

The Virgin Islands Consortium

The First Ever Large Scale Mangrove Cleanup In Territory Nets Thousands Of Pounds Of Debris

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ST. THOMAS -- The Great Mangrove Cleanup, the first large-scale community cleanup of the St. Thomas East End Reserves (STEER), took place last Saturday, April 21, where one hundred twenty-six volunteers gathered to remove debris, large and small, from STEER's mangrove shorelines, according to a release issued Tuesday. STEER is a marine protected area on the east end of St. Thomas.

Participating in the cleanup was a team from the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) including members of the Center for Marine & Environmental Studies (CMES), Master of Marine and Environmental Studies (MMES) students and UVI undergraduates.

Nearly 50 individuals from All Hands and Hearts, a volunteer organization assisting in hurricane recovery in the territory, also participated in the cleanup.

Conservatively, organizers estimate more than 3,000 pounds of trash were removed from mangrove shorelines of STEER. The vast majority of debris originated from land-based versus marine-based sources (90-95% of items) and most of the items collected, approximately 65-70%, were plastic. These patterns are consistent with marine debris patterns globally.

Items from the Cleanup that could be re-used were – fenders, buoys, pieces of wood; metal was recycled for scrap; hard plastics (e.g., plastic beverage bottles, other plastic bottles) were recycled through DPNR CZM's recycling program with Terracycle (run by DPNR CZM's Education and Outreach Coordinator, Kristina Edwards).

The top 10 items collected at The Great Mangrove Clean-Up were

1,765 plastic beverage containers

1,000 misc. plastic pieces

585 foam pieces

417 aluminum beverage cans

359 other plastic bottles

328 plastic bags

307 glass bottles

?298 pieces of rope

265 plastic cups

201 plastic food containers

Other fun finds included:

55 shoes

1 pool noodle

2 fire extinguishers

11 snorkels

Permitted activity under DPNR permit #DFW/CZM17004T

"A clean-up of this scale, in such a difficult-to-access environment, like the mangroves, has never been done before in St. Thomas. Through the hard work of 126 people, we cleaned more than 3,000 lbs of trash from the mangroves in a single day," said Dr. Kristin Wilson Grimes. "What an amazing, team effort by all the volunteers who gave up part of

their Saturday to make this happen and a huge thank you to our sponsors who made this event possible.”

She added, “We picked up 1,765 plastic beverage containers on Saturday, more than 4 times any other item we collected that wasn’t broken into pieces. That’s an incredible number for such a small section of shoreline. What that tells me, is that if we want to reduce marine debris in the USVI, we should think about what we drinking out of, where we dispose of it, and where it might end up.”

Also at hand were members of the VI-EPSCoR (Virgin Islands Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research), VIMAS (Virgin Islands Marine Advisory Service); federal agencies (FEMA); local agencies (Department of Planning & Natural Resources (DPNR) Division of Coastal Zone Management, DPNR Division of Environmental Enforcement, and Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority); and other local non-profits. Also participating were Marine Rebuild Fund, Perfect Heart, Blue Flag, Camp Umoja, Environmental Association of St. Thomas, the Episcopal Church, and senate candidate, Sean Georges.

The Cleanup was sponsored by VI-EPSCoR, UVI CMES, VIMAS, DPNR CZM, the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Coral Reef Conservation Program, NOAA Marine Debris Program, Pizza Pi (who supplied lunch and boat safety support), the Marine Rebuild Fund, U.S. Virgin Islands (who provided lunch for the volunteers), VI Ecotours (who provided 4 staff members, and more than 30 kayaks, paddles, and life jackets). Custom Builders provided logistical support and supplied dump trucks to cart the trash to the Bovoni Landfill.