

STATEMENT

Tel: (284)468-2730

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Remarks by Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Climate Change Dr. Ronald Smith-Berkeley On the occasion of the the launch of the Virgin Islands National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP)

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in the Ministry of Environment,

Natural Resources and Climate Change

Dr. Ronald Smith-Berkeley

On the occasion of the

the launch of the Virgin Islands

National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP)

Tuesday 11th of February, 2025

Maria's by the Sea, Road Town

Tortola, BVI

It is a privilege to stand before you today as we embark on a journey that is fundamental to the future of our beloved Virgin Islands the development of our first-ever National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

This initiative is not just a government undertaking; it is a collective mission to safeguard the very essence of who we are as a people. Our environment is our identity, our lifeline, our greatest asset, and it is our duty to protect it for generations to come.

The Virgin Islands is blessed with extraordinary natural wealth. Our vibrant coral reefs, mangrove forests, and seagrass beds provide food, shelter, and protection for countless marine species.

Our lush forests and hills support a diversity of wildlife and serve as a shield against the effects of an ever-changing climate. These ecosystems are not just scenic landscapes; they are vital, living systems that sustain our way of life. Our fisheries, agriculture, and tourism industries depend on the health of our environment. Without it, we will not have an economy, we will not have resilience, and we certainly will not have the quality of life we currently cherish.

But we must face a difficult truth, our biodiversity is under threat. Climate change, habitat destruction, pollution, and invasive species are relentlessly chipping away at the very foundation of our environment. We see it happening before our eyes.

We see the impacts of sand mining on Anegada, with sand being irresponsibly extracted just 47 meters from the shoreline. If this practice persists, it will lead to severe environmental, ecological, and socioeconomic consequences.

The island's coastline will erode, critical habitat will be destroyed, and its natural defenses against storms and rising sea levels will be weakened.

Continued sand mining will result in catastrophic coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater supplies, and the loss of essential nesting grounds for endangered species.

Our coral reefs, once teeming with life, are struggling to recover, pushed to the brink by prolonged environmental stressors. Warmer waters, pollution, and destructive practices are killing the very reefs that protect our shores and sustain our fisheries. Our critically endangered Virgin Islands Rock Iguana, one of the rarest lizards in the world, a species found nowhere else on Earth, fighting for survival in the only place it has ever called home. Their numbers are dwindling, their future uncertain.

If we continue on this path, we will lose more than just our natural beauty. We will lose the resources that sustain our people. We will lose the balance that allows us to thrive. We will lose what makes the Virgin Islands special.

We cannot afford to wait. We cannot afford to turn a blind eye. The time to act is now.

This is why we are here today, to develop our National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. This will be our unique blueprint for conservation, a roadmap that will guide us in protecting, managing, and sustainably using our natural resources.

This strategy will ensure that the environment and the biodiversity that resides within it, is not an afterthought but an integral part of national planning and decision making. It will provide a clear framework to enhance ecosystem services, tackle biodiversity loss, and promote sustainable development, ensuring that conservation and economic prosperity go hand in hand.

We are not starting from scratch. For years, the Virgin Islands has taken steps to protect our environment. We have established national parks, marine and fisheries protected areas, restoration efforts and conservation programs to safeguard our most critical ecosystems.

At the international level, the United Kingdom's Biodiversity Strategy has set ambitious conservation goals, many of which align with global commitments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Our work here will not only support these international efforts but will ensure that the unique biodiversity of the Virgin Islands is given the attention and care it

deserves.

None of this would be possible without the unwavering support of our partners.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) orchestrating the commitment for a regional strategy for enhancing environmental sustainability towards the OECS member states.

We thank PC Consultants Ltd. of Guyana for bringing their expertise and dedication to this process. We also thank Dr. Shannon Gore of Coastal Management Systems, whose knowledge of our local environment will ensure that this strategy reflects our needs and priorities. We also acknowledge with appreciation the European Union's BioSPACE Project, whose generous funding has made this work possible.

But beyond policies, strategies, and funding, the most important ingredient for success is **you**. Our communities, our fishermen, our farmers, our students, and every person who calls the Virgin Islands home.

You are the stewards of this land and sea. Conservation is not the responsibility of a single Ministry or a handful of experts. It is a collective effort. It is a call to action for every one of us to protect what we have before it is too late.

Imagine a Virgin Islands where our coral reefs flourish, our mangroves thrive, and our people continue to benefit from a healthy and resilient environment. That future is possible but only if we take responsibility today. Let us come together, engage in this process, and create a legacy of conservation that will stand the test of time.

Thank you.