

Spring 2020



Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) status report for the United States Virgin Islands (USVI). This document is the product of collaboration between the NOAA Coral program and numerous partners, including University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science's Integration and Application Network, USVI Department of Planning and Natural Resources, University of the Virgin Islands, and U.S. National Park Service.

This report is meant to help start a conversation about USVI's coral reefs and represents a snapshot in time from 2014-2017. This report was designed as a communication tool and not as a decision tool for management or restoration efforts. Data used for this product primarily came from NOAA's National Coral Reef Monitoring Program (NCRMP), but were supplemented with data from partner efforts in the USVI that use statistically comparable sampling methods, i.e., USVI territorial coral reef monitoring program (TCRMP) and the Virgin Islands National Park Inventory and Monitoring Program from 1999-2005.

The scores on this product for corals and algae, fish, and climate indicators were derived from comparing data from 2014-2017 to the best available historical data. The human connections indicators were compared to goals set by experts because the goals are subjective to jurisdictional needs and there are no historical data to compare to. It is important to note that for some indicators the best available data were post-1990s, and therefore may already be reflective of declined ecosystem health compared to pre-industrial times. Unfortunately, reliable and verifiable historical reference data are not always readily available. As a result, the scores are likely elevated given they are compared to an already-affected reference point. Additionally, data from the 2019 NCRMP field season were not yet available at the time this report was created. Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease was first identified in St. Thomas in 2019, and has caused significant declines in coral cover and health in St. Thomas and also now in St. John. Readers should be aware coral scores in this report are not inclusive of 2019 disease impacts. Given the challenges with historical references, the working group was as scientifically objective as possible. The overall score is "Fair (72%)", suggesting some indicators meet reference values, and others have declined moderately.

The report suggests resident survey respondents' self-reported engagement in pro-environmental behaviors was critical in USVI. Reef fish sustainability was also critical, suggesting this indicator is severely impacted and/or has declined substantially. However, temperature stress was good in the data used for this report, as was coral mortality, suggesting these indicators have only been slightly impacted or have slightly declined. Again, it is important to note this report is not inclusive of data from 2019, which included a major bleaching event in the fall when this report was undergoing its peer review process. We hope this report will foster continued discussion about USVI's coral reefs, and encourage you to contact the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program if you have any questions about anything in the report.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Koss, Director, Coral Reef Conservation Program  
Erica K. Towle, National Coral Reef Monitoring Program Coordinator