

**Update on the NOAA Grant NA16FZ2959
as of December 31st 2006**

The Ocean Conservancy (TOC) originally identified five primary tasks to complete under Grant NA16FZ2959 and proposed some modifications to these in the 5/1/05 interim progress report. Below in italics is a report on the status of each of the five tasks as of September 25, 2006.

Task #1: To document, evaluate, and publicize the effectiveness of the existing Marine Protected Areas in the U.S. Virgin Islands with an emphasis on the Red Hind MCD.

The largest and most expensive remaining work component under this task is video documentation of the Red Hind MCD and production of a promotional DVD/ documentary on the Red Hind MCD and USVI spawning aggregations more generally. A production company has been identified and hired to complete this work. TOC is poised to finalize an agreement with UVI's CMES and other project partners with respect to the promotional DVD, pending approval of this grant's no-cost extension. TOC believes this work can be completed by 9/1/06.

The DVD "Seas of Change" has been completed as a joint effort between The Ocean Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy and the University of the Virgin Islands. A comprehensive public awareness campaign was planned and executed collaboratively, with public showings of the DVD, followed by discussions on all three islands. A DVD distribution plan has been worked on, and they are being distributed to a wide network of decision makers, resource users, managers and educators. A list of recipients is attached, and a copy of the DVD has been mailed to the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program Office. As was the intention, the DVD has generated considerable discussion within the territory about grouper spawning aggregations and the co-sponsors believe that the level of interest has been high enough to warrant a reproduction of the DVD in Spanish. The Ocean Conservancy is requesting a re-allocation of \$1,000.00 of the remaining project funds to be used as our partnership contribution to the cost of the Spanish Translation and re-production of the DVD.

Distribution of the DVD's has continued, primarily at three main coral reef-focused events:

- **The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meeting, St. Thomas, USVI, Oct 24 - 27 2006.**
- **The Virgin Islands National Park's 50th Anniversary Conference "Science in the Park", St. John, USVI, Nov 1 - 3, 2006.**
- **The Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute (GCFI) meeting, Belize, Nov 6 – 10, 2007.**

A session focusing on spawning aggregations and recruitment was sponsored at the Ho "Science in the Park" conference.

Task #2: To identify and assess inshore areas off the U.S. Virgin Islands with potential for MPA designation and to contribute to an effective MPA network.

The Ocean Conservancy has successfully begun identification of nearshore recruitment areas, preferred juvenile habitat types, and species abundance through the work cited above. Remaining work elements under this task include additional analysis of St. Thomas data previously-collected, expansion of geographic scope, additional ground-truthing, and mapping and sharing of the results with work with appropriate fishery management decision makers. The late spring and summer months are the best time to conduct additional fieldwork. Given prior delays and current status, it is unlikely that we will be able to complete work during this field season. TOC does believe that remaining field work can be completed no later than the summer of 2006, with remaining analyses, mapping, and distribution of results to be completed by September 30th, 2006.

The data collection and analysis intended under this section of the project, have been completed. Both scientific studies, and traditional knowledge of fishermen were used in identifying essential near-shore habitats. The results have produced initial information with regard to several species of grouper, including significant juvenile Nassau Grouper habitats on St. John, and possibly Goliath Grouper habitats on St. Croix. Reports on these findings are attached. The indications from these studies point toward completely new information that will prove to be critical to the Government of the USVI, in terms of its approaches to grouper fishery management, and its future designation of Marine Protected Areas. The data collected however, is only indicative at this stage, and will require additional, more refined studies in order to present clearly compelling management recommendations for the USVI. Additionally, we wish to share these initial findings with our national and regional colleagues at the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute annual meeting in November. We believe that this will serve to encourage other areas to conduct similar studies of near-shore essential nursery habitat for groupers. TOC is requesting the reprogramming of funds remaining under this grant, to be used for supplementary data collection, using for the moment, the same methodologies employed so far, but increasing the geographical coverage of our studies.

Additional areas around St. John, St. Thomas, Water Island and St. Croix were studied to make this initial nearshore study, more comprehensive. The USVI has just undergone gubernatorial and senatorial elections. The new administration took office on January 2nd 2007. The reports from these studies will be presented to the head of the Division of Fish and Wildlife, the senior staff of the Division of Coastal Zone Management, and the commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, once these officials are in place. The data and findings of this additional work are submitted along with this final report.

Task #3: To identify, describe, and conserve the grouper and snapper spawning aggregation sites in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Ocean Conservancy's remaining work elements under this task include facilitating ongoing fisher involvement in surveying, monitoring, and data collection, primarily around St. Croix; the video documentation of spawning aggregations in the USVI, including those at the Red Hind MCD, and production of a high quality promotional DVD/video product (also discussed under Task 1); mapping of relevant spawning aggregation information; and sharing of information products. The most costly and time-consuming element is the promotional DVD/video product, which we believe can be completed by September 30th, 2006. The other components are less expensive and should be completed prior to this date.

Fishermen were involved on St. Croix, in the scientific near-shore assessment of juvenile grouper habitats around the island. In addition, they were engaged to take TOC staff to sites where they knew juvenile were traditionally seen. Maps have been produced showing sites around the three islands where various juvenile grouper species were sighted during the assessments. The maps are currently being prepared and will be submitted as part of the final report on this project.

We continued to use the traditional knowledge of the fishermen previously involved, to scope out other areas known by them to be primary juvenile grouper habitat. Maps showing the results of these studies are also included in this final report.

Task #4: To foster dialogue and collaboration among the various stakeholders, interests, and management entities in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Task # 4 is substantially completed, but we will continue the successful dialogue and collaboration previously initiated as time and resources permit. Any continued activity under this task is not expected to involve major expenses or substantially extend the time frame of the project.

Task #5: To explore similar potential and opportunities for MPA development in the British Virgin Islands (BVI)¹ with local government agencies and NGOs:

Task #5 is substantially completed as well. We do not see additional high priority opportunities to complete under the scope of this grant. We do anticipate additional communication with key individuals and institutions in the BVI and will look for opportunities to share products from work completed under this grant with the British Virgin Islands and other neighbors in effort to promote protection of areas that may prove to be essential points for connectivity. Any continued activity under this task is not expected to involve major expenses or substantially extend the time frame of the project.

¹ The Ocean Conservancy agrees that none of the funds from NOAA will be applied towards work carried out in the British Virgin Islands (BVI). All work undertaken in the BVI will be funded through other, non-federal sources.