



Foundation Document Overview

Buck Island Reef National Monument

U.S. Virgin Islands



Contact Information

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Purpose



BUCK ISLAND REEF NATIONAL MONUMENT in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, preserves, protects, studies, and interprets diverse marine and terrestrial tropical ecosystems, fish, wildlife, and significant submerged and terrestrial cultural and historical resources in one of the first marine protected areas in the Caribbean Sea.



Significance

Significance statements express why Buck Island Reef National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Designated as a national monument, Buck Island and its surrounding coral bank barrier reef formations are regarded as one of the first marine protected areas in the Caribbean Sea; this protected tropical coral reef and island ecosystem provides refuge for a diversity of marine and terrestrial species including Caribbean coral reefs, fishes, sea turtles, lizards, sea birds, marine mammals, and marine invertebrates and plants.
- The first marine protected area in the national park system, Buck Island Reef National Monument safeguards a wide spectrum of marine habitats that range from a shallow 7,000-year-old bank barrier coral reef where unusual elkhorn coral (haystack) formations are found, to open ocean corridors that plummet to abyssal depths along a vertical shelf edge containing deep coral species and rare marine life.



Significance



- Uninhabited, Buck Island is an important sanctuary for the biological diversity of many terrestrial plant and animal species that live, forage, breed, nest, or rest within the safety of the monument including four species of sea turtle, sea birds, and the only completely protected habitat that supports the globally endangered St. Croix ground lizard.
- The archeological record on Buck Island bears witness to more than 2,000 years of human history. The earliest inhabitants used the island as a fishing camp. During the historic colonial period the surrounding reefs proved treacherous to mariners, resulting in numerous shipwrecks. Of these submerged archeological resources, the most notable are the wrecks of two 18th-century transatlantic slave ships, the *Mary* and *General Abercrombie*.
- For 50 years Buck Island has been one of the most accessible and studied coral bank barrier reef systems in the Caribbean. Buck Island Reef National Monument continues to foster outstanding opportunities for scientific research and scholarship, inspiring scientists and students as well as the public to explore the monument's many natural and cultural resources.
- Buck Island Reef National Monument's coastline represents a gradient of geological processes from coral sand beaches to vertical sedimentary rock cliffs. The rock cliffs, composed from ancient volcanic materials, are layered with calcite, exposing the island's buried geological history of tectonic plate movement and uplift.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Water Clarity**
- **Coral Reef Communities**
- **Island Environment**
- **Terrestrial and Marine Wildlife Including Fish**
- **Maritime Heritage Resources**
- **Scientific Research and Education**
- **Experiencing a Caribbean Coral Reef**

Buck Island Reef National Monument contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Natural Sounds and Visual Resources**
- **Natural History Collections**



Description

Preserving “one of the finest marine gardens in the Caribbean Sea,” Buck Island Reef National Monument was established by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 through Presidential Proclamation No. 3443. Recognizing the importance of the marine resources surrounding Buck Island Reef, the national monument was later expanded by more than 18,000 acres and all extractive uses prohibited within the monument’s waters (fishing, taking whelk, conch, lobster, etc.), making it the first and one of only a few fully protected “no-take” marine protected areas in the entire national park system. Today, Buck Island Reef National Monument manages more than 19,000 acres of mostly submerged land north of St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. St. Croix is the largest of the four islands that comprise the U.S. Virgin Islands, which also include St. John, St. Thomas, and Water Island, and is located inside the sweep of the Lesser Antilles arc, roughly 45 miles south of the other islands.

Originally designated because of the unique coral barrier reef system surrounding Buck Island and unusual elkhorn coral “haystack” formations, Buck Island Reef National Monument now protects extensive Caribbean marine and terrestrial habitats for numerous species. The monument’s tropical marine ecosystems are a continuum of shallow coral reefs, seagrass beds, octocoral hardbottom, sand, algal plains to shelf edge, mesophotic to deep reefs, and open ocean to depths of 3,000 feet, providing habitats essential for sustaining diverse communities of marine life.

Only 176 acres in size, Buck Island is a crucial refuge for many native terrestrial species such as the globally endangered St. Croix ground lizard. Several threatened and endangered species can be found in the protected waters within the monument.

Buck Island also contains evidence of more than 2,000 years of human interactions with the surrounding marine environment. Archeological research has documented prehistoric use of the island. During the Danish colonial period, a homestead was constructed above the beach and a military signal station was built on the island’s peak in an effort to warn ships of the coral barrier reef. Still, the hazards of navigating around the island took its toll, resulting in an array of submerged archeological resources including wrecks of two significant slave ships, reflecting the rich maritime heritage protected by the national monument.

Buck Island Reef National Monument, located in the clear, warm waters of the Caribbean Sea, provides unique opportunities for continued long-term scientific research into the tropical marine environment in the eastern Caribbean, for educational experiences, and for recreational activities. An underwater snorkel trail, the first of its kind in the national park system, provides an immersive experience where visitors can explore and appreciate the coral barrier reef system that is the focal point for many visitors to Buck Island Reef National Monument.

