



Implementing Agency: Water Resources Research Institute, University of the Virgin Islands

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Title: Revitalization of Guts as Urban Recreational Spaces in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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Abstract

The Virgin Islands Code protects watercourses through a prohibition on cutting of vegetation within 30ft. of the center of a natural watercourse, or 25ft. from the edge, whichever is greater. Despite the legal protection, guts continue to be degraded through clearing and paving, resulting in erosion and the rapid transportation of significant sediment loading in surface runoff directly to the marine environment. The Unified Watershed Assessment Report for the U.S. Virgin Islands (Department of Planning & Natural Resources and Department of Agriculture, 1998) notes that sedimentation is the primary nonpoint source pollution threatening the islands water resources.

In addition to impairment of coastal water quality, the sediment loading reduces water availability for other uses. A project currently being undertaken by technical staff in the Cooperative Extension Service, University of the Virgin Islands, involves the rehabilitation of ponds in the Bordeaux area of St. Thomas. Those ponds had become filled with silt transported in the guts, resulting in a significant reduction in the water available to farmers in the area.

Streams and watercourses/guts have traditionally been used for recreational purposes in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), and though that use has been reduced due mainly to increasing urbanization, community uses of the areas still continue. Current work by the Investigators named in this study confirms that community use, and is attempting to determine the potential future demand for those recreational spaces. Groups, such as the St. Croix Hiking Association, conduct hikes to selected guts, and the Estate Adventure Trail with interpretive signage has recently been established by volunteers along the edge of a gut. On St. John, the Virgin Islands National Park conducts tours of the Reef Bay trail (among others), though that trail is promoted

partially because of the cultural heritage value (petroglyphs attributed to Arawak Indians). There are no known comparable institutions or activities on St. Thomas, though the Environmental Association of St. Thomas and other groups have expressed interest in identifying guts on St. Thomas appropriate for hiking tours.

Periodic studies have noted that the guts represent one of the few remaining areas where canopy forest can be found in the USVI, and encompass potentially higher levels of biological diversity. As part of its Natural Resources/Environmental Management and Water Quality Programs, the University of the Virgin Islands, Cooperative Extension Service (UVI-CES) promotes awareness of guts as important riparian habitats protected by USVI law. In exhibits and publications, UVI-CES has emphasized the critical function that guts naturally serve in the protection of wetlands and coastal water quality, as well as the recreational potential and scenic beauty of guts. However, a comprehensive program to promote awareness and protection of guts has not been formally adopted by community groups or the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), the primary natural resource management agency in the Territory. The lack of attention offered to guts and streams and the weak enforcement of the USVI law prohibiting the removal of gut vegetation has resulted in the deterioration of the habitats through clearing and paving. Pollution in surface runoff and illegal disposal of solid waste also act to degrade the ecosystems and decrease the amenity value.

However, there is no program that translates the protection afforded by the law into actual protection strategies or that offers protection of guts through the development control process. For example, the wildlife strategy for the USVI, prepared by the Department of Planning Natural Resources, Division of Fish and Wildlife, does not include guts in the classification of wetlands, and does not offer any direction for protection of this ecosystem (Division of Fish & Wildlife, 2005).

It has therefore been suggested that greater attention would be given to streams/guts if they were promoted as recreational spaces for residents and visitors. This project will focus on the design of a framework within which a gut protection program can be established by the relevant natural resource management agencies and research institutions in the USVI.

Project Objectives:

- (a) Determination of the state of knowledge concerning guts in the USVI;
- (b) Review of the current programming relevant to guts/streams;
- (c) Preparation of a draft policy and plan for gut management;
- (d) Endorsement of the draft gut management program by the relevant public sector and research institutions, using a peer review process (in a workshop format) for plan review and finalization; and
- (e) Development of demonstration activities involving one site each on St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Project Outputs:

- A report on the current state of knowledge concerning guts in the USVI.
- A draft gut management policy and plan for the USVI.
- A proposal for a project to demonstrate the management strategies and appropriate institutional arrangements using two guts, one each on St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Methodology:

The report on the current state of knowledge concerning guts in the USVI will be compiled from publications, grey literature (research papers, natural history notes from noted naturalists, and project reports), and anecdotal information submitted by individuals during the project consultation process.

The project consultation process will take place over the duration of the project, and will involve direct discussions with relevant government and civil society institutions. Guidance will also be sought from persons that have conducted research or community projects on guts in the USVI.

Two sets of workshops will be held, one set on St. Croix and the other on St. Thomas. The workshops will be used for two purposes. The first is to finalize the peer review of the background status report, facilitate preliminary discussion of the proposed management plan, and facilitate discussion of the proposed demonstration project. The second set of workshops will be used to finalize the peer review of the management plan, and continue discussion of the demonstration project. The workshops will be held during the second week of January 2008 and the third week of February 2008.

Information will be circulated on an ongoing basis through the various community bulletin boards, through the main environmental non-governmental organizations, and through other relevant institutions, such as those concerned with tourism. Additionally, a Yahoo-based listserv will be established to support communication between interested individuals during the project.

Contact Information:

Persons and institutions wishing to contribute materials to be reviewed for the project can contact any of the Project Investigators. Materials such as photographs and maps can also be submitted, and where such materials are used in the final report, credit will be given to the person or institution that submitted the materials. Persons wishing to join the listserv should send their full name, email address, and telephone number to Lloyd Gardner at: <mailto:mlgardne@uvi.edu>.