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New Study Finds Development on Private Land Within Park Boundaries Is Harmful to Marine Environment at Virgin Islands National Park

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: March 26, 2008

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Funding Shortfalls Limit Park Service's Ability to Protect Marine Life, Historic Structures from Inappropriate Development

Washington, D.C.—According to a new assessment released today by the nation's leading voice for the national parks, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument are at risk from development on privately owned land within and adjacent to park boundaries. Chronic funding and staffing shortfalls have limited the National Park Service's ability to protect the parks historic structures and marine ecosystems.

"The Virgin Islands attract millions of visitors each year, and we must ensure its unique marine ecosystem is protected for future generations to enjoy," said NPCA's Senior Marine Program Manager Jason Bennis. "The risk from development on privately owned land is a major threat to the health of the fish and wildlife of this unique marine park."

According to an assessment by NPCA's Center for State of the Parks, the natural resources of Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument are in "fair" condition, scoring an overall 73 out of 100 points. The report cites concerns about the effects of global climate change on sensitive coral reefs, and warns that the development within park boundaries is causing the proliferation of damaging, non-native species, as well as wildlife habitat fragmentation.

Moreover, a forthcoming national publication by NPCA will highlight Virgin Islands National Park as one of many national parks at risk from development on privately owned land within park boundaries, known as inholdings. Currently, more than 1,400 acres of land are privately owned and scattered throughout the park. Inholdings are often subdivided, resulting in forest fragmentation and commercial and residential development around the park's historic sites. Sediment runoff from development is a major threat to water quality and the health of the marine ecosystem. The Park Service has partnered with local and national nonprofit organizations to acquire some inholdings, but high real estate prices have made it difficult to protect historic landscapes and park habitats.

"An increase in federal funding is critical to acquire land within park boundaries and restore our national parks," said Bennis. "Private land within park boundaries is vulnerable to inappropriate development, and puts our national heritage at risk."

The new assessment rated the park's cultural resources in "poor" condition, scoring an overall 55 out of 100 points. Historic structures and archaeological sites from the plantation era are at risk of deterioration, vandalism, and poaching because

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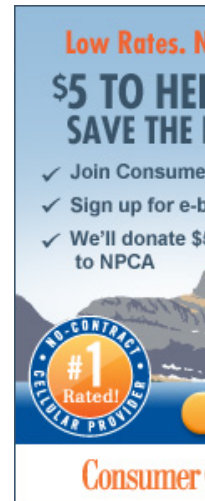
the park does not have sufficient funds or staff to locate, document, protect and properly maintain all of them. The park is home to hundreds of historic structures, including plantations, factories, fortifications, schools, and thousands of sites that were inhabited by enslaved workers on the island.

Currently, the Park Service is only able to fill 65 of the 75 authorized staff positions, and the park faces a backlog of maintenance projects totaling \$22 million. These funds are needed to care for roads, trails, interpretive signs, boat docks, and other facilities that serve visitors each year.

Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument provide diverse habitat for plants and animals, from marine areas that support coral reefs and seagrass beds, to some of the last remaining native tropical dry rain forest in the Caribbean. Over the years, the park's delicate coral reef systems have been altered and suffered from a variety of causes, including global climate change. In 2005, corals within the park endured the most severe coral bleaching event recorded to date in the U.S. Virgin Islands. In light of these negative effects, NPCA is encouraging Congress and the Administration to take action to address the effects of global climate change.

The National Parks Conservation Association launched the landmark Center for State of the Parks program in 2000 to assess the resource conditions of national parks across the country. Please view a copy of the full report, and take action to help protect the park [here](#).

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