

December 29, 2008

Jennifer Koss
NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Re: NOAA GCRC Program Agreement # NA06NMF4630112
Bridging Gaps for a Territorial Marine Park System in the U.S. Virgin Islands
TNC Reference # 1710053813
Final Report October 1, 2006– September 30, 2008

Dear Ms. Koss,

Please see the enclosed final report for the NOAA GCFR Program grant “Bridging Gaps for a Territorial Marine Park System in the U.S. Virgin Islands”, Agreement NA06NMF4630112. This final report covers the activities conducted during the award period of **October 1, 2006 through September 30, 2008**.

With this award, The Nature Conservancy, working with the VI Government officials and local partners, developed “portfolios” comprising of representative natural resources and conservation targets, including coral reef and associated habitats that will be used in conservation planning for the territory. The following report describes the work conducted to engage stakeholders, obtain relevant data, make improvements on the territory’s Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) use of spatial data, and the completion of the technical analysis for the ecological component of the Territory’s Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan. These accomplishments are ultimately paving the way for devising an effective and resilient system of marine parks.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns. I may be reached at (340) 718-5575, ext. 203 or via e-mail at jeanne_brown@tnc.org.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Brown
Coastal Conservation Program Manager

Attachment: The draft final report of the USVI Ecological Gap Assessment
“usvi_gap_final_report_DRAFT_swm.pdf”

NOAA GCRC Program Grant- Final Report
October 1, 2006 – September 30, 2008

Introduction

The Bridging the Gaps project was developed to support the efforts of the government of the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) in the pursuit of designating and implementing effective management of a Territory-wide marine park system. The government was lacking a means for effectively determining how to simultaneously promote economic growth while addressing land-based impacts on the natural environment. The “gap” to effectively manage a system of marine protected areas included the information and tools needed by management and regulatory agencies to make decisions that would balance development with sustainable resources use and the effective conservation of critical habitats, endangered marine species, and a thriving coral reef ecosystem. Understanding the necessity to approach planning in the marine landscape holistically, policy makers, regulators, conservation partners and stakeholders took into consideration the Territory’s current and projected development and land use needs that would affect the management of the natural resources.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) worked with the USVI’s Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), The University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) and other local VI partners to increase the capacity of the government to base land-use decisions on the ecosystem needs of the USVI. The Nature Conservancy provided technical support for an in-depth spatial analysis that would become part of the ecological component of the Territory’s Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan (CLWUP). The results include portfolios of critical conservation areas, areas there were appropriate for development, and a report and recommendations for how to advance a conservation decision support system for the territory (see attached draft USVI gap results). Ultimately these outputs will provide the means for selection of additional or possible alternative areas in order to accomplish the goal of establishing an effective territory wide network of marine parks within territorial and federally controlled waters. The advancements made by DPNR to increase the technical capacity for the Territory along with progress made towards the goals to effectively manage a system of marine protected areas was made possible with funding assistance from NOAA’s General Coral Reef Conservation Program.

Stakeholder Engagement

Between October 2006 and April 2007, TNC began to assess availability and accuracy of existing marine spatial data and to accumulate relevant marine use information. The project began with mapping effort of the existing marine managed areas of the USVI (of which there are 15 total), and in conducting a gap assessment to determine existing habitat representation relative to assumed goals to protect 20% of coral reefs and associated habitats in the USVI (announced at the 1999 Coral Reef Task Force Meeting in St. Thomas). This initial attempt was somewhat hypothetical based on assumed targets as opposed to having identified targets and threats based on extensive stakeholder involvement. However, subsequently planned were a series of community meetings on each of the three islands of the USVI. These meetings aimed to define conservation targets and threats to those targets based on the 20% marine resources goal by

engaging stakeholders in identifying and ranking conservation targets and threats to be incorporated into decision-making tools.

In May, 2007, TNC and The Ocean Conservancy (TOC) held community meetings on St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas. Invitees included representatives from the Territorial government, Federal agencies, UVI, and other local stakeholders such as Fisheries Advisory Council members. At these meetings, the project objectives, an outline of the process of the spatial analysis, and future direction of this project was elucidated by TNC staff. The meetings resulted in a number of recommendations made to define the level of specificity for recommendations made to the local government, a clearer understanding of the role of various groups in the process, and a listing of the major issues expected to hinder any comprehensive planning. Several concerns and recommendations were raised at these meetings regarding the current status of marine management areas, including the determination of roles and responsibilities of the partners and the need to maintain consistency and transparency in the collection of data. Policy recommendations were made by various individuals for land use regulation, pollution prevention, fisheries management, and tourism-related activity. The stakeholders made apparent the need to incorporate terrestrial management component with the marine protection initiatives. Further, participants emphasized the importance of packaging the economic well-being of the USVI with any marine conservation initiative to foster support from all sectors.

Spatial Analysis Process

It became apparent during consultations with these key project partners that efforts to protect marine areas of the USVI are futile without a planned approach to terrestrial management that takes into consideration the impact that land-use decisions have on the condition of our marine resources. However, due to staff turnover at both TOC and TNC, and a change in the structure of the Southeast Caribbean Program of TNC, no additional activity occurred on this grant since the meetings held in May, 2007 until October, 2007. In the meantime though, a MOU was signed with TNC and the government of the USVI in July 2007 in which the government’s commitment to collaborate and develop a conservation strategy and action plan with TNC was elucidated. This solidified the partnership of TNC and DPNR and commitment of each party in achieving the Territory’s marine protection goals. The strategy outlined in the MOU ensured all manageable conservation elements of terrestrial as well as marine protected areas be considered in conjunction with sustainable development, pollution prevention, and watershed management endeavors.

As this grant project was being reevaluated for effectiveness and discussions with DPNR advanced, two strategies emerged:

- 1) The development of a GIS Work Group in DPNR who would work to increase the capacity for the Department’s key personnel who would be intimately involved with planning, including a GIS technical training workshop and the development of a Spatial Data Infrastructure Policy for DPNR.
- 2) A series of workshops with personnel from DPNR and other partners to collect specific biological and socio-economic parameters and to apply the information in a

spatial analysis to examine existing and potential conservation and protected areas relative to the territory wide presence of coral reef and associated habitats.

To this end, a week-long Geospatial Data Workshop was held at the end of January, 2008 to introduce TNC’s Conservation Decision Support System (CDSS) tool, provide an introductory GIS training by TNC personnel, cover intermediate GIS techniques for creating metadata, making maps, using the CDSS, and running GIS spatial analysis. About 40 personnel from DPNR’s St. Croix and St. Thomas offices attended the week-long training session.

This paved the way for a creation of a GIS Work Group for DPNR with TNC providing organizational support and technical assistance. This group met regularly to advance the Spatial Data Infrastructure Policy and to find means to meet the Department’s technical needs for spatial data infrastructure. The Nature Conservancy has a vested interest in seeing that a functional and equipped GIS Work Group can perpetually operate using the most reliable and accurate data, applying the best science, and utilizing the most advanced technology to better serve the decision-making needs of the DPNR. By the end of 2008, the DPNR’s GIS capacity has increased to the point of being much better equipped to use GIS in its decision making applications. As of December, 2008, the GIS Work Group is moving forward with defining spatial data sharing regulations, and TNC is working with ESRI to provide ArcGIS license keys to DPNR.

Concurrently, Expert Consensus workshops were held to collect spatial data necessary for the ecological component of the DPNR’s Comprehensive Land and Water use Plan. A group of territorial experts convened for the first USVI Ecological Gap Assessment workshop held in May 2008. Facilitated by TNC, the purpose of this workshop was to review existing marine and terrestrial spatial data and identify critical natural resource areas. TNC provided technical support to partners by performing spatial analysis of the data. Through a series of meetings and analysis iterations in June, July, and finally September, 2008, the group of approximately 25 experts reached consensus on important marine and terrestrial areas within the territory. The results of this analysis and partnership effort are being submitted to the commissioner of DPNR to review and include in the future update of the CLWUP (see draft Final Report, attached). Additionally, this information is being immediately utilized by territorial planners to help guide and inform development decisions and identify critical conservation areas. It is expected that this information will help inform future rezoning efforts within the territory.

Conclusions

The NOAA GCRC award Bridging Gaps for a Territorial Marine Park System in the U.S. Virgin Islands has paved the way for advancement being made on a science-based, spatial data informed decision making to be employed by the Territory’s DPNR. The threats to the marine resources of the Virgin Islands’ currently 15 existing marine managed areas have been identified for priority areas and conservation planning strategies are being developed. These advancements, though slow to be realized, are making possible the current momentum of the community to be involved with planning and a local government impetus to maintain these efforts. With proper planning, the benefits of the natural resources of the coral reefs to the residents of the USVI will be

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realized, maximizing for the protection of coral reef resources while allowing optimal economic growth.