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Reclaiming Natural Beauty: Over 1600 Pounds of Trash Cleared by Community Efforts

University of the Virgin Islands and DPNR lead successful Ruth Cay and Mangrove cleanups

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Volunteers from DPNR and UVI remove a commercial boat rope and a full-size bathtub, showcasing diverse marine debris items during the 2024 Altona Lagoon and Ruth Cay Cleanup. By. UVI

Last month, over 1600 pounds of trash was removed from natural landscapes across the Virgin Islands, thanks to the University of the Virgin Islands and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

The two entities collaborated on the Ruth Cay Cleanup on February 23, which brought together 10 volunteers who removed a combined total of 447 pounds of refuse, comprising 809 pieces of debris.

Among the collected garbage, single-use plastic beverage bottles were identified as the predominant pollutant, with 186 bottles retrieved. A noteworthy find was a massive 240-pound industrial rope, an unexpected discovery along the cay's south shore.

The following day, the environmental campaign continued with the 2024 St. Croix Great Mangrove Cleanup, where 29 volunteers, ranging in age from two to 65, tackled the mangrove shoreline in Altona Lagoon. Their efforts yielded a substantial haul of 1,155 pounds of trash and hurricane debris from the mangroves, totaling 2,683 items. Single-use beverage containers – 723 of them – again made up the bulk of the waste, alongside 334 food wrappers and 244 plastic bottle caps. The assortment of trash collected also included more unusual items such as two full-size bathtubs, a washing machine, and a variety of children's toys.

Kristin Wilson Grimes, a research associate professor of Watershed Ecology at UVI, emphasized the impact of terrestrial sources on marine debris in the U.S. Virgin Islands. She underscored the vital role of collective action in mitigating this environmental challenge. "Community members can make a big difference when it comes to reducing marine debris by limiting their use of single-use items, re-using items, or making sure that items that must be thrown away end up in the proper waste receptacle, rather than the environment," said Dr. Grimes.

The St. Croix Great Mangrove Cleanup, benefiting from the support of entities like UVI, DPNR, Virgin Islands EPSCoR, Atlantic Trucking, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Marine Debris Program, reflects a growing tradition of ecological preservation efforts across the Virgin Islands. Since 2018, these initiatives have mobilized hundreds of volunteers and removed more than 14 tons (28,161 pounds) of marine debris from the territory's shorelines.

"I love knowing I can make an immediate difference at these cleanups while providing long-term benefits for mangroves and marine life," said UVI undergraduate student, Savannah Carroll, sharing her enthusiasm for the activities.

Future cleanup events are scheduled for St. John and St. Thomas on March 9 and April 20, respectively, offering community service hours to participants. Those who wish to join these efforts or learn more about marine debris cleanup in the Territory, interested parties can contact Zola Roper at zola.roper@dpnr.vi.gov or visit the event registration page at <https://www.viepscor.org/gmc-registration>.