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'Climate Change Keeps Me Up At Night, I Worry About It Constantly': Secretary Haaland Visits U.S. Virgin Islands

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U.S. Dept. of Interior Secretary Deb Haaland By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

During a short visit to the U.S. Virgin Islands last week, U.S. Dept. of Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, and Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs, Carmen G. Cantor, highlighted the department's efforts to bolster coastal and climate resilience in U.S. territories.

All three islands were visited and activities such as hiking, swimming and attending the Veterans Day Parade were on the agenda.

On Saturday, the officials held a press event at the Nature Conservancy on St. Croix, where the importance of the coral tissue loss that the Caribbean and the world is experiencing was discussed.

The National Park Service has already invested \$1.1 million in the coral restoration partnership with the Nature Conservancy, according to Ms. Haaland. She said these investments will increase coral growth and preserve coral genetic diversity for improved reef resilience. She added that healthy new corals are then used to bring dying reefs back to life and restore the benefits they provide for the ocean, communities, and economies that depend on them.

Funding from President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Ms. Haaland said, includes funding to build on nature-based projects, programs, and partnerships to protect and cherish wildlife and natural resources, while creating good-paying union jobs to strengthen communities. This year alone, the Dept. of Interior has invested more than \$570,000 for projects here in the Virgin Islands, according to Interior officials.

Coral reefs are one of the great wonders of our world. These vast living networks sustain the ocean biodiversity, protect coastlines from climate impacts and help maintain the ocean's natural balance.

Dept. of Interior International Affairs Asst. Secretary, Carmen G. Cantor said she marvels at the beauty of the islands and promises to visit again. "I provide assistance and advocacy for the territories and also the The Compact of Free Association states in the Pacific. This has been terrific, this is my second time in St. Croix. I was here several weeks ago. I had the opportunity to catch and release sea turtles with the Wildlife Refuge," she said.

Ms. Haaland encouraged everyone to protect the corals and praised the Nature Conservancy. "I am so honored to be here," she said. "We had a wonderful past few days. We had a chance to see the natural beauty of the U.S. Virgin Islands as well as the hard work by the local community that continue to protect and conserve even these unique landscapes. The Nature Conservancy and other organizations are using this facility to advance coral science to help reefs recover on a larger scale than ever before."

Director of The Nature Conservancy, Dr. Celeste Jarvis, said she'd like to see the community get involved. "Corals feed our families and protect our shorelines, yet they are dying," she reminded. "We don't pay attention to it because they are underwater. What we are doing is trying to develop methods to bring them back to what they once were. We are facilitating their reproduction. It's important to fight climate change and protect our island," she said.

During her visit, Ms. Haaland also met with Governor Albert Bryan, who was reelected Tuesday night for a second term in office.