

Geotourism

It isn't easy staying green...

Over 500 years ago, Christopher Columbus became the Virgin Islands first tourist. Since then visitors have enjoyed our natural beauty and more recently, the resources and infrastructure of our islands. But with over 2.6 million visitors annually, the delicate balance of nature, culture and heritage within America's Caribbean territory is challenged.

Tourism accounts for more than 80% of the U.S. Virgin Islands GDP and 70% of employment. So a key challenge for the territory is to adopt ecologically sustainable practices in day-to-day operation. A strategy known by the newly minted moniker, "geotourism", is a concept originated by the National Geographic Society Center for Sustainable Destinations (NGSCSD). The goal is to create *tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents*. It's the principle of place-based sustainable tourism—that destinations should remain unspoiled for future generations while allowing for enhancement that protects the character of the locale.

Commissioner Beverly Nicholson of the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism agrees, and is working towards a tourism strategy which encompasses environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Nicholson notes that "our unique culture, heritage and ecological elements make the U.S. Virgin Islands unlike any destination in the world."

But the world's most appealing destinations are also those most prone to tourism overkill. To gauge the integrity of islands around the world, the NGSCSD recently conducted their fourth annual destination scorecard survey which includes the three main U.S. Virgin Islands.

St. John is described "the best in the Caribbean" as "much of its natural environment has been saved by the National Park Service and ecologically minded business people." Those include philanthropist Lawrence Rockefeller and Stanley Selengut. Much of St. John's unspoiled landscape has been preserved since 1956, when Rockefeller bought and donated broad expanses of the island to the National Park Service to keep it "a thing of joy forever."

Selengut, developer of Maho Bay Campgrounds, eco-friendly apartments at Harmony Studios and the luxurious Estate Concordia Studios, is a father of geotourism. "He helped put us on the map with innovative preservation of natural resources." Commissioner Nicholson said. Selengut has received numerous awards for his efforts, most recently the Pioneer Award at the International Society of Hospitality Consultants' 2008 Americas Lodging Investment Summit

St. Croix has the Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve where that first tourist, Columbus, landed. It's is also known for its beautiful beaches and as an unspoiled and historically significant site. The NGSCSD survey notes that "St. Croix has natural and cultural heritage that remains the most intact of the Virgin Islands. Coastlines are stunningly beautiful."

St. Croix finds its ecological champion in award winning Olasee Davis. The island is a wonder of rainforests, historical and natural monuments and several life-list dive sites. Ongoing research such as studies by the Buck Island Reef Hawksbill Sea Turtle Research Program has contributed significantly to the survival of the endangered species.

St. Thomas, the most developed and challenged of the U.S. Virgin Islands has its share of geotourism. The General Manager of Coral World Marine Park & Observatory, Trudie Prior, remarked that while St. Thomas enjoys a "daily infusion of thousands of additional people embarking from cruise ships or staying in hotels," Coral World tries to "to increase visitors' awareness about the challenges in maintaining our environment for future generations...by bringing people close to marine life and offering them information in an entertaining way we hope they will take home a sense of the far reaching impact that we all have on the environment."

Other geotourism attractions on St. Thomas are Virgin Islands Ecotours and The Butterfly Farm. Ecotours offers guided kayaking and snorkeling tours through St. Thomas' Marine Sanctuary and Mangrove Lagoon. Owner, Sybille Sorrentino, comments that their tours "let visitors see the mangroves' fragile beauty firsthand." The Butterfly Farm presents an unforgettable encounter with nature, but also teaches the importance of these gorgeous creatures to the world's ecosystem.

The U.S. Virgin Islands, America's Paradise, owes much of its success in preserving its natural environs to government, both federal and local, as well as charismatic leaders. Yet balancing inevitable progress while retaining the elements that attract so many visitors remains a challenge. It is critical that the territory continue to apply its own brand of geotourism, creating appropriate limits and using management techniques that sustain our natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture. Successful tourism must be measured not by numbers of visitors, but the quality of their U.S. Virgin Islands experience.