



# United States Department of the Interior

## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

### Virgin Islands National Park

#### Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument

1300 Cruz Bay Creek

St. John, VI 00830



July 18, 2023

Senator Novelle E. Francis, Jr.  
President, 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands  
3022 Estate Golden Rock  
Christiansted, VI 00820

Dear Senator Francis:

It was brought to my attention that several questions were raised during last week's Committee of the Whole hearing on St. John. Below I have pulled out sections of the letter I submitted just before the hearing in question-and-answer format to more clearly address those concerns:

**1. How many acres does Virgin Islands National Park have? And when did the submerged lands around Whistling Cay become owned by the National Park Service?**

Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) was established in 1956 and is located on the island of St. John, United States Virgin Islands. The park comprises 7,259 acres of terrestrial and shoreline habitat and 5,650 acres of adjacent submerged lands (*offshore underwater habitat, added to the park in 1962 through Public Law 87-750*). The purpose of VINP is to preserve and protect for public benefit and inspiration outstanding scenic features, Caribbean tropical marine and terrestrial ecosystems in their natural conditions, and cultural heritage from pre-Columbian through Danish colonial times and the post-colonial period. *Note: PL 87-750 is available online via [750.pdf \(house.gov\)](#)*

**2. Who approached whom about the Land Exchange?**

Two decades ago, NPS worked with the Territorial Government of the United States Virgin Islands (GVI) at their request to evaluate park lands that could be a suitable location for a school and that could be exchanged for other naturally or culturally significant GVI lands. By the end of 2014, with support from the Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs, the GVI and NPS completed an archaeological and cultural survey of the Catherineberg parcel, held public meetings, and displayed a conceptual model of a new school programmed for the 11-acre site. The planning effort paused for several years while the GVI considered other approaches and alternative locations for a school. Talks with NPS were relaunched in 2019 when the GVI identified the Catherineberg parcel as their top desired location for a new public school.

*In late 2019, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. formally offered to NPS the 17-acre uninhabited, undeveloped island of Whistling Cay for consideration in exchange for the Catherineberg parcel after considering all other possible locations to site a school outside of the park boundary.*

**3. What will change or stay the same about access to Whistling Cay, visitor use, and water uses around the island? Is written guidance available?**

Under this exchange, Whistling Cay, which is currently considered public land under the GVI's jurisdiction, would permanently remain public land through NPS management. Whistling Cay is within the NPS' congressionally authorized boundary. NPS would maintain a conservation approach to management and interpretation of the resources on and around the island. Access to Whistling Cay by all Virgin Islanders and park visitors would remain unchanged. *Day use access to swimming, snorkeling, diving, and recreational fishing in the surrounding park waters would remain unchanged.* Guidance on fishing within VINP, including the waters immediately adjacent to Whistling Cay, can be found within the following three sources:

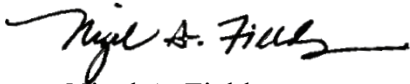
- (a) Title 36, Chapter 1, Part 7.74 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). Please see: <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/section-7.74>;
- (b) the VINP website provides an informational *Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources Fishing Guide* that describes which fish and shellfish harvesting is allowed. This includes a statement regarding the allowance of traditional West Indian fish traps. Additional guidance is provided in the Fishing section of the Superintendent's Compendium. Please see: [VIIS Fishing Information - Virgin Islands National Park \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#) and [Compendium - Virgin Islands National Park \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#); and
- (c) the Virgin Islands Mariners Guide pamphlet provided to each Virgin Islands Senator during the Field Day of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature Committee of the Whole on July 10, 2023. The mariner's guide is a popular tool which summaries 36 CFR 7.74 and the VINP website information into an easy to read, visually appealing format

**4. Is this exchange of the Catherineberg parcel consistent with the donor's intent?**

The Estate Catherineberg parcel is not a part of the original Jackson Hole Preserve donation which created the park. In 1968, NPS purchased the 55-acre plot in fee with a life estate from Ms. Ethel M. Bishop, the seller. With Ms. Bishop's death in 2006 the life estate extinguished, and the deed was no longer encumbered.

Please contact the Virgin Islands National Park's program coordinator, Ms. Elsa Alvear via [elsa\\_alvear@nps.gov](mailto:elsa_alvear@nps.gov) if you have further questions.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nigel A. Fields". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Nigel A. Fields  
Superintendent

cc. Kenneth L. Gittens, Senate Majority Leader, 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands