

TROPIC NEWS

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

October 1997

Volume 10 Number 1

A Scary Prospect

Easter Island, in the Pacific Ocean, is the world's most isolated habitable land mass (1400 miles to the nearest inhabited island). The island is 63 sq. miles (vs St. Croix's 84 sq. miles). It is mostly known for its giant stone statues. Easter Island is now known as a classic example of what can happen when a human population exceeds the carrying capacity of its environment, something which could happen on a larger scale with the Earth.

When the original Polynesian colonists (and there can't have been too many) reached Easter Island around 400 AD in canoes, they found an island with thriving forests of trees, palms, ferns and many other plants. There were also 25 species of seabirds, many species of land birds, large seal colonies and many insect species. Easter Islanders main source of meat was from the porpoises which they caught at sea from log canoes. At its peak it is estimated that around 20,000 people lived on Easter Island, farming, fishing and building their famous statues.

Pollen analysis indicates that by 800 AD forest destruction was well underway, at a faster rate than the forest could regenerate. By 1400 the large palms which had covered the island were extinct. Without these palms to make their canoes, they could no longer go to sea to catch porpoises or leave the island. The loss of trees eliminated wood supplies for fire. The seal and seabird colonies, large sea snails and land birds were gone from over harvest. Springs and streams dried up as the forest cover was stripped from the land. Soil eroded into the sea without the vegetation to hold it in place and nutrients were leached from what soil remained. Farming of vegetables and root crops was no longer productive.

The Easter Islanders turned to eating chicken (which they had brought with them) and each other. War broke out over the limited resources and the statues of opposing groups were destroyed. The human population plummeted from 20,000 to around 2000 people who took to living in caves for protection against their enemies.

When the first European explorer (Jacob Roggeveen) saw Easter Island in 1722 he thought it was a completely sandy island. The reason for this was that the island was covered with withered



grass, hay or other scorched or burnt vegetation, giving the impression of poverty and barrenness. The island was a grassland without a single tree or bush over ten feet tall. In fact, only 47 species of plants remained, most of these grasses, sedges and ferns. Native animals included nothing larger than insects. Not even a single species of bat, land bird, land snail or lizard remained.

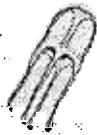
This real life story has chilling implications for our world today. A rising population and dwindling natural resources could lead to a similar conclusion. And like the Easter Islanders, we can no more leave this planet to find a new place to live than they could leave Easter Island to do so. If we continue on our present course, the human race shall have exhausted the world's major fisheries, tropical rain forests, fossil fuels, soil and wildlife resources within the next century. Our best hope is that we humans can choose to learn from the fate of societies like Easter Island and not repeat history.

Quote

"When you study members of another species, when you habituate them in the wild, when you begin to understand the intimate details of their private lives, and then you learn that the population or whole group is sliding towards extinction, what do you do? In conscience, you must defend them...."

-- Birute M.F. Galdikas

Sea Wasps : *Carybdea alata*



The jellyfish of family Cubomedusa are known as box jellyfish due to their cube-shaped dome. The Caribbean box jellyfish, *Carybdea alata* is called a sea wasp because of its painful sting. This species has a single, salmon-colored tentacle up to 1ft long hanging from each of the four corners of the dome. Its translucent dome is about (2 to 3 1/4 in) in height and may have reddish or bluish tints. Sea wasps spend most of the day in deep water and rise to the surface after dark. They are found near lights at night where they feed on smaller animals attracted to light.

The sting of the Caribbean sea wasp can range from painful to fatal. They are usually not common in the Virgin Islands and occur locally primarily in the late summer and early fall (August to October). The stings are the result of the injection of venom into the skin by specialized cells called nematocysts found on the tentacles. Contact with the tentacles produces intense pain when the nematocysts fire. It is important to remove any tentacles which remain on the skin to minimize any discharge of nematocysts. The application of vinegar will inhibit the discharge of nematocysts while the tentacles are being removed by scraping with a knife.

To minimize the chance of being stung, wear a tight fitting wet suit, Lycra "skin" suit or pantyhose on legs, arms and other exposed areas. If stung by sea wasps, exit the water as soon as possible. Do not rub or touch the affected area, as this serves only to discharge nematocysts not initially released. If general reaction occurs (pain all over, difficulty breathing), medical attention should be sought rapidly

Coastweeks: Thanks to All!

Participate, Celebrate, Educate is exactly what Virgin Islanders did this year. Hundreds of public and private school students, government and private business employees as well as many other environmentally conscious citizens participated in cleaning just about every beach in the territory. Many of the beaches were cleaned several times throughout the three week period. Thousands of pounds of every imaginable type of debris were collected from our coastlines.

The mission of the International Coastal Cleanup - is to **remove** debris from the shorelines and beaches of the world's lakes, rivers, and oceans; to **collect** valuable information on the amount, types and sources of debris; to **educate** people on the issue of marine debris; and to use the information collected from the cleanup to effect positive changes on all levels, from the individual to the international, to reduce marine debris and enhance marine conservation.

Data sheets will be sent to the Center for Marine Conservation (CMC) in Washington, D.C. for part of the annual report on marine debris. Results on territory wide beach cleanups will be available in 1998. The next goal is finding solutions through whatever means possible, from recycling, waste reduction and management, and education to enforcement of existing regulations and legislative reform. Thank you to everyone who helped.



This newsletter was funded by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration Acts, the Caribbean Fishery Management Council and the Government of the VI.

Donna M. Griffin - Editor

Ralf H. Boulon Jr. - Chief of Environmental Education

GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
OF THE UNITED STATES

Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife
6291 Estate Nazareth 101
St. Thomas, USVI 00802-1104
(809)775-6762 (ST.T.), (809)772-1955 (ST.X.)

BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
CHARLOTTE AMALIE, V.
PERMIT NO. 35

Address Correction Requested

Trees were saved by printing on recycled paper