

6-16-2023

From: Cleone Creque, Senator at Large of the 12th, 13th, 15th, and 16th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
RE: Virgin Islands National Park Land Exchange of Whistling Cay

Testimony to be Read on Friday, June 30, 2023 at Committee of the Whole

The history of Whistling Cay not only has a deep sentimental value to our native population but irrevocable ancestral value. Whistling Cay was the primary trading post for charcoal used for cooking and other household necessities. Charcoal was transported via sailboats from Whistling Cay to Cruz Bay, St. John, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, West End, Tortola, and the other inhabited neighboring islands.

As a result of continuous harassment by the Virgin Islands National Park, numerous residents complained to our Legislative Office regarding threats, citations, and being arrested. Their complaints ranged from the inability to set fish pots, harvesting seafood (whelks, conch, lobster) and local fruits (mango, soursop, guava-berry, mamey, custard apple, mispel, local cherry, tamarind, genip, coconut, avocado, sugar apple, and other native fruits). Other complaints were the inability to collect local bush (used for tea, bathing, medicinal herbs, etc) and the farming of goats, pigs, chickens, cows, horses, mules, and donkeys. At the time, fencing was a luxury that most native farmers could not afford. As such, farmers would have to recapture their animals who would wander off; unfortunately, animals that wandered on to park own lands became property of the Virgin Islands National Park and deemed as wild and lost to the farmers.

I recall an incident where one man's goats ventured into the Virgin Islands National Park. The park ranger told him that his goats have now been identified as wild and that they were no longer his property and will not return to him. On another occasion, the Legislature had a staff event at Trunk Bay. One of my guests swam out to the small cay in the middle of the beach. He returned with whelks in his shirt and was greeted by a Park Ranger who ordered him to return the whelks to the small island or be arrested. On a third incident, I stopped along the road to pick some native tea bush, as I had done since a childhood, and a Park Ranger pulled up behind me and told me if I picked anymore, I would be arrested.

As a result of non-stop complaints of harassment including my personal experiences, I contacted the late Delegate to Congress Ronald de Lugo to meet with residents and hear complaints first hand. With the unanimous support of my colleagues and residents, per the recommendation of Congressman de Lugo, we sponsored a resolution petitioning the U.S. Congress to restrict the acquisition of additional acreage of St. John by the Virgin Islands National Park to increase their acreage. The Virgin Islands National Park ignored this resolution by illegally acquiring additional acreage by those circumventing the law by "gifting", "donating", and "deeding" land.

Today, we are gathered at the Committee of the Whole, to once again insult the intelligence of our native St. Johnians by, yet again, providing another synonym of "acquisition" and calling it the "land exchange" or "land swap."

In conclusion, as an advocate for a high school on St. John from the mid-70s, I am in support of a K-12 school; however, I am not in support of exchanging property with the Virgin Islands National Park for anything. I am not in favor of exchanging Whistling Cay for a school that I feel we are entitled to. The history of harassment of St. Johnians by the Virgin Islands National Park must be recognized and acknowledged. We appreciate the preservation and protection of our home, but not at the expense of compromising our culture.

Accordingly, the exchange of Whistling Cay is not acceptable.

Respectfully submitted by Cleone Henrietta Creque
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