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March 29, 2013

Liz Fairey
Federal Program Officer
Fisheries Habitat Conservation Program Office
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Re: NOAA GCRF Program Agreement # NA10NMF4630063
"St. Thomas East End Reserves: Implementation of Management Plan Early Action Steps"
TNC Reference # 1710053824
Final Report

Dear Ms. Fairey,

This letter and following information serve as the Final Report on the activities completed and objectives met under the NOAA GCFR Program grant "St. Thomas East End Reserves: Implementation of Management Plan Early Action Steps", Agreement NA10NMF4630063 during the award period of **July 1, 2010-December 31, 2012**.

We look forward to promoting the conservation of natural resources in the USVI and supporting the legislative and policy agencies that are charged with the protection of critical conservation areas. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns. I may be reached at (207) 650-5483 or via e-mail at jeanne_brown@tnc.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeanne Brown". The signature is stylized and fluid.

Jeanne Brown
VI Coastal Program Director

Summary

This project, “St. Thomas East End Reserves: Implementation of Management Plan Early Action Steps,” successfully enabled two years of implementation of the St. Thomas East End Reserves (STEER) management plan; thereby meeting project objectives to increase resources protection, conduct baseline monitoring and assessments, promote effective management and coordination amongst agencies, and establish education and outreach. The hiring and dedicated presence of the on-the-ground STEER Implementation Specialist to coordinate STEER efforts truly raised the visibility and priority of STEER among the community and local and federal agencies, facilitating and bolstering efforts to protect valuable coral reef, mangrove, seagrass and fisheries resources.

In coordination with the local coral reef resource managers in the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) Division of Coastal Zone Management (CZM), TNC has supported the implementation of critical management strategies in STEER. Out of this grant, the following significant milestones for site-level MPA management within USVI were reached:

- Finalization and implementation of the STEER management plan;
- Coordination of the STEER core team;
- Consistent stakeholder meetings;
- Increased monitoring and research within STEER; and
- Education and outreach efforts resulting in increased visibility of STEER.

Meeting Project Objectives and Outcomes

Working together, the on-the-ground STEER Implementation Specialist (STEER IS), in conjunction with partners including the STEER core team (DPNR, UVI, Friends of Christmas Cove), stakeholders and NOAA, accomplished the following objectives and outcomes:

1) Increased the percentage of area effectively protected for the maintenance of the biological diversity and other natural functions of Caribbean coral reef systems with sustainable harvest of marine resources; improved enforcement of resource protection laws; pollution control measures; reduced physical damage to coral reefs and associated habitats; and watershed improvement actions. (*GCRCGP Priorities: (a) Fisheries Impacts; (b) Land based Sources of Pollution; (c) Climate Change*). **Outcome:** additional 9.6 km² of coral reef effectively conserved.

2) Implemented baseline monitoring and assessment activities identified in STEER management plan, including resource monitoring and commercial and recreational use. (*GCRCGP Priorities (a) Fisheries Impacts; (b) Land-Based Sources of Pollution (c) Climate Change*) **Outcome:** resource monitoring, assessment, baseline maps and commercial and recreational use and impact assessment implemented and guiding adaptive management for protection of coral reefs and associated resources.

3) Promoted sound management practices for the protection of adjoining watershed through improved coordination of resource agencies, and a series of public education and outreach activities. (*GCRCGP Priority (b) Land-based Sources of Pollution*). **Outcome:** increased public knowledge of watershed impacts on coral reef ecosystems, and increased participation of community, resource agencies, and researchers.

4) Increased public awareness of the marine protected areas and their coral reefs. (*GCRCGP Priorities (e) LAS lack of public awareness*) **Outcome:** design, publication and distribution of

outreach materials focused on coral reefs and marine resources conservation for visitors and locals.

Activities conducted during the award period

Activity 1: Hire STEER Implementation Specialist

Hiring of the STEER Implementation Specialist was coordinated through outside reviewers and a hiring committee to bring the Implementation Specialist on board. This entailed a considerable amount of coordination and collaboration to refine the job descriptions, recruit, review and hire the Implementation Specialist. Fifty-two people applied for the position. Of those, six made the top consideration and four were interviewed. The STEER IS started on March 1, 2011 and immediately began meeting with partners to finalize the STEER management plan. The STEER IS, Anne Marie Hoffman, had worked previously as a volunteer with The Nature Conservancy on both STEER and the St. Croix East End Marine Park (funded under the NOAA GCFR Program grant “Building Capacity and Increasing Effectiveness for the USVI Territorial Marine Protected Areas”, Agreement NA09NMF4630122) from July to December 2009. Familiarity and previous working experience with both STEER and STXEEMP, local laws and regulations, and partners enabled the STEER IS to hit the ground running.

Activity 2: Implement early Action Steps identified in the STEER Management Plan

During the spring of 2011, the STEER IS sought additional input, clarification and final review of the STEER management plan from the STEER core team and finalized the plan in May 2011. To celebrate this major milestone, the STEER core team invited stakeholders to and provided appetizers at the STEER open house on May 22, 2011. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) printed the management plan, management plan summary and STEER activities guide for the event. The open house was a successful kickoff event, receiving positive coverage in the Daily News and online VI Source.

After the open house kickoff event, outreach and coordination remained a priority throughout the two year award period. The STEER IS initiated standing monthly meetings, project specific meetings, became a member of several local committees to keep the community informed and involved in STEER and published the first STEER newsletter in August 2011, and a similar research update newsletter in September 2012. These efforts have directly resulted in a greater understanding on the part of the public of STEER resources and management efforts as well coordination between local and federal agencies. These efforts were bolstered by the addition of a STEER volunteer intern, supported by TNC through a cooperative agreement with NOAA’s CRCP program, focused heavily on education and outreach from July – December 2012.

The following is a description of education, outreach and coordination conducted during the award period:

1. Monthly meetings: A total of 15 STEER core team and public meetings were held on March 11, April 15, May 13, June 22, July 15, August 15, September 28, October 13, November 21 and December 14, 2011; January 30, March 27, April 18, June 27 and December 6, 2012. Consistent monthly meetings promoted communication and planning and enabled regular updates on activities in STEER. (Specific project meetings were sometimes held in place of the general monthly meetings.) Meetings were held at UVI

and on the east end of St. Thomas to encourage stakeholder attendance and participation. The agenda and notes were sent to the STEER community prior to and after the meetings through the STEER Google group and stakeholders were invited to provide input whether they can physically attend the meeting or not.

2. STEER core team work planning (members of the US Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) and TNC): The STEER core team conducted all day work planning on January 26, 2012, that led to a vetted 2012 calendar work plan. It was also a day to identify 2011 accomplishments and plan priorities and moving forward.
3. STEER Google group: The STEER Google group was maintained and added to during the award period. Expanding the listserve to over 100 participants means that more members of the community are informed about STEER efforts, priorities and challenges.
4. Newsletter and research update: The STEER IS and TNC intern created the inaugural STEER Newsletter in August 2011, and a research update in September 2012. These documents, sent out to the STEER Google group and provided at STEER meetings, served to keep the community informed about STEER priorities and efforts.
5. Domestic and international representation of STEER: The STEER IS was asked to give a presentation and present a poster at the “NOAA in the Caribbean” meeting in May 2012. Further, in June 2012, the STEER IS attended the MPA Federal Advisory Committee (FAC) and partners meeting at the request of the MPA center. It was a valuable learning experience to discuss stewardship, communication and challenges to MPA management and implementation from practitioners and managers throughout the US. With STEER recently becoming a member of the National System of MPAs as the Virgin Islands Marine Protected Area Network (VIMPAN), participation in this partner’s meeting opened the door to future collaboration, resources and support. STEER was well represented on the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI) agenda in Puerto Morelos, Mexico in 2011, through a general session presentation and as a case study in the sustainable finance workshop. The STEER IS presented on the development and implementation of the STEER Management Plan. Additional benefits of attending GCFI included networking with other MPA practitioners and managers, absorbing information and innovative solutions from the varied presentations and posters and brushing up on Spanish. Additional benefits were obtained from attending the International Tropical Marine Ecosystem Management Symposium (ITMEMS) conference in Guadalupe. The symposium was well targeted at MPA managers and practitioners and covered STEER relevant topics such as marine spatial planning, reef resilience, lionfish, climate change and communication with stakeholders. Networking during this conference has already led to sustainable finance ideas for STEER. As a representative of STEER, the STEER IS also attended the Puerto Rico-Virgin Islands Climate Change Conference and the Coral Assembly, both located in Puerto Rico. These meetings were integral in aligning regional partnerships and initiating actions to address climate change and coral concerns in the USVI, BVI and Puerto Rico. STEER is the primary marine protected area on St. Thomas and will benefit from these regional activities.

Implementation of early action steps in year 1 and year 2 of the STEER Management Plan was also a priority during the award period. Progress and completion on buoy, watershed, contaminants, water quality, habitat and coastal use mapping and lionfish were supported by the STEER IS as described below:

1. **Mooring Buoys:** To partially satisfy Strategy 8.1.A of the STEER Management Plan, create a buoy mooring system in popular boating areas containing coral and seagrass habitat within STEER, the DPNR Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) installed mooring buoys along Bovoni Cay. At the request of DFW, the STEER IS assisted with education and outreach to the STEER community regarding the Bovoni Cay hurricane mooring buoy system by distributing information booklets and answering any questions. Additionally, she assisted DFW at the drawing where they assigned berths to interested boat owners. The Bovoni Cay hurricane mooring buoys system was installed to protect mangroves and seagrass beds in Mangrove Lagoon and attracted attention from the DPNR Commissioner, Governor, and several senators.
2. **NOAA projects identified in the STEER management plan:** Contaminants, bioeffects and biological monitoring; watershed planning and assessment; and coastal use mapping. NOAA project coordinators and contractors for these projects relied on the STEER IS to arrange five STEER core team meetings, four public meetings, various conference calls, development of three flyers and three press releases and community advertising for the following efforts:
 - a. **Contaminants, bioeffects and biological monitoring:** In June, NOAA’s National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) started to fill a research gap identified in the STEER management plan: Strategic Action 1.1.B.1 -- Develop a baseline assessment of chemical contaminants and bioeffects present in Mangrove Lagoon and STEER (metals, nutrients, bacteria, hydrocarbons, etc.). NOAA’s NCCOS collected and analyzed sediments from twenty-four randomly selected sites to identify organic and inorganic contaminants. The STEER IS accompanied the NOAA team in the field and assisted with sediment sample preparation. The STEER IS planned and advertised public meeting and agency meetings in December 2012 to present the results of the STEER contaminants project. The STEER IS trained and assisted with the biological monitoring on St. Croix in May 2012, and supported NOAA’s Biogeography Branch as a fish diver during the STEER biological monitoring effort in June 2012.
 - b. **Watershed Assessment:** The STEER IS organized public meetings on February 28 and 29 and December 6 and 7, 2012, to seek public input for the watershed assessment study being conducted on behalf of NOAA by the Horsley Witten Group. These public meetings were held at three different venues: a local restaurant called 18 Karat on the east end of St. Thomas, the Curriculum Center in the upper watershed and the local high school. Outreach was conducted by newspaper and radio announcements as well as flyers. Additionally, TNC borrowed the watershed model owned by VIERS on St. John and UVI graduate students demonstrated the model. All of these efforts were successful in bringing new stakeholders into the conversation to provide input and support watershed efforts.

- c. Coastal mapping project: Conducted by NOAA’s MPA Center, the STEER IS contributed during all stages of the project including a scoping trip, the mapping workshop and the follow-up workshop by identifying a local hire for the project, advertising the meetings, facilitating at the workshops and participating as a source of local knowledge regarding activities conducted in STEER. Members of the community were enamored with the technology and dialogue that these workshops encouraged.
3. UVI research and monitoring: Students and faculty from the University of the Virgin Islands Masters of Marine and Environmental Science (MMES) program participate on the STEER core team and conduct research in the area. The STEER IS met with various students and faculty to recommend that they conduct specific, relevant projects in the STEER management plan. This outreach resulted in specific projects conducted by the MMES program including: water quality sampling and analysis, marine debris and trash analysis, development of a biological monitoring protocol, mangrove monitoring, and mangrove prop root community analysis.
4. Connectivity analysis of critical mangrove, seagrass and mangrove habitat: The STEER IS conducted a proximity analysis using NOAA’s habitat priority planner to determine distances and likelihood of fish migration between priority mangrove, seagrass and coral reef habitat within STEER.
5. Lionfish: Lionfish have become a larger invasive species problem in St. Thomas waters. The STEER IS attended a meeting with the Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs at NOAA Fisheries and TNC’s USVI Coral Restoration Program in March 2011, to discuss lionfish, coral restoration and STEER. The STEER IS drafted a lionfish permit, based on the model adopted by the National Park Service, and coordinated with DPNR’s Divisions of Fish and Wildlife and Coastal Zone Management and CORE, the nonprofit conducting lionfish education, outreach and search dives.
6. Enforcement: There have been an increased number of reports of illegal activity in STEER, a positive sign that the community has developed trust in the STEER IS. Transferring these reports to the Division of Environmental Enforcement has become an avenue for developing a positive rapport. The STEER IS anticipates that it will lead to increased enforcement in STEER.
7. Coastal Cleanups: Two cleanups of the Compass Point Salt Pond and surrounding areas were conducted on September 24, 2011, and November 3, 2012, as part of The Ocean Conservancy’s Coastweeks, in conjunction with the Environmental Association of St. Thomas-St. John, Sea Grant, University of the Virgin Islands and the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School’s JROTC program. TNC created and posted fliers and advertised the cleanups through radio and newspaper announcements. Approximately 10 members of the community and 129 members of the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School’s JROTC program assisted with each cleanup, filling large dumpsters 2/3 full of trash at each cleanup!
8. Sustainable Finance and Tourism: To support establishment of sustainable financing mechanisms for STEER, Marija Micuda, NOAA Fellow at the St. Croix East End Marine Park, completed a project to conduct willingness-to-pay surveys of businesses that operate in STEER to increase stakeholder understanding. Businesses conduct a variety of

activities in STEER including diving, kayaking, sailing, power cruises, etc. Additionally, charter boats often use Christmas Cove as their first or last anchorage on their way to/from the British Virgin Islands. The survey also asked important questions regarding the preferred management structure and expectations for STEER. The STEER IS helped collect surveys and organized other members of the STEER core team to collect surveys. The final report, identifying findings and making recommendations, was finalized in early 2013.

Activity 3: Coordinate development of the STEER management structure

During the June and July 2011 STEER core planning meetings, scoping management options was an item on the agenda. STEER stakeholders identified management options for STEER including creation of an advisory board, management authority and trust. Inclusion of the STEER community in these early meetings is critical for buy-in as plans for sustainable STEER management continues. These discussions continue but stalled during the remainder of the award period because it appears unlikely that DPNR will designate a dedicated manager or staff for STEER.

Issues Hindering Progress

The STEER core team and STEER IS made progress towards implementing steps and actions in the STEER Management Plan. However the lack of a dedicated DPNR manager and staff hinder significant progress. Additionally several key members from the Divisions of Fish and Wildlife and Coastal Zone Management have left DPNR recently , resulting in fewer members of the STEER core team available to implement projects. For STEER to progress to a fully functioning MPA, these management and underlying funding issues must be resolved.