

GREAT SALT POND

On the south shore of St. Croix, Great Salt Pond is an important part of the island's history and future. The pond and surrounding mudflats are dependent on fresh and salt water with a limited connection to the sea. Historically used by Crucians as a place to fish and gather salt, Great Salt Pond is now one of few remaining mangrove habitats in the USVI.



OVER THE LAST HALF CENTURY, THE VEGETATION IN THE POND HAS CHANGED

Beginning in the 1990s, mangroves expanded, adding small islands of trees to what had been an open-water system.

This transition is nothing new! Tidal basins, over decades, often transition to become closed salt ponds. Examples on St. Croix are Mount Fancy Pond and West End Salt Pond.

THE POND IS UNDER STRESS

Many overlapping stressors have degraded the health of the pond.



A MAJOR DIE-OFF OF MANGROVES BEGAN IN 2015, resulting in the grey landscape you see today. Sudden changes in the physical environment (water availability, quality or flow, sediment accumulations, erosion, storms) are the most frequent cause of mass mangrove die-offs. This die-off likely started due to drought.



HURRICANE MARIA DEALT A BLOW to the mangroves which survived the 2015 drought. Mangrove systems are resilient though, and some recruitment of both red and black mangroves is happening.



'FISH KILLS' OCCUR ON THE EDGES OF THE POND when the water dries and individual fish are trapped with no path to open water. In 2020, all the individuals observed in such a kill were non-native tilapia.

THE CHANNEL CONNECTING GREAT POND TO THE SEA HAS NARROWED OVER TIME, and can become blocked by dumped trash, marine debris, *Sargassum*, and sand which impact tidal flow to the pond.

A VALUABLE HABITAT

Many native species depend on the pond as a place to feed, rest, reproduce, or mature.

The physical structure of mangrove areas creates excellent nurseries for reef fish and invertebrates which hide in the roots and shade of the trees.

THE FISH COMMUNITY IN GREAT POND HAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY

Since the 1990s, invasive species like tilapia (*Oreochromis* spp.) have replaced native snappers, jacks, and mojarras inside the Pond. Invertebrates like spiny lobster and blue crabs are greatly reduced.

THE ECOSYSTEM IS IMPORTANT FOR BOTH RESIDENT AND MIGRATORY BIRDS ON ST. CROIX

Great Pond is designated as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International. The impacts of recent changes to the bird life are still being described and understood.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources is looking for opportunities to pursue the restoration of Great Pond. Any actions must be based on scientifically valid conclusions and seek a long-term solution that is sustainable without constant management intervention.



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HOW YOU CAN HELP

1 GET IN TOUCH!
If you are concerned by changes you see, contact the East End Marine Park. Funding agencies need to see demonstrated community concern and interest!

2 RESPECT THE NO-TAKE ZONE!
Except for line fishing from the beach into the sea, there is no fishing allowed in the pond or bay. This provides a safe-haven for fish and invertebrates, allowing them to replenish fished areas.

3 DON'T DRIVE ON THE MUDFLATS OR DUMP YOUR TRASH!
They may not look like much to us, but they are habitat for other creatures and are important overflow areas for fluctuating water levels, including flood water from heavy rain.