

Straight from the Vine

Spring 2006

The Environmental & Cultural Education Newsletter for the Virgin Islands Community

Where do Least Terns spend their winters?
Read this month's "Straight from the Vine" to find out!

Endangered Least Terns Make Return Trip To Islands...

Once again, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with HOVENSA's Environmental Department, will be monitoring the nesting of Least Terns at the refinery. Every April, after a long migration, Least Terns return to St. Croix to nest and breed. The endangered bird, and its nests, can be seen around the refinery from May until they depart for their winter grounds in August.

Nests are found on the ground in wide open non-vegetated areas close to the sea. One to three eggs are usually laid by each female. Beaches, salt flats, and industrial areas on St. Croix are used as nesting sites for these small sea birds. HOVENSA

is an active nesting area for the Least Tern on St. Croix. The nests in the refinery are usually concentrated in the tank fields and in the land farms. The nests are marked by the Environmental personnel with bright orange or pink flagging tape placed on opposite sides of a nest. HOVENSA sends a notice to all employees informing them to avoid driving or walking through or close to the areas flagged with such tape. This year the HOVENSA Environmental Department is hoping to see for over 100 pairs of nesting birds throughout the refinery.

Least Terns are listed as an endangered species by the USVI Indigenous and Endangered Species Act of 1990 and are also protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This species was nearly hunted to extinction in the early 1900's for their feathers, which adorned women's hats. Disturbing nesting habitat is currently the main reason for the low Least Tern population. These disturbances by humans, as well as predators like mongoose or dogs, keep birds off nests, preventing them from incubating eggs or attending young. The development of the shoreline for recreation has limited the number of suitable sites available for nesting by Least Terns.

...Just In Time To Meet Up With Nesting Sea Turtles

Spring brings the official start of sea turtle nesting on St. Croix and the surrounding islands. Although some species, such as green and hawksbill turtles nest year round in the Virgin Islands, there are distinct high seasons for all three turtle species nesting here. Leatherbacks are the first to begin the love-in. Leatherback activities generally begin in February, with extensive nesting from April through August. Leatherbacks prefer to nest on wide, sandy beaches like Sandy Point. Sandy Point, a National Wildlife Refuge, is closed during the height of turtle nesting sea-

son to protect the vulnerable nests and hatchlings. Most impressive of the returning sea turtles, the critically endangered leatherback is the largest sea turtle, weighing from 600-800 pounds. Then, from August to October, federally threatened 200-300 pound green sea turtles will nest on the cobblestone beaches of Jack and Isaacs Bay. The endangered hawksbill, the smallest of local sea turtles, nest over the late summer months on many types of beaches, building their nests under manchineel and sea

grape trees. Their nesting grounds on Buck Island are world-famous.

Local school groups and community organizations interested in attending the Turtle Watch program at Sandy Point should contact:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
(340) 772-4554

Successful nesting seasons are vital to the recovery of our local sea turtle populations. USFWS urges the public to please let them nest, hatch, and live in peace. As a reminder, it is a federal offense to disturb sea turtles, collect their eggs, harm or kill sea turtles.

VINE is

- ◇ Coral World
- ◇ Fort Frederik Museum
- ◇ Hovensa, LLC
- ◇ Island Resources Foundation
- ◇ The National Park Service Virgin Islands NP
- ◇ The Nature Conservancy
- ◇ The Ocean Conservancy
- ◇ St. Croix Environmental Association
- ◇ USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- ◇ UVI Cooperative Extension Service
- ◇ UVI Globe Program
- ◇ UVI Virgin Islands Marine Advisory Service
- ◇ US Fish & Wildlife
- ◇ VI Department of Agriculture
- ◇ VI Department of Planning & Natural Resources
- ◇ VI Environmental Resource Station
- ◇ VI EPSCoR
- ◇ VI Resource Conservation & Development, Inc.
- ◇ VI Waste Management Authority
- ◇ West Indies Marine Animal Research & Conservation Service, Inc.

Upcoming Events

- March 26: Shell-A-Bration, Rainbow Beach, St. Croix
- April 20-21: EcoFair, St. George Village Botanical Garden.

Paper Versus Plastic: Is Either Better For Our Island?

Hey, it's human nature and a lot easier to automatically make a decision without fact finding. For instance, I presumed that the use of plastic bags was much worse for the environment than the use of paper bags. Why? Because I have heard that outcry from my friends, my family and probably a talk show host or two. After a bit of re-research, I can now make a more informed decision about Plastic vs. Paper. Let's look at some facts about paper production and recycling:

· It takes four times the amount of energy to produce a paper bag than a plastic bag.

In the case of wood, you have to cut down a whole lot of trees using heavy machinery, turn the wood into pulp by using thousands of gallons of water, all requiring the use of electricity, chemicals and fossil fuels. When recycling paper, again thousands of gallons of water are used and the costs are high for both labor and the mechanical operation of the recycling facilities. The wastewater can be extremely harmful to our ecosystems.

· Eight plastic bags can be made from 1 gallon of oil.

While this sounds like an environmentally-friendly balance, let's look at plastic production and recycling. It's estimated that nearly 12 million barrels of oil are required to make the 100 million plastic shopping bags. Translated worldwide, over 60 billions of oil are needed to make the 1 trillion plastic

bags that are consumed each year, according to reusablebags.com, a website launched to educate the public about the true costs associated with the use of disposable bags.

· Compared to paper bags, plastic bags are more efficiently made, easily recycled, and take up less landfill space.

If it is recycled. Currently, the Virgin Islands do not have a formal recycling program, instead relying on individuals either reuse their bags or to dispose of them properly. When it is not recycled, plastic bags pollute our lands and waters. They are a very real threat to wildlife as well, especially sea turtles and shore birds, who mistake the bags as food or become tangled in it.

· There's a third option to plastic or paper: Canvas Bags.

Since the Virgin Islands are currently poorly-equipped to reuse or recycle plastic and paper bags, and are facing the closure of over-full landfills, plastic bags all too often end up as unsightly litter or marine debris strangling birds and sea turtles.

So, when the clerk at the grocery store says: Plastic or Paper? I now know that both plastic and paper use up our precious natural resources at different rates. Maybe it is time to consider something truly reusable: canvas bags.



Why not use canvas bags at the store to help keep our islands litter-free and beautiful? Minimizing your amount of waste is a great way to show you love your island home. And its been shown to help out your pocketbook too!

EPA Mark 35 Years, Plant Trees At St. John School

As part of EPA's celebrating 35 years of work in the Caribbean, activities in the Virgin Islands included a symbolic planting of 3 Lignum Vitae trees on the newly constructed high school campus of The St. John School, at Gift Hill, St. John. Lignum Vitae means "tree of life", and the planting represents a commitment by The St. John School to re-vegetate and bring life back to the campus grounds, which shares borders with the Virgin Islands National Park of St. John. EPA chose the ceremony to positively influence the education of students and to encourage the St. John community to become partners in maintaining a sustainable environment in the Virgin Islands. Attendees made pledges to recommit themselves to environmental protection and conservation in the Virgin Islands.

Students Visit OSV Bold, Learn About St. Croix's Coral Reefs

On February 8, over 300 students from seven St. Croix schools, along with more than 100 interested members of the public, were welcomed aboard the United States Environmental Protection Agency's Ocean Survey Vessel *Bold*. The students learned about the history of the *Bold*, its parts and functions, and the responsibilities of the scientists, captains, divers, cooks and other personnel on board. The *Bold* visited the territory for three weeks, including a week-long stay at St. Thomas, welcoming over 500 individuals including Governor Charles W. Turnbull. The *Bold* is supporting DPNR's

water quality and marine resource monitoring of coral reefs. Monitoring is important in protecting both the reef and those who rely on it for work, food, and play. As the students discovered, learning can happen outside the classroom. Even on a ship!

For more information on educational activities sponsored by DPNR, please contact:

Kathleen M. Plaskett
Education & Grant Specialist
DPNR— Environmental Protection
(340) 773-1082



St. Croix elementary students listen on the back deck of the OSV Bold to research scientists during the EPA ship's visit to the territory. The Bold, once a spy ship, was visiting the Virgin Islands to assist DPNR in monitoring coral reefs.

Environmental Observances In March Begin Build Up To Earth Day 2006

In anticipation of Earth Day 2006, celebrated every April 20, March welcomes *Nonpoint Source Pollution Month*, *Ground Water Awareness Week*, and *Poison Awareness Week*.

As part of the campaigns, DPNR's Division of Environmental Protection would like to heighten the Virgin Islands community's awareness about Nonpoint Source Pollution, Ground Water, Poisons and Pesticides.

What is Nonpoint Source Pollution? The *State of the Environment, United States Virgin Islands* explains that nonpoint source pollution (NPS) results from the action of rainfall running over and through land, picking up natural and human-made pollutants and carrying them to our coastal waters. How can individuals help to prevent NPS? DPNR-DEP offers the following tips:

- Keep litter, pet wastes, leaves and debris out of street gutters and storm drains.
- Protect wells and surface waters by applying lawn and garden chemicals only according to directions.
- Dispose of used oil, antifreeze, paints and other household chemicals properly, not in storm drains.
- Clean up spilled brake fluid, oil, grease and antifreeze rather than hosing them into the street.
- Control soil erosion on your property by planting ground cover and stabilizing erosion-prone areas.
- Have your septic system inspected and pumped at least every 2 years.
- Reduce the amount of nutrients released into our waters by using low-phosphorous detergents and cleaners.
- Reduce soil erosion and by using conservation practices and other applicable best management practices.

This year's **National Ground Water Awareness Week** is themed, "*Schedule Your Water Well Checkup*" and will be celebrated from March 16 to 22. Ground water is a limited yet extremely valuable and renewable resource. DPNR-DEP urges Virgin Islanders to conserve and protect their ground waters. Ground water, extracted from wells, has long been an integral part of Virgin Island's life.

Today, ground water accounts for 30% of the water supply and has provided up to 100% of the public's potable water supply after major disasters such as Hurricane Hugo. DPNR-DEP's Harold Mark urges the public to protect this precious resource by following these suggestions:

- Don't dispose of hazardous waste substances by dumping them in or on the ground.
- Don't pour hazardous substances into drains or sewers.
- Don't over apply pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.
- When handling hazardous substances, do so over cement to avoid ground water infiltration or runoff into surface water from accidental spills.
- Have your water well tested yearly.
- Have your septic system cleaned and serviced every 2 years.

Determined to cut down the number of accidental poisonings involving children, the DPNR-DEP's Pesticide Control Program acknowledges March 19-25 as **National Poison Awareness Week**. This year's theme is "*Children Act Fast . . . So Do Poisons!*" As part of the campaign, DPNR-DEP's Pesticide Coordinator Nevin Williams will make several Poison Awareness presentations to selected schools around St. Croix. Along with these presentations, he shares these tips to protect children from pesticide and lead poisoning:

- Always store pesticides and other household chemicals out of children's reach.
- Always read the product label first. Pesticide products, household cleaning products, and pet products can be dangerous or ineffective if too much or too little is used.
- Before applying pesticides or other household chemicals, remove children and their toys as well as pets from the area. Keep children and pets away until the pesticide has dried or as long as recommended on the label.
- Always ensure that pesticide containers are completely closed.

- Never transfer pesticides from their original containers to other containers for storage.
- When applying insect repellents to children, read all directions first. Do not apply over cuts, wounds, or irritated skin. Do not apply to eyes, mouth, hands, or directly on the face. Use only enough to cover exposed skin or clothing. Never spray onto any skin covered by clothing.
- Have your home tested for lead if it was built before 1978 and you plan to remodel or renovate it.
- Ask about lead when buying or renting.
- Get your child tested for lead.
- Keep children's hands, toys, and bottles clean.

During March, DPNR-DEP will set up an educational display to provide additional information and educational activities on these topics at the Athalie MacFarlane Library in Frederiksted and the Florence Williams Library in Christiansted.

Join WIMARCS For A Turtle "Shellabration"

On March 26, from noon until 7pm, the West Indies Marine Animal Research and Conservation Service will host the inaugural "Sea Turtle Shellabration" at Rhythms at Rainbow Beach. This family-friendly event will kick off the beginning of turtle nesting season with a celebration of everything sea turtle-related. Posters, videos, brochures, and more will help the community better understand the vital role sea turtles play in our oceans, and how to protect and conserve them for future generations. Topics include sea turtle biology, the dangers of street lights to hatchlings, sea turtle research, and the STAR network for sick and injured sea turtles. Local sea turtle biologists and scientists will be on hand to answer questions and "talk turtle"! There will be music, T-shirts, games, raffles, prizes, and turtle trivia. All proceeds will benefit WIMARCS research and conservation programs.

For more information on WIMARCS and Sea Turtle Shellabration, please contact:

Steve Garner
WIMARCS
(340) 772-1382

VI EPSCoR Announces 2006 Incubator Grants Competition

The Virgin Islands Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (VI-EPSCoR) is offering incubator grants for new research on the Bio-complexity of Caribbean Coral Reefs. The grants can support pilot research, proposal development, and other activities to advance research to the point at which it can attract major funding. Proposals for the 2006 grants competition are due by March 15, 2006. Preference will be given to proposals that include evidence of:

- Relevance to the BCCR research thrust
- Interdisciplinary collaboration
- Collaboration between university researchers and local organizations
- Undergraduate research opportunities
- Potential for economic impact and spillovers
- Potential to attract competitive funding

An incubator grant can be funded up to \$25,000. Successful proposals will be announced on April 3, 2006. Project funding will be available immediately.

For more information, please visit the VI-EPSCoR website at: <http://epscor.uvi.edu>

or contact:

Meri Whitaker
VI-EPSCoR
Project Co-Director
(340) 693-1478

USDA Seeks To Donate Computers To St. Croix Schools

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's St. Croix offices are seeking to donate the following computer equipment to eligible Virgin Islands learning institutions:

- 1 Windows NT Desktop Compaq Desktop E FY98 - CCE001
- 1 Windows NT Laptop Dell Latitudes Cpi266XT FY98—CCE002

For local educational institutions to be eligible to receive USDA computer equipment, they must demonstrate, in writing, to the USDA that they meet all of the following criteria:

VINE, SEA Readies Volunteers For EcoFair, Earth Day 2006

As part of St. Croix's Earth Day 2006 celebrations, the St. Croix Environmental Association, along with many member agencies of the VINE Network will participate in the annual EcoFair, to be held at St. George Village Botanical Gardens on April 20 and 21. On the 20th, third and fourth graders will make their way around to a number of fun, interactive activities, learning about importance of a happy, healthy St. Croix. On the 21st, it will be the fifth and sixth graders turns.

For the past thirteen years, SEA has been the lead organization in sponsoring the Eco-Fair to coincide with annual Earth Day celebrations held around the world. At the EcoFair, various government agencies and private organizations from all over the island give presentations, offer garden tours of the St George grounds and give kids up to date information about how they can make St. Croix a cleaner and healthier place to call home. The two day fair expects to receive over 1000 students from the public and private schools on the island. Funding for the Fair has traditionally come from the VI Waste Management Authority.

For more information on EcoFair 2006, please contact:

Dan Odell
Education Coordinator
(340) 773-1989
odell@seastx.org

- The computers must be set up solely for educational purposes at the institution.
- The institution must have a non-profit status.
- The computers must service K-12 schools or be a 2-year or 4-year secondary educational institution.

Unfortunately, institutions such as day care centers, churches, community centers, the Boy/Girl Scouts, etc. would not qualify because their sole purpose is not education. However, any private K-12 school operated by a church or non-profit group would qualify.



Did you know that Least Terns spend their winters in South America, traveling as far south as Peru and Brazil?

The Least Tern, North America's smallest gull, spends its summers as monogamous nesting pairs from northern Maine all the way south to St. Croix and other Caribbean islands. Other populations nest along the Mississippi River, the Great Lakes, or along the California coast. But come September, the terns fly to South America, completing their 10,000 mile round-trip!

Interested teachers, administrators, or institutions should contact the USDA to complete the necessary form AD-107 which confirms eligibility requirements and relays school information to the USDA. The school must be registered in the Computer for Learning Web site:

<http://www.computers.fed.gov/public/aboutProg.asp>

For more information, please contact the USDA Service Center at:
(340) 692-9632 x101

Received requests will be considered based on meeting of all requirements and the order in which the request is received.