

Statement of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett (VI)

House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Hearing: “Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1154, H.R. 1286, H.R. 1316, H.R. 1424, H.R. 1908, H.R. 1925, H.R. 2024, H.R. 2107, H.R. 2359, H.R. 2899, H.R. 3222, and H.R. 3616”

June 15, 2021, 1:00PM, via Cisco WebEx

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, thank you for the opportunity to present my views on H.R. 1424, the Saint Croix National Heritage Area Act.

This bill would designate the island of St. Croix, located in the U.S. Virgin Islands, as a National Heritage Area site. My efforts for this designation are preceded by nearly 20 years of tireless work on the part of many individuals, community groups, and local stakeholders in my district. This National Heritage Area designation is being proposed pursuant to a congressionally directed feasibility study that was completed by the National Park Service more than 10 years ago, in September of 2010. This study was initiated by the National Park Service after it was included in the National Heritage Areas Act of 2006 by my predecessor, Dr. Donna Christian-Christensen.

According to the National Park Service, National Heritage Areas are designated “as places where natural, cultural, and historic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape...[and] tell nationally important stories that celebrate our nation's diverse heritage.”¹ The movements for these designations are typically community-driven and seek to honor and share heritage while creating a sustainable future. National Heritage Areas are not living theme parks seeking to freeze places

in time, but rather seek to conserve their special natural spaces and historic places as part of their communities' social and economic future. The successful melding of past and future is the National Heritage Area challenge.

The unique natural, historic and cultural resources of St. Croix represent distinctive aspects of the heritage of America that have been determined by the National Park Service to be worthy of recognition and provide outstanding recreational and educational opportunities. After nearly four years of community engagement and examination of the merits of a National Heritage Area designation by the National Park Service, the NPS feasibility study team concluded that the island of St. Croix meets the evaluation criteria for designation as a National Heritage Area, based on the applicable National Heritage Area Feasibility Study Guidelines.

As described throughout the study, St. Croix has contributed in substantial ways to our American national heritage. St. Croix has nearly fifty listings on the National Register of Historic Places, with many more sites with potential. It also contains an assemblage of natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources that make up a nationally distinctive landscape. The rich and varied stories about St. Croix lend themselves to an intriguing set of themes that connect people to the various heritage resources of the island. Five themes were developed with the input of the community and analysis by the study group. These themes create “building blocks” which illustrate the ways in which the individual resources of St. Croix connect and contribute to the overall heritage of our nation.

One: Early Cultures

St. Croix contains archaeological evidence of extensive prehistoric occupation, possibly dating back as far as 4,000 years ago, which tells the story of trade,

migration, settlement and contact between different cultures. The first recorded conflict between Amerindians and Europeans occurred with Columbus' arrival in 1493 during his second voyage.

Two: Slavery and Emancipation

Africans that were brought to St. Croix to provide slave labor were incredibly resilient and their cultural contributions are found in the essence of Crucian heritage today. St. Croix has a history of strong vanguards. In 1848, a series of revolts on St. Croix led to the abolition of slavery in the Danish Colonies. In 1878, the Three Queens led a rebellion in protest of the demoralizing conditions in St. Croix despite the abolition of slavery 30 years prior. D. Hamilton Jackson traveled to Denmark and successfully petitioned King Christian X to abolish strict government control and press censorship, and thereafter founded *The Herald*, a free newspaper. On the national stage, many individuals from St. Croix have gone on to impact the United States as a whole. Notably, St. Croix was the home of the first Secretary of the Treasury and one of the leaders of the American Revolution, Alexander Hamilton.

Three: the Seven Flags of St. Croix

Seven different flags have flown over St. Croix: Spain, Holland, England, France, Malta, Denmark and the United States. Each of these colonial rule changes created and transformed the economic, social and cultural traditions and overall development of the island.

Four: Geography and the Natural Environment

St. Croix is a crossroad - geographically, environmentally and culturally. St. Croix is poised between the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean and receives both the westerlies and prevailing easterly winds. This creates an extremely rich terrestrial

and marine environment that offers plentiful resources which have been attracting people for thousands of years. The numerous coral reefs and fisheries surrounding the island help sustain the St. Croix economy and are also a natural beauty to locals and visitors alike. This area includes Buck Island, the only U.S. underwater National Monument. Additionally, St. Croix’s eastern tip, Point Udall, is also the easternmost point of the United States. This combination of natural resources and the rich heritage of St. Croix make it a perfect venue for a National Heritage Area.

Five: Modern Day St. Croix

The fifth and final theme focuses on Modern Day St. Croix as a multicultural society with influences tracing to West Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, South America and the United States. Today, the island has two distinct towns—Christiansted, built in 1734; and Frederiksted, built in 1752. Christiansted is the one-time Danish West Indies capital and now a National Historic Site. Christiansted reflects the 18th century urban planning and architecture that emerged from the Italian Renaissance and Baroque traditions. Frederiksted, known for its shoreline, deep port, and famous palm trees, showcases unique, locally constructed gingerbread-style houses typical of the Victorian Era. As the vision statement developed by the St. Croix community states, “St. Croix’s authentic natural, cultural, historic, and scenic features are a celebration of our people, young and old alike, and a testament of our splendor. This is our shared heritage where Crucians — past, present, and future — represent a colorful kallaloo of our nation, the Caribbean, and the world.”ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, the designation of St. Croix as a National Heritage Area has strong support from the public and from community stakeholders, and there is local capacity and commitment to undertake the responsibilities of managing a National Heritage Area. Therefore, this bill would complete the work that has been done for

this National Heritage Area designation in a way that is consistent with the procedures traditionally set forth for such site designations, as last enacted in the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act of 2019.

Under the bill, a local nonprofit organization – the Virgin Islands State Historic Preservation Office – would be designated as the local coordinating entity and charged with developing a management plan for the Heritage Area, in consultation with other local organizations that were involved in the planning and development of the Heritage Area. The management plan would have to include strategies for using the area's natural, scenic, historical, and cultural resources for scientific and recreational purposes. It would also have to include a business plan for financing appropriate activities in the area. The bill would require the coordinating entity to prepare a management plan for the Heritage Area for the protection, enhancement, and interpretation of its resources, and submit the plan to the Department of the Interior for approval within three years of enactment.

As concluded by the National Park Service study on St. Croix, “...there is not one single thing that sets St. Croix apart, but rather an assemblage of authentic natural, cultural, historic, and scenic features that celebrate the heritage of the Crucian people. This heritage is not only a testament to the vitality and uniqueness of St. Croix, but to our nation’s rich and varied heritage overall.”ⁱⁱⁱ Through this legislation, I seek to finish the long-standing work of my home island to utilize our spectacular natural and historic resources to spur economic development that is much needed.

ⁱ *What is a National Heritage Area?*; National Park Service; available at: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/what-is-a-national-heritage-area.htm> (last visited: June 11, 2021)

ⁱⁱ *St. Croix National Heritage Area Feasibility Study*; National Park Service; p. vii; available at: <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo14518/St-Croix-FINAL-FS-SEPT-10-PEPC%5b2%5d.pdf> (last visited: June 11, 2021)

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Croix National Heritage Area Feasibility Study*; National Park Service; p. v; available at: <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo14518/St-Croix-FINAL-FS-SEPT-10-PEPC%5b2%5d.pdf> (last visited: June 11, 2021)