

TROPIC NEWS

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

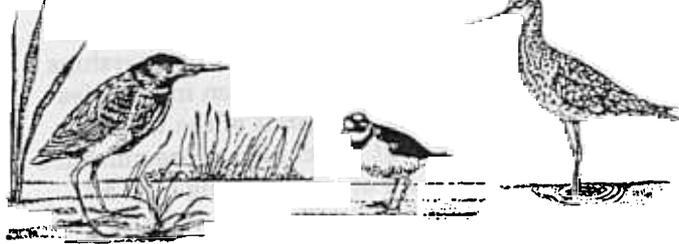
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Protecting Our Environment

Did you know that the Virgin Islands has lost more than 50% of its mangrove forests, over 30% of its sea-grass beds, a number of saltponds, and many of its coral reefs in the last 50 years? It's true, and it has had a very great negative effect on our quality of life as residents of these beautiful islands.

Well, we are trying to do something about it. Recently, Commissioner Roy Adams designated a series of marine reserves and wildlife sanctuaries on the southeastern end of St. Thomas. Governor Farrelly then signed Rules and Regulations for these areas to provide protection for the natural resources found in these areas. The three sites include; the Compass Point Pond Marine Reserve and Wildlife Sanctuary, the Cas Cay/Mangrove Lagoon Marine Reserve and Wildlife Sanctuary, and the St. James Marine Reserve and Wildlife Sanctuary. Each of these areas will be detailed in separate newsletters. This issue will start with the Compass Point Pond.

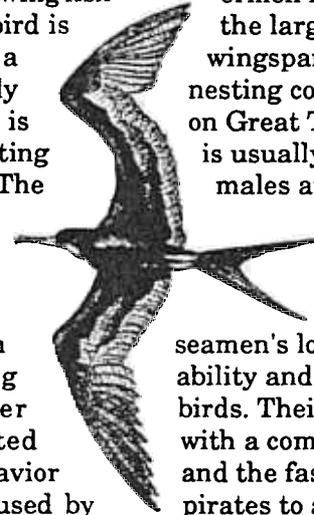


Salt ponds are very important wildlife feeding and roosting habitats. They are also important for allowing sediment to settle out of runoff from the land. Compass Point Pond was blocked from the sea a number of years ago by a developer and dried up. The mangroves died and wildlife was forced to go elsewhere. After designation of this pond as a protected area in 1992, it was reopened to the sea and natural water levels were restored in the pond. Almost immediately, fish and crabs were observed in the pond and shortly afterwards, many shorebirds were observed feeding and residing around the pond. With the return to natural water levels, conditions are now proper for reestablishment of mangroves in the pond. As an off-site mitigation measure, the Magens Bay Authority is going to plant mangroves around the pond to replace mangroves removed during their bridge expansion project at Magens Bay.

Following the reopening of the pond, Rotary East took an interest in the pond and adopted it as a community project. Several weekends of volunteer efforts resulted in removal of all the accumulated trash, old boats and cars. The long term plan for the pond is development of boardwalks and viewing blinds for bird and other nature watching. Signs and a brochure are being developed by the Division to help make the pond a valuable educational/recreational destination for both residents and visitors to our islands.

The Magnificent Frigatebird

In the Virgin Islands, the Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*), also called a Hurricane or Man-O'-War bird, is a common sight gliding on air currents or following fishermen hoping for a handout. This bird is the largest of our seabirds with a wingspan of up to 96 inches. The only nesting colony in our area for these birds is on Great Tobago in the British V.I. Nesting and December. The is usually in November and December. The males are identified during this period by their inflated red gular pouches as they display to the females. Frigatebirds occupy a prominent place in seamen's lore due to their superb flying ability and tendency of attacking other birds. Their name most likely originated with a comparison between this behavior and the fast, maneuverable warships used by pirates to attack merchant vessels and relieve them of their cargos. Frigatebirds are often seen stealing food from other birds but they actually do catch most of their food themselves.



Frigatebirds can become quite tame. South Pacific islanders would take young birds and hand raise them. When going on long trips they would take a frigatebird with them and, on arriving at their destination, release the bird with a note attached to its leg. The bird would then invariably return to the house where it was raised with the good news of their safe arrival. Around the time of the discovery of America, frigatebirds were thought to be good news for sailors because they meant land was near. Those sailors would have been alarmed to know that frigatebirds are capable of long journeys into mid ocean!

Recently, a female frigatebird was found at a local marina trailing a fishing line and pole! The hook was removed from its wing and the wound was stitched. After several days of recovery and feeding, the bird was released in Pillsbury Sound and is hopefully pursuing its Man-O'-War activities.

QUOTE

"Unless business can make money from environmental products or politicians can get elected on environmental issues, or individuals can get personal satisfaction from experiencing environmental concern, then individuals and organisations will simply do whatever competes with environmentalism if they see the payoff as greater."

C. Seligman, 1980

What Would We Do With An Oil Spill?

If there is an oil spill in the Virgin Islands, it is the responsibility of the Coast Guard and the responsible party (the company or individual that spilled the oil) to clean up the oil. The primary goal is to keep the oil from reaching the shore. Once the oil reaches the shore the cleanup becomes more difficult and expensive and the environmental and economic impacts are greater. There are currently four methods for removing oil from the open ocean.

The most popular methods are mechanical. One of these methods is the use of skimmers which skim the oil off the surface of the water and store it in tanks. The St. Croix based Caribbean Responder uses this method. Another method is the use of oil absorbing materials. the main problem with mechanical methods is the generation of large amounts of waste material that must be disposed of. This is a serious problem here in the VI.

Bioremediation, or the use of bacteria to eat oil, has great promise, but has yet to work in the open ocean.

Chemical dispersants are used to break up the oil into small droplets that sink. This prevents much of the oil from reaching the shore. Unfortunately, the droplets remain in the water column and the long term fate of these droplets is not known. Therefore, this method is not advisable in shallow water or over seagrass beds or coral reefs.

The last method is in situ burning. Oil is concentrated by boats pulling fire-proof booms and then lighting the oil on fire. When done under proper conditions, this method removes the most oil and probably has the least environmental impact. Unfortunately, the plume of smoke can create a human health hazard. Therefore, this method cannot be used when there is any danger of the smoke blowing over populated areas.

Currently, all of the techniques for cleaning up a spill in the ocean have problems. The method used will depend on conditions at the time of the spill. Continued research is developing better methods all the time.

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A New Sport Fisheries Initiative

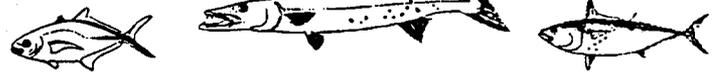
Did you know that more than 50 million Americans fish each year? Did you know that they spent \$24 billion on fishing gear and motor boat fuels to fish recreationally in 1991? Excise taxes collected on these sales support US Fish and Wildlife Service sport fish restoration projects throughout the U.S., including the Virgin Islands. These are the funds that the Division uses for many of our projects, including boat ramps, artificial reefs, fish sampling, and various studies.

Recently, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt announced a new fisheries conservation strategy called the Recreational Fisheries Stewardship Initiative. Recognizing the decline of fisheries and the habitats that they depend on, the Initiative calls for an enhancement of the health of aquatic ecosystems and recreational fisheries, and an increase in sport fishing opportunities.

This goals of the Initiative, which will involve federal and state natural resource agencies, include:

- Enhancing and restoring aquatic ecosystems,
- Enhancing recreational fishing opportunities,
- Increasing partnerships with private landowners,
- Establishing partnerships between governments and the private sector, and
- Achieving balance in the recovery of endangered species and the management of recreational fisheries.

Hopefully, through the forging of new partnerships and an improvement of national direction in fisheries conservation policy-making, the goals of the Initiative will become reality. Without the changes recommended by the Initiative, the future of sport fishing (and all fishing) is uncertain as habitats continue to be degraded.



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