

Building a New Marine Institute as a Federal-State-Territorial Partnership Salt River Bay Marine Research and Education Center

Briefing Paper to Highlight Current Activities and Initiatives
For the 2012 Senior Plenary Session of the Interagency Group on Insular Areas

- **Issue:** A partnership among the National Park Service (NPS), OIA and a consortium of universities known as the Joint Institute for Caribbean Marine Studies (JICMS) is working to build a major marine institute at the Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve (SARI) in St. Croix. The facility will serve not only as a center of excellence for marine research and education but also as a model for USVI, NPS and insular areas for future development.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Coral reefs are under extreme threat. The Salt River Bay Marine Research and Education Center (MREC) will galvanize scholarly interest and expand public education and awareness of important issues affecting the health of coral reef ecosystems throughout the Caribbean and other tropical regions of the world.
- SARI is co-managed by NPS and the Government of the USVI. Along with the JICMS [Rutgers University; University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW); University of the Virgin Islands and University of South Carolina], it is the perfect “partnership” for a new marine research and education center. NPS will own the buildings and JICMS will operate the facilities, relying on student and research fees for much of the annual revenue.
- Research records in St. Croix date back to the early 1970’s. Gathered by some of the world’s leading investigators at the two former marine laboratories (Farleigh Dickinson University’s West Indies Laboratory and the NOAA’s National Undersea Research Center at Salt River Bay), the data document marine ecosystems prior to the rapid decline in coral reef health that began in the 1980’s. They provide a rare historic record of healthy coral reef ecosystems.
- The closure of both research facilities following Hurricane Hugo in 1989 was a major loss to St. Croix, the U.S.V.I. and the region. The MREC would restore world-class research capacity to an area of great scientific and historic value. It would also provide VI students with opportunities to study and participate in university exchanges among the JICMS.
- The Virgin Islands have been designated critical habitat for staghorn and elkhorn coral, the two species that were listed in 2006 as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.
- The creation of the East End Marine Park, the territory’s first marine park, and the expansion of Buck Island National Monument, provide a unique opportunity for conducting research to evaluate management effectiveness in protected areas, including “no-take”.
- Salt River Bay also has unique cultural significance. On November 14, 1493, Christopher Columbus’s party came ashore at Salt River Bay, the only site visited in U.S. territory. The site is also an

important archaeological site for the indigenous Tainos, with many artifacts and archaeological finds recovered.

- MREC will be a green building, relying on renewable energy such as wind and solar power, and designed to minimize impacts to surrounding sensitive habitats such as the watersheds and adjacent marine areas. It will be a model for island development. An international student design competition scheduled for 2011-2012 will raise the visibility of the project internationally.
- The closing of the Hovensa Refinery on St. Croix will have significant economic impacts to the island and the territory. The MREC is a high-profile project that could help to offset some of the economic losses.
- Milestones:
 - MOU signed among DOI, NOAA and JICMS (1999)
 - NPS acquires 73 acres at Salt River Bay (2001)
 - Feasibility study completed (2004)
 - Environmental assessment completed (2006)
 - OIA provides additional \$1.25M for design (2009)
 - Strategic Business Plan developed (2009)
 - Cooperative Agreement with GVI signed (2009)
 - Executive Leadership Team formed (2009)
 - International Institute for Sustainable Laboratories announces a competition to design innovative technologies for a “sustainable” MREC; competition is open to architecture and engineering students in college students around the world (2010)
 - Rutgers University landscape architecture students complete site concept designs (2010)
 - Work Teams formed to scope curriculum, outreach, and laboratory seawater systems (2010)
 - DOD provides \$1.4 million for site restoration road work (2010)
 - Memorandum of Intent signed with NPS (2010)
 - Lord, Aeck, Sargent contracted to develop design concepts (2010)
 - Archaeology field school becomes first class at SARI (June 2010)
 - Environmental monitoring begins (June 2011)
 - NPS’s Development Advisory Board (DAB) approves the concept design (July 2011)
 - OIA awards \$2.6 million to complete design requirements for final DAB approval (Sept 2011)
 - Next phase of design planning commences (spring 2012)
 - Presentation to DAB of final design concepts expected Nov 2012
- OIA has contributed more than \$5M for project planning and development. The NPS has contributed several million dollars in land acquisition and project support. The Department of Defense is using the road and site preparation as a training exercise for the National Guard and will spend a total of about \$4M. GVI has contributed \$250,000 to the project.
- Construction costs are estimated at \$54 million.
- Visit the OIA website for more info at: <http://www.doi.gov/oia/saltriver/index.html>