and
- West Site, includes the NPS Visitor Contact Station and the Salt River Marina.

The MREC would include several structures: main building (i.e., offices, classrooms, teaching labs, conference rooms, and library) education center

(main hall, theater, lecture hall), dormitories, cafeteria, staff housing, maintenance building, wet laboratory, and marine operations facilities. The MREC facilities would affect less than 4 acres of land at the park, excluding roads.

This project also proposes the demolition of the abandoned hotel structure located on the east side of Salt River Bay. The hotel structure was part of a development project started in the late 1960s that was never completed. Currently the structure is deteriorating and presents a safety and environmental concern for the park. The park proposes to remove the entire structure, reuse and recycle as much of the material as possible, and return the site to a more natural condition.



Abandoned hotel structure

### Purpose of the Project

At one time the park's reef and hard bottom habitats in the canyon were among the most extensively studied and characterized coral structures in the world. However, since the closing of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Undersea Research Center in Salt River Bay, this is no longer the case. Reefs that fall within the boundaries of the park but are outside of the canyon itself are currently monitored by the University of Virgin Islands (UVI) Seagrass Program and the V.I. Department of Planning and





Natural Resources (DPNR); however, with limited funds and resources. The seagrass and algae communities which were also studied by the NOAA facility researchers receive limited monitoring by DPNR Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and Division of Environmental Protection (DEP). These communities are of increasing concern due to water quality issues in the bay.

There are concerns for the future of coral reef ecosystems in the Caribbean region. Although there are over 4.2 million acres of coral reef submerged lands under U. S. jurisdiction, few have been properly studied to assess their overall health, and evidence is overwhelming that coral reefs and associated ecosystems are deteriorating at a rapid rate throughout the world.

Additionally, the island has a rich coral reef research history. Extensive research was conducted from 1970-1989 at the former West Indies Laboratory on the eastern end of the island and at the NOAA Undersea Research Center based at Salt River Bay. Presently, NOAA-CREWS meteorological and oceanographic monitoring



platform has been moored at Salt River Bay since 2002 and is collecting physical and biological data as part of NOAA's International Coral Health and Monitoring Program.

SARI is considered the ideal location for the MREC. The 1,015-acre park is jointly managed by the NPS and the Government of the Virgin Islands whose goal is to preserve the area and promote the study of the unique resources associated with the park. SARI provides a diverse ecosystem for study by representing the "Ridge to Reef" concept. Its location facilitates the MREC operation logistics providing easy access to the nearby resources.

## NEPA Process

The NPS must follow the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 to assure consideration of important environmental issues. The proposed MREC and hotel demolition that are being considered at SARI will be analyzed through the NEPA process.

As part of the NEPA process, the proposed MREC and hotel demolition will be evaluated in an Environmental Assessment, which will analyze the potential environmental effects of the

proposed MREC and hotel demolition. This analysis will consider impacts to topics such as mangroves; floodplains; wetlands; seagrasses; rare, threatened, and endangered species; air and water quality; and cultural resources.

## Public Meeting and Comments

There will be a public meeting held on Tuesday, August 22, 2006 from 5:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. at the Christiansted National Historic Site located at the Guinea Company Warehouse (old post office building) 2100 Church St., #100, Christiansted, VI. The public meeting is open to everyone and will provide opportunities to learn more about the project.

Please tell us what you think. Use the enclosed response card to provide us with your comments. Simply fold and staple or tape the completed card and drop it in the mailbox. We would appreciate your comments by September 20, 2006 to be considered in this phase of the planning process. You will have additional opportunities to comment on the alternatives as we continue the planning process. The EA will be made available to the public for review.

*Photo Source: NPS*





**National Park Service**  
**U.S. Department of the Interior**

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