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Plaskett Legislation to End NPS Expansion in St. John Gains Momentum as Push to Solidify Park Boundaries Intensifies

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett.

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, in her exclusive interview with the Consortium earlier this week, highlighted the ongoing legislative efforts to halt further expansion of the National Park Service (NPS) in St. John, addressing concerns of local residents feeling encroached upon by federally-owned land.

Asked to share her feelings about the [recently-approved land swap](#) in which Whistling Cay was traded for a parcel of federal land in Estate Catherineberg, Delegate Plaskett said, “I think what was done...for the time we’re in, needed to be done.”

However, she acknowledged that the visceral emotional reactions of St. Johnians surrounding the swap came from a valid place. “That is because of the history of St. John and the history of the development of that National Park [Service], and it needs to be addressed,” Ms. Plaskett said.

With the NPS owning roughly 60 percent of St. John, Ms. Plaskett said, “You know, the creation of the National Park was fantastic, but at what cost?” She said that legislation is currently in progress to ensure the NPS's footprint does not extend further. The bill, which Ms. Plaskett says has already had its initial hearing in the U.S. House of Representatives, will fix the boundaries of the Virgin Islands National Park permanently, so as to prevent future expansion.

“Angus King, the senator out of Maine, who is the chair of the [Energy and] Natural Resources Committee in the Senate...has agreed to work with us,” Congresswoman Plaskett said, dismissing the idea that the park’s boundaries could ever be shrunk, when asked by Consortium publisher Ernice Gilbert. “You won’t get agreement from the National Parks or the President. The President has already signaled that is something he would never sign,” she stated, adding that Mr. Biden is keen not to set a precedent that could lead to deluge of requests from states and territories to shrink the NPS's presence in their respective jurisdictions.

The congresswoman pointed to the attempts by some Virgin Islanders to use a land transfer in Maine as evidence that the National Park Service could unilaterally give up lands without needing an equal exchange. “What they didn’t know is, that was related to legislation from 30 years ago where Maine had given land to the National Park.” Therefore, the congresswoman explained, the recent transfer was “the last piece of a land swap,” rather than the NPS making a one-way gift of land to a state.

That’s why a unilateral divestiture of NPS land in St. John is a non-starter. “They don’t want to be precedent-setting by doing that in St. John,” said Ms. Plaskett.

The measure to permanently fix the boundaries of the Virgin Islands National Park is moving forward. “It’s come out of the committee,” said Congresswoman Plaskett, who noted that a companion bill in the Senate was being drafted so that the measure can be immediately addressed by the upper chamber once it passes the House. As part of her efforts to ensure the legislation’s success, the territory’s delegate to congress has already secured the agreement of Senate staff to “come down to St. John, and hear from the people of St. John...and all Virgin Islanders, because what happens on St. John affects all of the Virgin Islands.”