

# Protecting Paradise

A decade-long effort fills a giant gap  
in a Caribbean national park.

*By Matt Villano*

SUNSET COMES QUICKLY ON BIG MAHO BEACH, a sandy crescent on the quiet north shore of St. John, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. It begins with pelicans. Dozens of them. They glide in from Cinnamon Bay to the west and hover above the turquoise sea before dive-bombing

for an evening snack of fish. Next come mosquitoes, buzzing around your ears and nibbling at your hairline. In the waning light you can't even see the buggers, but after three or four slaps at the nape of your neck, you know they're there.



Previous page and above: Long held collectively by 11 separate owners, Estate Maho Bay divides two sections of Virgin Island National Park. Below: A brown pelican.



STEVE SIMONSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Finally, between the distant islands of Thatch Cay and St. Thomas, the glistening sun meets the horizon in a kaleidoscope of colors and dips below the waterline in minutes. Wispy clouds turn pink, then mauve, then lavender. Stars emerge by the hundreds.

Elsewhere on St. John, vacation seekers and recent island transplants pay millions for a chance to glimpse these natural theatrics, developing delicate hillsides to build rooms with a view. But here, at the bottom of a hillside on 420-acre Estate Maho Bay, the beach is open to everyone and is expected to stay that way forever.

Surrounded on all sides by Virgin Islands National Park, this land long has been on the wish list of the National Park Service. Now, after what has to be the longest-running conservation drama in Caribbean history, The Trust for Public Land has tracked down the



STEVE SIMONSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Big Maho Beach is one of St. John's most popular beaches. A TPL project will add Estate Maho Bay and much of the beach to the national park.

far-flung heirs of Harvey Monroe Marsh, a St. John native who in the 1960s left the land to his many children and grandchildren—not as individual plots they could sell, but owned together by all in equal shares. TPL's goal was to acquire as many shares as it could, and then get a court to partition it legally so that individual parcels could be added to the park.

The effort to find 11 Marsh heirs spanned the better part of a decade. The search stretched from Florida to a halfway house in San Jose, California, and required the services of a private investigator to track down one missing heir. Subsequent negotiations involved nearly a dozen attorneys, representing seven members of a Marsh family, and an anonymous donor who kicked in \$5 million to sup-

port the project. The result is that a big private tract within Virgin Islands National Park will now belong to the public.

"It's not often you see a situation as complicated as this one, where everybody seems to get what they are looking for," says Rafe Boulon, chief of resource management for the park. "I'm not sure it could have happened anywhere but here."

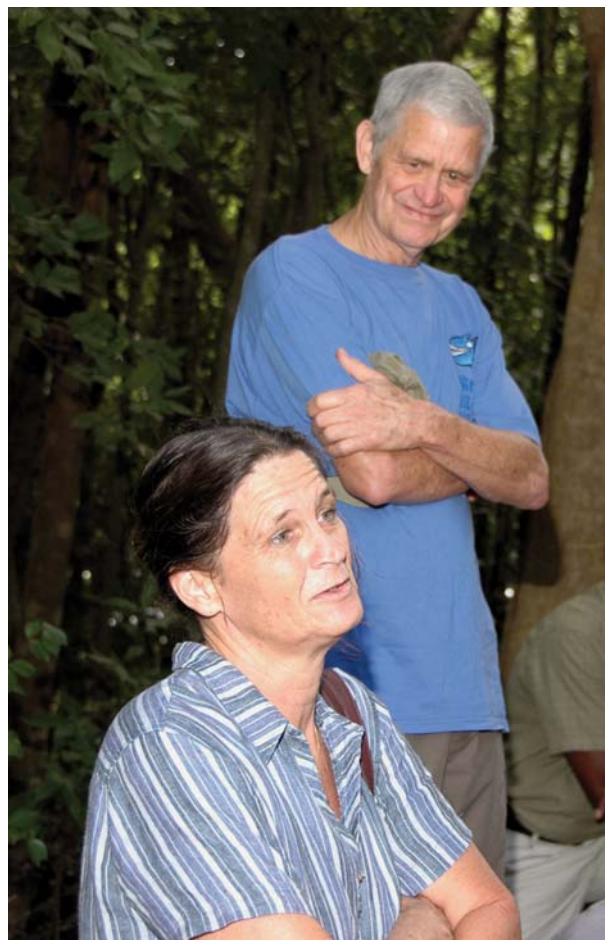
John Garrison, a former St. John resident who now directs TPL's field office for Southwest Florida and who worked on the Estate Maho Bay project, says that the sale ushers in a new era of TPL's work in the Caribbean. "We've spent a while dreaming of working toward open space in this part of the world," Garrison observes. "It's hard to believe we're almost there."

### ONE SPECIAL SPOT

St. John, a Danish colony until the First World War, certainly is a special place. One needs to spend only a few brief hours on the island to understand why venture capitalist and renowned conservationist Laurance Rockefeller (son of philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr.) fell in love with this place more than a half century ago. Its azure waters, lush hills, and vibrant reefs virtually define paradise. Rockefeller didn't even step foot on the island, but from his boat he admired it enough to buy 5,000 acres over a few years.

In 1956, before the ink was fully dry on Rockefeller's title to the land, he decided it to the National Park Service to create the Virgin Islands National Park, a bi-lobed swath that today comprises nearly two-thirds of the island. But the new park also contained many preexisting private inholdings. Estate Maho Bay was one such tract.

Harvey Monroe Marsh bought the land from his older brother, E. W. Marsh, in 1900, when the island still



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BOTTOM TIME PRODUCTIONS, LLC

Above: A bananaquit, the official bird of the Virgin Islands. Below: TPL project manager and former St. John resident John Garrison listens to local conservationist Eleanor Gibney.

belonged to Denmark. Harvey sold off some acres here and there, but for the most part willed the property to his children and grandchildren over time. By the turn of the second millennium, 11 landowners had rightful claims.

It would be easy to confuse Estate Maho Bay with Eden. I spent much of a recent visit exploring the area on foot, marveling at the diversity of life. One morning I spotted a green sea turtle. Another day I saw a male anole lizard doing push-ups in a territorial display. The highlight of my walkabout came in a mangrove swamp, where thousands of dime-sized mangrove crabs dashed into subterranean holes as I clomped by, staring in amazement.

Hundreds of plant species and more than 30 species of birds populate the estate, including egrets, three species of Caribbean hummingbirds, and the tiny bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*), the official bird of the Virgin Islands. The area also is home to large nesting colonies of pelicans and serves a seasonal home for migratory warblers and terns.

"Put simply, the spot is a veritable treasure trove of life," says Eleanor Gibney, a native St. Johnian and self-taught botanist. Gibney was instrumental in the Estate Maho Bay conservation effort and worked with TPL to protect her own small family inholding for addition to the national park as well. "There are some species on that hillside you won't find anywhere else in the Caribbean," Gibney says.

Estate Maho Bay also boasts significant historic and archeological resources, says national park archeologist Ken Wild. These include the largest concentration of

*Since most of Estate Maho Bay has remained undeveloped and public access was unrestricted, many island visitors and natives have believed it was already part of the park.*

historic plantations and ruins from the Danish colonial era (1760–1800) and may include pre-Colombian cultural resources from the island's first inhabitants, the Taino Indians.

Many of the Danish-period ruins—dilapidated buildings of granite and coral—are visible from a park road. To glimpse others I was forced to brave paper wasps known as Jack Spaniards and bushwhack through stretches of a spiky plant that snags hikers and sticks to their unsuspecting flesh, prompting Wild to dub it "Catch-'n-keep." Offsetting these hazards were colorful bromeliads and the curious geckos I encountered every night before I went to sleep.

Since most of Estate Maho Bay has remained undeveloped and public access was unrestricted, many island natives and visitors have believed it was already part of the expansive Virgin Islands National Park. This is especially true of Big Maho Beach, the only beach on the island easily reached by road. The bay's calm waters are warm and tranquil, and the beach is popular with tourists and locals alike, especially the elderly and families with children.

Every morning dozens of locals park their vehicles amid the mangroves and file across North Shore Road with beach chairs and coolers. On chillier days they congregate in groups on the sand, talking about the weather, island politics, and life. When it warms up, they leave their stuff on the beach and bob like buoys in the ocean. That some of this area might be developed and made off limits to the public seemed unthinkable. But unless the Marsh heirs could be found and persuaded to sell the land for protection by the park, this was likely to be the fate of this paradise.

### LOOKING FOR JOEY ADLER

As early as 1972, the Park Service had tracked down three of the eleven Marsh descendents and contracted

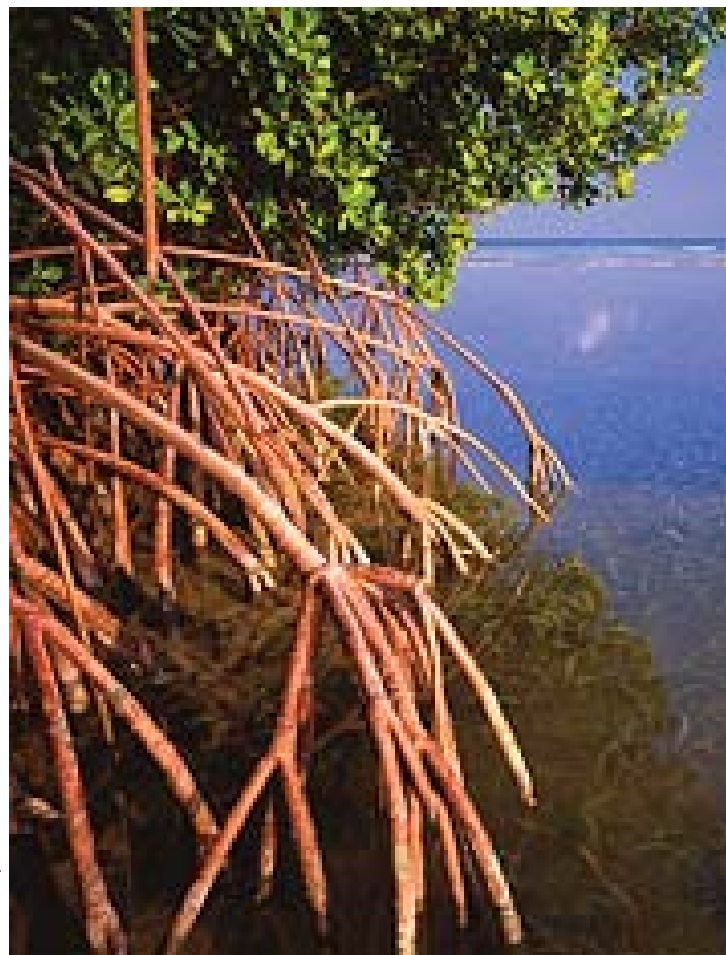


STEVE SIMONSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Maho Bay's calm waters are popular with swimmers and skin divers.

with them to buy their rights to the land. But that left eight heirs whose approval would be needed to craft an eventual conservation solution.

As development pressure on the island increased through the 1990s, the Park Service and local conservationists grew increasingly concerned—especially when rumors began to fly that a large development was planned at Estate Maho Bay. Beginning in 2001, however, an anonymous donor began making significant and regular contributions to TPL—to date totaling



GEORGE H. H. HUEY

In addition to Big Maho Beach, the newly protected Estate Maho Bay includes hillside forests rich in unusual species and mangrove swamps, like the one pictured here. Below: A dwarf gecko, a common lizard on Caribbean Islands.

more than \$5 million—to conserve land around the park. TPL used some of this money to purchase several small properties near Big Maho Beach.

At about the same time, TPL began a serious search for a missing Marsh heir named Joey Adler. None of the family members had heard from Adler in years, and it was assumed he had died. If he was alive, he very likely was unaware that he had inherited an eleventh share of the land's ownership when his mother died in 2000. Acquiring Adler's share of the land would give TPL a foothold in Estate Maho Bay and could advance negotiations with other family members.

To find Adler, TPL hired a private investigator, who finally tracked him to Sunnyvale, California, where he

*“Talk about a ‘Eureka!’ moment. Finding Joey Adler was really what got this whole thing going.”*

—Project Manager John Garrison

lived in a group residence for Vietnam veterans. TPL then hired a lawyer to represent Adler's interests in the negotiations and eventually presented him with a check for approximately \$1 million for his interest in the property.

If this seemed like an unexpected windfall to Joey Adler, it was the best news yet for attempts to protect Estate Maho Bay, says TPL project manager John Garrison. “Talk about a ‘Eureka!’ moment,” recalls Garrison. “Finding Joey Adler was really what got this whole thing going.”

#### CLOSING THE DEAL

Armed with its own share of Estate Maho Bay—and with the continued support of its anonymous donor—TPL accelerated its negotiations with the remaining heirs. In September 2007, TPL acquired six additional interests in the property. Together the National Park Service and TPL now controlled 10 out of 11 interests in the land. (One Marsh heir decided not to sell.)

In another recent and important step, the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands legally subdivided the land. The National Park Service ended up with a key species-

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STEVE SIMONSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

#### IN PUERTO RICO, CONSERVATION GETS PERSONAL



PETE FODOR

Project manager Mildred Majoros and friend.

TPL's conservation efforts in the Caribbean go beyond the U.S. Virgin Islands and Maho Beach. On the nearby island of Puerto Rico, TPL project manager Mildred Majoros has the rare opportunity to help conserve a rich coastal ecosystem that features prominently in her childhood memories.

Majoros, who grew up in the Bronx, New York, recalls summers spent at her grandmother's Puerto Rico home, with its views over lush, forested mountains to the coast. Today she is working with local conservationists and the Puerto Rico government to conserve some of that land by creating the Northeastern Ecological Corridor—3,200 acres of rare tropical habitat on the island's northeast coast. The corridor includes sugar-sand beaches, coral reefs, mangrove wetlands, and forests that were growing when Christopher Columbus explored the island in 1493.

Last fall, TPL helped protect a key property in the corridor to create the San Miguel Natural Reserve. The beach here—more than a mile long—is one of the world's most

important nesting areas for the endangered leatherback sea turtle. A large resort with several golf courses was planned for the area, but, after years of controversy and lawsuits over the proposed development, TPL purchased the property for protection by the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Funding secured for the project includes grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

It was an important victory for sea turtles, the environment, the commonwealth, and Mildred Majoros. “The San Miguel beaches are where my father courted my mother, and where I myself learned to swim,” she says. “Someday, I hope, my own son will dip his feet into these clear blue waters. What an extraordinary opportunity to protect my beautiful homeland.”

For more information on TPL's efforts to create Puerto Rico's Northeastern Ecological Corridor and protect land throughout the Caribbean, go to [www.tpl.org/caribbean](http://www.tpl.org/caribbean).

# Islands Gallery



## Orcas Island, Washington

The largest of Washington State's San Juan Islands, Orcas is a popular vacation destination and the year-round home for an eclectic collection of artists, musicians, retirees, and cottage industries. Turtleback Mountain, one of the island's best-known landmarks, rises more than 1,500 feet above Puget Sound and has long been identified as the most important conservation target in the San Juans. In 2006, when the mountain's owner needed to sell, TPL joined with the local community, the San Juan Preservation Trust, and the San Juan County Land Bank to raise the \$18.5 million needed to protect it. Following up on this project, TPL is now working with the county land bank to protect Judd Cove, a former log-shipping area within sight of Turtleback Mountain. With the log dock and pilings removed, the cove will be restored to its natural state and become a public beach. One day, trails may extend from the cove all the way to the summit of Turtleback Mountain.



KURT THORSON, SAN JUAN PRESERVATION TRUST

## Lemon Island, South Carolina

Islands are not exactly in short supply in Beaufort County, South Carolina, north of Savannah. The county is a maze of low-lying islands, marshes, forests, and coastal farmland. But it is also the fastest-growing county in the state, and residents and governments have been working for years to preserve open space. Widgeon Point, at the south end of Lemon Island, is one of 37 sites conserved since 2003, when TPL contracted with the county's Rural and Critical Lands Preservation Program to buy land and easements for conservation. Twice in the last decade, county residents have overwhelmingly passed conservation bond measures—\$40 million in 2000 and \$50 million in 2006—to fund the program. The 162-acre Widgeon Point property includes more than 50 acres of upland forest, a pond, and a saltwater marsh. Up to 130 houses could have been built on the land, which instead will become a destination for kayakers and may be used to house a county environmental education facility. In total, TPL has helped Beaufort County conserve more than 7,700 acres.



ED FUNK

## Pūpūkea-Paumalū

The North Shore of O'ahu, Hawai'i, is justly famed for its natural beauty, quaint communities, and, perhaps above all, the monster waves that pound its beaches, attracting surfers from around the world. Overlooking the world-class surf breaks at the Pipeline ('Ehukai) and Sunset Beach rises a 1,129-acre coastal bluff known as Pūpūkea-Paumalū. In the 1990s, a community of more than 350 homes was approved for the bluff, but was put on hold after community members objected that development would mar the breathtakingly wild landscape, destroy Hawaiian archeological resources, and pollute the water off the island's treasured beaches. TPL, working with the North Shore Community Land Trust, began negotiations with the owner in 2003, and last August completed protection of the land, which will be owned in separate parcels by the City and County of Honolulu (25 acres) and the State of Hawai'i (1,104 acres). Funding for the \$8 million project came from federal, state, and local public sources and private donations.



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SEAN DAVEY

## Wolf Island, Minnesota

Lake Vermillion, Minnesota's fifth largest lake, was once named one of America's ten most scenic lakes by National Geographic magazine. Located in the northern reaches of the lake, 60-acre Wolf Island is both historic and lovely. Homesteader John Jaeger, who first visited the island in 1906, described various Native American sites there, including burial mounds and the remains of a birchbark canoe workshop. Today the island's rolling landscape is densely timbered with mature aspen, pine, maple, and birch. Although surrounded by Superior National Forest and near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Wolf Island has for some time been in danger of development. Thanks to donations to TPL's Northwoods Protection Fund, TPL was able to acquire the island in March 2007, and will hold it until federal funds are available for its permanent protection and inclusion in Superior National Forest.



DARCY KIEFFEL

## South Brother Island, New York

Lying in the East River off the South Bronx, South Brother Island is one of the last wild places in New York City. The seven-acre island has been private hands since Colonial times. It was once owned by Colonel Jacob Ruppert, a beer baron and former president of the New York Yankees, and legend has it that Yankee star Babe Ruth used to spend days off there, swatting balls into the river. Composed of forest, scrub lands, beach, and rocky shoreline, the island now hosts the third largest waterbird nesting colony in the city and is home to egrets, cormorants, and herons. Working with U.S. Congressman José E. Serrano, The Point (a community development corporation), and the Wildlife Conservation Society, TPL recently acquired South Brother Island for protection as a wildlife refuge by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.



ALAN CHIN

*“That people can continue to enjoy Big Maho Beach is cause for celebration.”*

—Joe Kessler  
Friends of Virgin Islands National Park.

rich parcel abutting its existing lands, with the expectation that TPL will be able to convey two additional parcels totaling 206 acres and including a 1,000-foot expanse of Maho Bay Beach, as federal funds become available over the next few years.

Most people on St. John are enthusiastic about the conservation effort. The local *Virgin Islands Daily News* regularly runs editorials supporting the projects, and the federal delegate from the Virgin Islands, Donna M. Christensen, has proposed National Park Service funding for the acquisitions.

Among the most outspoken project supporters is Joe Kessler, president of Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park. At his office atop Mongoose Junction, an upscale shopping mall outside the bustling town of Cruz Bay, Kessler told me that on an island as small as St. John, any victory for open space is a big one. “In a place like this, everyone is impacted by everything,” he said. “Many people consider Big Maho the best beach in the entire Caribbean. The fact that people can continue to enjoy it is cause for celebration.”



TROY FARMER

Maho Bay Camps is a popular ecotourist resort just north of Maho Bay. Its vice president, Maggie Day, went further, describing an undeveloped Estate Maho Bay as a “critical counterbalance” to thoughtless development elsewhere on the island. “For every new construction project, there should be more open space,” she says. “When you’re talking about a place with a finite amount of space that’s disappearing rapidly, it’s the only way to go.”

Federal funds will by no means cover the entire cost of the Estate Maho Bay transaction, and TPL continues to raise private donations for its work there. “The discounted land deal is a great deal for taxpayers and

#### *About TPL’s Natural Lands Initiative*

The American conservation movement was born of the impulse to preserve natural lands. Early park visionaries believed that land should be set aside to protect wildlife and to conserve forests and other natural resources. They also understood that, as population and cities grew, people needed places to make contact with nature—and that providing such places as parks or public forests was one measure of a great nation. Americans continue to seek recreation and renewal in large expanses of natural land.

But as our population continues to expand, and more land gets developed, natural lands within easy

reach of cities and suburbs are increasingly hard to find and important to protect. The Trust for Public Land’s Natural Lands initiative works with agencies and communities to conserve these lands for all Americans to enjoy. Some of the many natural places TPL has helped protect include the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area in Oregon; Ohio’s Cuyahoga River National Recreation Area; the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida; and numerous lands in the Sierra Nevada of California. For more information, go to [tpl.org/naturallands](http://tpl.org/naturallands).



Maho Bay camps, a popular ecotourism resort.

STEVE SIMONSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

demonstrates TPL’s commitment to conservation,” says Mark Hardgrove, superintendent of Virgin Islands National Park. “I bet Rockefeller would be proud.”

TPL’s work on St. John and elsewhere in the Caribbean is far from complete, says Greg Chellius, director of TPL’s Florida and Caribbean office. TPL has launched a series of projects to protect land in the U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (see sidebar, page XX.) “Development pressure on these islands makes it imperative to move as quickly as we can to protect their unique ecological, historic, cultural, and recreational resources,” Chellius says. “If we don’t conserve these lands in the next few years, it will be too late.”

No matter what lies ahead for Chellius, Garrison, and the TPL team, it’s a good bet that the projects ahead cannot be more complicated than the conservation of Estate Maho Bay. “It’s been a long, long haul,” says John Garrison. “The good news is that, no matter what happens, a vast majority of the estate will remain untouched for generations to come.”

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*Matt Villano is a writer and editor based in Healdsburg, California. He has written previously for The New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, and Sunset magazine.*