

## Report on Response Activity to Vessel Groundings in the US Virgin Islands

April 2, 2014

Active response to vessel groundings was identified as a strategy towards the conservation of coral reefs in the US Virgin Islands Reef Resilience Plan. As a result, marine scientists at The Nature Conservancy in the US Virgin Islands have responded to a number of vessel groundings within USVI territorial waters since 2010. In all occasions, Conservancy staff has acted at the request and on the behalf of the natural resource trustees – The Department of Planning and Natural Resources Division of Fish and Wildlife and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Since initiated, Conservancy staff has responded to nine grounding incidents, which represents all but four grounding events reported in territorial waters over that period. In two instances, grounding occurred on St. John near park waters and staff from National Park Service responded and in the other two instances Division of Fish and Wildlife staff responded. Response activity typically includes initial survey of damage, emergency triage of injured corals, and in some cases site restoration activities. The list below is comprehensive with information on activities conducted in response to each incident.

1. Long Reef, St. Croix

In the fall of 2010, a sailboat grounded near Long Reef on St. Croix. The grounding occurred during low tide as the keel struck sand/rubble substrate. The vessel was freed on its own during the next high tide.

2. Sprat Hole, St. Croix

In 2010, a vessel affiliated with Nekton Diving Cruises anchored onto reef near Sprat Hole on St. Croix. Initial surveys were conducted at the site and injured corals were triaged. No additional activities were conducted at the site as DPNR officials negotiated with the responsible party.

3. Round Reef, St. Croix

In July 2010, *Endless Reach* grounded on Round Reef on St. Croix. Through an initial survey, it was determined that no significant damage was caused to corals on the reef.

4. Green Cay, St. Croix

In March 2011, *New Moon* grounded on shore at Green Cay, an offshore Cay near St. Croix. An initial survey was conducted and no significant damage to coral resources was observed.

5. Great St. James, St. Thomas

In July 2011, *Royal Miss Belmar* grounded on Great St. James, a small island between St. Thomas and St. John. Multiple surveys were conducted to determine impacts to nearby corals as well as to recommend an appropriate location to stage the barge needed for removal/salvage. Additionally, tissue sample of nearby corals (as well as from a control site) were collected and shipped to NOAA for analysis. Although no corals were directly damaged from the vessel, one elkhorn colony was lost (potential as a result of exposure to hundreds of gallons of diesel).

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6. Saba, St. Thomas

In August 2011, *Solitude* grounded and was destroyed at Saba on St. Thomas. Initial assessment, emergency triage, and debris removal were conducted and the site was also later restored along with NOAA Coral Restoration staff.

7. Red Hook, St. Thomas

In October 2011, *Guiding Light* grounded at “false entrance” near Red Hook, St. Thomas. An initial assessment was conducted at the site. No significant damage was reported.

8. Teague Bay, St. Croix

In May 2012, a submerged sailboat was observed near TNC’s coral nursery. The vessel was observed traveling underwater and across the bay. Anchors were affixed to the vessel to prevent damage to the coral nursery. Information was provided to NOAA and DPNR. No action has been taken to remove the vessel.

9. Saba, St. Thomas

In September 2012, *Sin Sin* grounded at Saba on St. Thomas. An initial assessment was conducted at the site and no significant damage was reported.

In addition to directly responding to vessel groundings, Conservancy staff has also conducted two vessel grounding workshops and have analyzed the Virgin Islands Code to identify rules and regulations that can be used to process claims for damages to corals reefs. Additionally, the Coral Conservation Manager participates in locally hosted Caribbean Regional Response Team meetings and developed a points-of-contact list for disturbance response. As a result of these efforts and active response to vessel grounding events, hundreds of corals, which would have died if they had been left unattended have been rescued and/or reattached onto local USVI reefs.

**Photographs.**



Elkhorn coral colony impacted from the grounding at Great St. James, St. Thomas



Rescued fragmented corals (later reattached in situ) near Saba Island, St. Thomas



Marine debris removal near Saba Island, St. Thomas