

>> Good day.

You are listening to "Ability Radio."

I am one of your hosts, Amelia Headley LaMont, Executive Director of the Disability Rights Center of the Virgin Islands, and today we are going to look at the whole topic of our environment.

There's been a lot of talk about global warming and human habitat and possible scarcity of resources, and I thought what better person to talk to today than the Acting Executive Director of the St. Croix Environmental Association, Jen Valiulis.

Hi. How are you? Good morning.

>> Hi. Good morning.

>> Welcome, and I really appreciate you being willing to share your time and your expertise in this important matter.

>> My pleasure.

>> Tell us about your work in the St. Croix Environmental Association, for those of us who have heard of you...

>> [ Laughs ]

>> ...but don't really have a handle on what you do.

>> Of course.

>> Well, so we are the St. Croix Environmental Association, and we've been around for over 30 years, and so what we've done is kind of evolved based on the needs of the Island throughout these 30-plus years.

Currently we do a lot of work with environment education, getting everybody of all ages either out there, outside, seeing what the environment is about, seeing the wonderful environment that we are fortunate to have in St. Croix, and also, you know, teaching them ways -- teaching people ways that they can care for the environment, from small things

like recycling or reducing your trash to larger things like planting trees and adjusting some of their -- you know, the way you live your life to be more eco-friendly.

So in addition to education, we also do a lot of on-the-ground conservation.

There are places on St. Croix with a lot of potential to be a little more natural, and, you know, they've been really disturbed by years of misuse and mistreatment, and --

>> Yeah, give me some examples of that.

>> Well, so one of the places that we've done a lot of work with and we actually own and manage now is the Southgate Coastal Reserve, which is 100 acres near -- It's between Cheeseburgers and Chenay Bay.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> It has a wonderful sea turtle nesting beach, and we monitor the turtles that are there, and it's also got a large salt pond, which is a great habitat for bird diversity.

But in the upland area in between that, it's all just invasive grasses and tan tan. and, you know, things that aren't really native to the island and don't provide great habitat, don't do the things that a forest would do, which is what should be there.

It's a dry forest.

And this is from years of fires and, you know, bag agriculture practices.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And so what we've been doing is planting a lot a trees.

That's really the simplest, most rewarding, easiest way to restore the habitat.

>> What kind of trees do you plant?

>> Yeah.

[ Both laughs ]

You know, it's a harder question than you would think it would be because there's sort of the ideal trees that we want in there, which are native, long-lasting, big shade trees. But because it's been disturbed so long, some of the soil -- We have to work on the soil a little bit first, and it's also really hot there, and also there's only certain trees available on the island.

You know, there's, fortunately, a lot of people planting trees now, and so there's high demand for trees.

So that said, we've been planting *lignum vitae*.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> We've been planting a tree called an orange manjack, which has these beautiful, beautiful bright-orange flowers that hummingbirds love -- and people love, too.

[ Laughs ]

>> Sure, they're beautiful.

>> Pink Cedar -- We've been planting a lot of calabash trees as well, and those are kind of neat because they have a lot of cultural history in that they're -- you know, the gourds are used for all kinds of things -- bowls, art, earrings -- and so we, as part of our -- not just conservation but education, we can bring students out there and learn about the calabash and also do some activities with them.

>> Let me play devil's advocate.

Why should we care about the environment?

I mean, how does that -- What does that have to do with my own, you know, selfish needs as an individual?

Why should we even look at the environment?

>> Yeah.

Well, I'm gonna give you my personal answer, and then I'll

give you -- 'cause I know not everyone feels the same way I do.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> For me, being out in nature is the best thing I can do for my stress relief, for my mental health, for just kind of dealing with stress and breathing fresh air.

And I think that, probably, people underestimate that because they don't have the opportunity to do that very often.

And it doesn't have to be just, you know, hiking a trail and exercising.

It can be sitting on a bench.

>> Just go outside.

>> Exactly.

And it's a great way to connect to where you are to St. Croix.

So there's that, but, again, I understand that not everybody wants to go outside.

So there's some very practical reasons for protecting the environment.

The big one that everyone's heard about is climate change, which will affect -- It's already affecting us with changes in weather, changes in rainfall. So, we've seen droughts, we've seen different temperatures

They're becoming unpredictable. One of the things that's going to affect St. Croix -- Well, everyone, but St. Croix disproportionately -- is sea level rise.

Our island's gonna get smaller, and it's going to affect anything along the shoreline, so any infrastructure, any buildings, any roads that are near the shoreline are gonna be compromised.

And so where that goes back to protecting the environment is there are things that we can do to affect -- to prepare for

that and also to affect the severity of that.

Like I said, it's already happening, but, going back to my favorite thing, planting trees -- trees trap carbon, carbon causes climate change, and so the more trees we plant, the more we can really control the effects of climate change.

>> I think I recall vaguely hearing about some study where the projection was if we plant -- a trillion trees? I don't recall what the exact number was.

It was a map that identified areas around the world where these trees should be placed that, as you indicated, that has a strong ability to impact or reverse the trend that we find ourselves in now with regard to, you know, drought, heat, melted ice, that type of thing.

>> Exactly. Yeah.

I think -- And it's --

I was so glad to see that study come out, because it feels helpless sometimes.

You hear these big things about climate change, and, you know, it's hard to do -- And actually, we on St. Croix -- There's these things online that you can do that test your carbon output.

How are you personally affecting carbon?

Your footprint is what they call it.

And we do pretty well here, because we don't have central heating, which is a big way to contribute carbon.

We don't drive two hours each way for commute.

We have pretty, you know, small distances that we drive.

>> Right.

>> So those things in of them self make it such that we do a good job, but it's still gonna affect us so we still need to do what we can.

>> Certainly by hurricanes, I would think, right?

>> Oh, yes.

Yes -- which I think is still very fresh in everybody's minds.

>> Right.

>> You know, the predictions are for more severe hurricanes, and also other things like, you know, the coral.

We like to eat a lot of fish.

I love fish, you know?

>> Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

>> Coral is really important for healthy fish stock, and if our corals continue to die at the rate they are, we're not gonna have fish to eat.

>> How does coral affect fish?

In what way is it --

>> Ah, yeah.

>> Do they hide, or -- I mean, what does coral do?

>> Yeah, it's a habitat for them, so it kind of creates this food chain.

So if you think of the concept of, you know, little stuff gets eaten by bigger stuff gets eaten by bigger stuff, the coral -- coral is actually not just a rock.

A lot of people think it's just a rock, but it's actually kind of a skeleton structure formed by these teeny-tiny organisms, little critters that look kind of like jellyfish.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> But it takes them a long time to create this coral, and there are things -- like, algae will be on the coral, and so you have algae eaters, and then you have fish that eat the algae eaters, and then you have the bigger fish that come along.

But it also provides shelter for small fish, so, you know, fish that might become bigger.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> It gives them a little place to hide from some of the bigger fish.

So those are kind of basic things.

And actually, coral serves a similar purpose as trees do in that they trap carbon as well. So they have that direct effect on climate change.

>> Oh, my goodness.

Well, we're going to -- We're learning a lot this morning, and I hope that our listening audience is as well.

You're listening to "Ability Radio."

We're gonna take a brief break. We'll be right back.

>> We're back.

You're listening to "Ability Radio."

I'm one of your hosts, Amelia Headley LaMont, Director of the Disability Rights Center of the Virgin Islands.

Our guest today is Jen Valiulis, who's the Acting Executive Director of the St. Croix Environmental Association.

Let me let our audience know that if you miss any portion of this show, this broadcast is recorded.

It will be posted on our website, which is located at [drcvi.org](http://drcvi.org).

Not only will there be an audio file of this broadcast, but it will also be transcribed for your reading pleasure.

So, let's go back to global warming and coral and trees.

You've mentioned that -- And I want to be sure that what we're talking about not only affects St. Croix but also extends to our sister islands in St. Thomas and St. John and Water Island.

You know, we're all impacted by this.

>> Absolutely.

>> Tell us a little bit more about your education outreach. I mean, obviously this is one of them.

>> Right.

>> But where do you typically, you know, present?

>> Okay.

Well, we have kind of a diverse way of -- We try to reach people in any way we can.

So we're just finishing up our summer programs right now.

We have Coral Conservation Corps, which is a summer camp for early teens where they learn about marine science.

They learn -- Well, they learn about marine science, but they also learn how to advocate for, you know, for the marine environment, so they learn some of the things I've been telling you, how does coral affect, why is it important, and how is it affected by the things that we do?

But then they do things like write letters, learn to write letters either to editors or to senators.

They do art projects that involve outreach.

In fact we just today put in at the library in Christiansted some of their artwork that they did with different critters, and then they wrote up a little paragraph about the animals that they made art of.

>> Well, advocacy is near and dear to our hearts.

[ Laughs ]

>> Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

I mean, and that often is a part that's missing from the outreach is -- you know, we can say all these things, "This is happening," "This is a threat," but if you don't say what you can do about it...

>> Right.

>> ...then, you know --

Yeah, it's not making much of a difference.

>> Okay, so we have -- Certainly young people are a wonderful audience with which to try and, you know, educate.

How have you been making -- Have you had any traction with adults?

[ Laughs ]

>> We have.

>> With some of us who are set in our ways.

>> Right.

[ Both laugh ]

Right. Yeah.

And our focus really has been kids, and so I've been trying to expand that some.

We do have regular activities of various sorts -- hikes, kayak trips, lectures -- that involve getting people outdoors and kind of seeing what we're talking about and, you know, making it real to them.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> One of my favorite programs is an all-ages program, and it's snorkel clinics.

So they're free

learn-to-snorkel, beginner clinics that we do at different beaches throughout the island from April to October, and we provide the gear, we provide guides and lifeguards, and anyone who wants to come can just show up, and we'll teach them to be comfortable opening their eyes underwater and breathing underwater.

And that's -- It's one of my favorite programs because it's been so rewarding to see people of all ages open their eyes underwater for the first time and see fish and, you know, all the cool stuff that's underwater.

>> That's great.

Have you done any outreach with, say, faith-based organizations?

>> You know, not specifically, and there are definitely more organizations that we can reach out to, and I think that's something we're looking at, looking at faith-based organizations, organizations

that work with people with disabilities, so it's not just the same people who keep coming to this, it's everybody.

>> Right, right, right.

Tell us about...

You said something about conservation that your organization does.

What does that involve?

>> Yeah.

Conservation is a little more the active, on the ground, improving habitat or improving the environment.

I've mentioned planting trees, and that's one of the things that we've done a lot of, particularly post-hurricane, 'cause there's been a real need for that.

So we've been planting and we've also been giving away trees to whoever wants one, really, until we run out.

We're also working to kind of bring back some endangered species to St. Croix, specifically we're working on two plants that are listed as federally endangered.

One is called the Egger's Agave or the St. Croix Agave.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> It's unique to St. Croix, not found anywhere else in the world.

It's all St. Croix.

And it's pretty rare in the wild.

And so what we're doing is we're working with landowners who have some land that they might be able to set aside for this plant and plant a bunch of them on their property.

>> Is that a shout-out to folks who might be interested?

>> Well, we're almost -- We've got our group for this first round.

>> Okay.

>> This is a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But the hope is that once we get this first round done and we kind of make the mistakes that happen...

>> Sure.

>> ...and really understand how this plant works and how best to were to plant them on peoples' properties and what they need to do to care for it, that then we can do this a little more wide-ranging.

>> Okay.

>> Yeah.

>> So this is phase one, so to speak.

>> Right, right.

>> Okay.

>> And there will be some education involved in that as well.

We have planned -- I know it seems very far away, but it'll come quickly.

[ Both laugh ]

For the Ag Fair, we'll have a booth and we'll have lots of information about this particular species, and, you know, how people, if they're interested in having one and growing 1 or 2 or 3 or 100...

>> Mm-hmm. Okay.

>> ...what can be done.

>> And you mentioned endangered species, okay, and the Agave being one.

Was there another...?

Is it a plant or an animal?

[ Laughs ]

>> Yeah, well [laughs], endangered species are -- It's kind of a designation or category that's given to plants or animals that are much rarer than they should be and that are in danger of becoming extinct. And so there's the one I talked about.

There's another one called the tropical lily thorn, and it's really -- It's one of those plants.

It's spiny, it's small, you

probably wouldn't notice it if you didn't see it, but it's very rare.

There's about 500 of them on St. Croix and 12 in Puerto Rico and that's it for the entire world.

So we're a little earlier on in that project, but we're going to look to do some of the same things where we're going to grow some and then plant them in protected areas and work with landowners to put more out there.

>> Well, again, I mean, for a layperson...

>> Uh-huh.

>> ...why should they care about an endangered plant?

>> Right.

>> What benefit is derived from protecting the Agave or the lily plant that you just talked about?

>> [ Laughs ] Yeah.

I mean, that is a really great question, and there's a couple of answers to that.

One involves protecting the diversity, particularly the unique diversity that makes a place a place, and so kind of the pure enjoyment of that.

Again, I know that's not everybody's --

>> Right.

>> It's not gonna convince everyone.

But to have a healthy environment, to have a healthy habitat, we need to have kind of the diversity of plants and animals that are here.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And some of those plants and animals are very important, directly affect our livelihood.

So let's take the Agave, for example.

There are some pollinators that love the flowers, including hummingbirds, bananaquits, and bats.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And all of those are key pollinators for our fruit trees, for our farms, also bats eat tons and tons of insects, so one small --

>> Like mosquitos?

>> Like mosquitos, yeah.

One small bat can eat, you know, upwards of 2,000 mosquitoes a night.

So, you know, we want to make sure that those guys are here and stay here.

So it's kind of the interconnectedness of, you know, even if this plant doesn't directly affect you...

>> Mm-hmm.

>> ...it's part of the system that does and that, you know, provides a healthy environment.

>> Makes sense -- makes a whole lot of sense.

We talked during the break that you also had some particular interest and recent training on bird diversity here in St.

Croix.

Tell us a little bit about that.

>> Yeah, well, my background is actually as a wildlife biologist.

That's what I have a graduate degree in, and I used to actually work for the local government as a wildlife biologist, and so that's kind of where my, you know, biggest love is.

But I was recently fortunate enough to go to a conference of Caribbean-wide biologists and educators in Guadeloupe with a group called BirdsCaribbean, and they're probably the strongest conservation organization throughout the Caribbean in that they've been around for, let's see, since about 1988, and, in fact, their very first meeting was in St. Croix...

>> Goodness. Wonderful.

>> ...so we've got a nice connection to them.

But it was a meeting of people from 34 different countries around the Caribbean and even from farther afield, people that have an interest in Caribbean biology and birds, and it was very inspiring, 'cause you get to see what everyone else is doing, and it kind of makes you think, "Okay, I can do this, too," you know?

[ Both laugh ]

Because when you're sitting in your office and you're writhing another report or another grant application, it seems like some of these things are insurmountable.

But, for example, I saw a great talk from the Grenadines of this lagoon that had been heavily impacted by a resort or something like that that started to build and then they pulled out because of money.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> But they left --

>> Everything.

>> Everything. And so --

>> Left their junk.

>> They left their junk, right.

And it completely changed the way the lagoon looked, it changed their fisheries because it was no longer flowing water through there.

And this group, Sustainable Grenadines, got money together, they got a plan, they did all the background research and basically restored the lagoon, and not only restored it, but made it into a destination that locals and tourists love to go to because there's lots of birds and fish, and they had, you know, education, and they had this fun bridge that people could walk across.

And so seeing people accomplish those things means that we can do it, too.

>> Absolutely.

Any idea, roughly, how long it

took for them to kind of turn that environment around? It sounds like it would take a while.

[ Laughs ]

>> The longest part was really getting the political will behind them.

It was kind of -- And I remember the presenter said something very specific about it had to be the right time.

>> Yeah.

>> So they tried and tried, and then -- and it wasn't, and then it suddenly was, and they had all kinds of obstacles of, you know, the money was there, and then it wasn't.

>> Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

>> [ Laughs ]

And then they had to do it in a very short amount of time.

I think they had a year, maybe two years, to do the whole thing.

But they did it.

>> Persistent advocacy -- That's what it took.

>> Yeah, exactly --

>> Yeah.

>> Convincing the right people.

>> Yeah.

No, that's a great example, and it's an inspiring example.

>> Yeah.

>> And there are a number of locations where I could just envision that happening, you know, here in the Virgin Islands as well.

>> Yeah.

>> Okay, we're gonna take another break.

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Our special guest today is Jen Valiulis, Acting Executive Director of the St. Croix Environmental Association.

We'll be right back.

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I'm one of your hosts, Amelia Headley LaMont, Executive Director of the Disability Rights Center, and our special guest today is Jen Valiulis, the Acting Executive Director of the St. Croix Environmental Association.

I paused, and I know we talked about this a little bit earlier. You're an Acting Executive Director.

[ Both laugh ]

What is an Acting Executive Director?

>> Oh, it means that I'm the Director temporarily, and, you know, my love and the things that I really like to do are the programs that I've been talking to you about.

And that's where my background is, so --

But, you know, post hurricanes, we had to shrink our staff significantly, so I'm the Acting Executive Director and the Education Coordinator and the conservation [laughs], you know, programs person, and just about everything else.

>> Yeah.

>> But it looks like we're moving towards being able to hire extra staff in the near future.

>> Good.

Tell us a little bit about your structure, about the Environmental Association.

I don't know -- Is it a membership organization?

>> Oh, yeah.

>> Do you have a board of directors?

How is it structured?

>> Okay.

Yes, we have a board of directors, and we have -- Our board of directors is a young board of directors, which has been really exciting because they've got lots of great ideas and they -- most of them are

younger than me, and they know about technology that I don't know, you know, and are involved, and so that's been really nice to work with.

We are a membership organization.

We've got about 230 members, and our members, you know, they pay an annual fee and because of that they can come to some of our education activities for free.

Some of them we charge a little bit of money for.

They have the ability to go on a turtle watch activity that we do at Sandy Point.

And we, you know, rely on our members to kind of help us out, volunteer, and appreciate the support that they give us.

And then we also have another --

So, it's myself and then kind of a program assistant who, just like me, does a little bit of everything...

>> [ Chuckles ]

>> ...and then, of course, volunteers.

>> You mentioned the turtle watch, and I notice fairly recently, or maybe in your mind it might not be so recent, but there are red lights positioned around the island.

What is the point of that?

>> Well, so turtles nest at night, so they come up on the beach and they dig their nests and then they go back to the water.

And the way they find the water is they kind of orient to the moonlight that's, you know, shining off of -- or reflected off of the water.

But when -- They're really orienting to the brightest light, and when in natural conditions, perfectly natural conditions, that moonlight is the brightest light.

When there's a lot of lights

along the beach, they obviously become confused, and they'll go in the wrong direction.

And so on roads that are particularly close to the ocean where we know that there are turtles nesting, we've had a lot of problems with turtles getting on to the roads, getting hit by cars, getting stuck in, you know, wherever walking the road.

>> Yeah.

>> And so the red lights are a part of the spectrum that the turtles can't see, so it's not causing them to go in the opposite direction.

And this is actually true of hatchling turtles, when the little turtles come up, and, you know, they come up for their first breath of air and sight of the world, they also are looking for that moonlight, and so, same thing, it keeps them from going the wrong the direction and going and getting run over.

>> Okay.

Let me understand this, then. So the red light, which is on every night...

>> Mm-hmm.

>> ...the function that it serves is to, what, allow for the turtles to see the moon? That's what I'm trying to get and gauge.

>> Yeah, exactly, exactly.

They don't see that.

They only see the moonlight.

>> Okay.

>> And so -- exactly.

>> Okay, alright.

And where did the funds come from to position all those lights around the island?

>> I'm not sure.

>> Yeah.

>> It was kind of a surprise.

[ Laughs ]

>> Yeah.

>> WAPA, when they were replacing some of the lights that were damaged by the

hurricane, without really telling anyone, just put those lights, which is really great but I know that there were a lot of people who didn't understand what they were for.

>> Right, right.

>> It was a little strange.

>> Again, that's the importance of educating the public and letting the public know...

>> Exactly.

>> ...what's going on.

>> Exactly, exactly.

And so that was something that I think that some of the people in the wildlife community through DPNR and Fish and Wildlife Service kind of retroactively saw them go up, heard the peoples' objections to them and kind of went to WAPA and said, "Hey, can we help you get the word out?"

And I know that there have been some brochures that have been put out at some events like Ag Fair...

>> Right.

>> ...who've tried to talk to people about it, but -- yeah. Hopefully people are coming around, understand the value of it.

>> Sure.

I mean, I don't know -- I know they're positioned on the northern part of the island.

I don't know -- I would imagine -- Well, they might not need it at Sandy Point.

I don't know.

>> No.

There actually aren't -- At Sandy Point, the only lights are really what's coming from Frederiksted.

>> Okay.

>> And we used to have problems there when the ballpark was running and they would leave the lights on very brightly.

You could just see the tracks in the sand of the turtles walking

all the way.

Rather than taking a very short walk right back to the ocean, they would walk all the way along the beach trying to go towards those lights.

>> Oh, my goodness. Okay.

>> So, yeah, the red lights are in Frederiksted as well.

>> Okay, gotcha.

Let's talk about -- You mentioned bats earlier and creating at habitat.

You may have some convincing to do [laughs] for people about, you know, the importance of the role of the bat...

>> Yeah.

>> ...which, as you describe, its consumption of mosquitos.

There is a habitat that the Association is involved in as well, correct?

>> That's right. Yeah.

We have a -- It's an old Danish well tower in Barren Spot that has a colony of fruit bats living in it, and they -- This is their roost, which is where they sleep during the day.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And we've just kind of protected it so that it won't be disturbed by people or, you know, noises and other things like that.

And, yeah, I'm happy to -- I talk a lot about bats, because I think they are scary.

You know, they're one of those critters that has gotten kind of a bad rap in TV, and, you know, it's always made to look like the bad guy.

But, yeah, I mean, the insect part of it, insect-consumption part of it, is so important to our health.

I mean, if you can imagine how many more insects there would be if we didn't have these little bats lying around catching the mosquito...

>> Right.

>> ...and given that we are susceptible to a lot of mosquito-borne diseases, it's significant.

>> Right.

>> But it's not just mosquitos, it's also insects that can affect agriculture, and so -- I don't have numbers for here, but in the U.S. bats are worth billions of dollars to the agricultural industry because of the amount of, you know, pest control that they do.

>> Hmm.

>> So that's important.

And then the fruit bats -- I know people get frustrated with fruit bats sometimes eating their mangos and, you know, understandably.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> But the flip side of that is that bats actually are pollinators.

So they're important pollinators to things like mangoes and papayas and bananas, and so, you know, we need those pollinators to produce the fruit.

They also serve a really important function in tropical areas in that they are -- them and birds are the gardeners of the forest.

They plant the seeds that help our forests recover from disturbance, they planted our forests.

And so that, if we want forests, which I think we do, we need to have bats.

>> Tell us about -- You mentioned before about the recycling component to your work.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Where do we stand with respect to that as a community...

>> Oh, gosh.

>> ...on recycling?

I mean, there was a long period of time, you know, where there

was many years ago, glass recycling, aluminum recycling. I don't think we've ever done plastics.

Certainly the anti-plastic bag law has been really a step in the right direction.

>> Yeah.

>> But where are we as far as, you know, even consciousness about recycling?

>> Yeah.

I think the consciousness is just miles ahead of where we were, even just a few years ago.

I think people are aware.

I mean, if you've gone to the beach you are aware that we have a lot of trash.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> You know, a lot of people have participated in beach clean-ups only to see, you know, a couple days later that same beach covered in trash.

And it's not just us, it's trash that comes -- washes up along the shoreline.

And so I think that is beginning to be something that people are more conscious of.

There is right now a recycling program that has been headed by Diane Brooks who's just working with Plaza -- Plaza West in St. Croix, and I believe Plaza Tutu in St. Thomas.

And basically, you just drop off your plastics on Saturday morning.

Oh, gosh.

I think it's between 8:00 and 12:00, but there is a Facebook page that gives the specific times.

>> Do you know where that is, more or less?

>> Plaza West.

>> Okay.

>> It's right -- Just to the west side of Plaza.

There are some satellite drop offs, but they've been kind of changing, especially over the

summer months, so it's best --  
You know, that drop off is  
there. And then beyond that, you  
can check the Facebook page for  
updates.

And there are some rules to what  
can be recycled and what can't  
be in terms of plastic.

And, again, I'm not completely  
up to date on all of that, but,  
you know, it's good if you can  
rinse out the plastic so that  
they can recycle it rather than  
keep the, you know, the stuff  
that's gonna attract ants.

>> You know, I was under the  
impression it was only plastic  
water bottles.

Is that not true?

There are some other plastics  
that can be.

I think clear plastics and,  
like, color plastics.

>> Okay.

>> But, again, there's a really  
great guide on the Facebook page  
that can kind of tell you yes  
and no.

And if you show up, she has  
volunteers working that can kind  
of help guide you through that.

>> Okay.

Now, you mentioned the Facebook  
page.

Do you know, roughly, how one  
would find it on Facebook?

What would be the keyword?

>> See, it's called "Plastic  
drop off and recycling," I  
believe.

>> Okay.

And probably just add "Virgin  
Islands" or "St. Croix" or  
something in there, and that  
would pop up.

>> Yeah, yeah.

>> Facebook is very popular  
here, as I'm sure you can  
attest to.

>> Absolutely.

And she also takes aluminum  
cans, I know, and I do know also  
that the Leatherback Brewing Co.  
here takes aluminum cans as

well.

>> Excellent. Okay.

That's good to know.

>> Yeah.

>> That's very good to know.

>> Also during the break, we talked about you had -- Not you personally, but the Association has a bird monitoring program or a bird...

Can you tell us a little bit about that?

>> Yeah.

>> So, we -- I think I mentioned earlier that we own a property.

It's a coastal reserve, so a place for nature, and it just happens to have this big salt pond, which is a fantastic place for birds.

It's actually been internationally recognized as an important bird area, so it's had this designation because of the birds that are there.

It's key to migratory birds, and to birds that live here year round.

>> This is the salt pond, the Southern shore, right?

>> Oh no, I'm sorry.

This is on the North shore.

This is actually right near Chenay Bay.

>> Okay.

>> There's a couple of salt ponds.

There's one at Sandy Point, there's Great Pond, which is -- I think it's the one you're talking about.

>> Right, right.

>> And so we are monitoring the birds there to kind of see how they're doing, see what we're seeing, seeing if the numbers are what we're expecting, and then we work with some international organizations to submit that data so that we can get a better idea of, worldwide, how the birds are doing.

And I know what your next question is, which is "Why?"

Why should we care?"

And birds -- You know, there's that saying "the canary in the coal mine," the indicator of what's happening in the world.

Well, birds -- You know, a canary is a bird, and so birds are giving us a good indication of how things are in the world, worldwide how they're doing, but also locally.

You know, if we see birds disappearing from a spot, that probably means there's something going on there.

So there's that, and, of course, you know, I mentioned earlier birds are planters of our forests, they're pollinators, and so they're important to have around and healthy.

>> Is there any species of birds that we particularly have a, I don't know, a large number of?

You don't see pigeons, for example, that you would see in New York City, particularly here, or would you?

>> There are few spots.

You know, I think at Christiansted, you might see some of those, but what we've got, which is kind of cool, is we've got doves and pigeons that are actually, like, native and beautiful and not just kind of the, you know, the trash eaters, the city pigeons.

And they're really neat.

You can see some of them in the forest.

If you go up there, there's one called a scaly-naped pigeon that's big, big, and white-crowned pigeons which like to nest in mangroves but also eat berries, and then some other birds that, you know, I think people really like but that, you know, have told us -- have been really interesting to watch post hurricane are hummingbirds.

You know, they're really cute and they're beautiful, and they

love flowers, but they really took a hit in the hurricanes not just because they're small and, you know, the winds blew them around, but because there was nothing for them to eat.

They like to eat the nectar from flowers, and, I mean, there were no flowers at all.

>> Yeah, yeah.

>> We actually had a program immediately after the hurricane working with the group that I just came from a conference with where we distributed 300 hummingbird feeders to anyone who is willing to put one up and fill it with sugar water for the hummingbirds.

>> Nice.

>> And I think it made a difference.

>> Well, we're gonna take another break.

This has been fascinating.

Birds are really a treasure.

They really are.

>> Yeah.

>> You're listening to "Ability Radio."

Again, we'll be right back.

>> We're back.

You're listening to "Ability Radio."

I'm one of your hosts, Amelia Headley LaMont, and our special guest today is Jen Valiulis, Acting Executive Director of the St. Croix Environmental Association, and we were talking about birds, and in particular -- lastly, we were talking about the hummingbirds and how that population was radically reduced as a result of the two hurricanes in 2017.

Do you have some idea where we are as far as whether birds have returned to their former self, or are we still kind of, you know, on the recovery mode?

>> Yeah.

They're definitely coming back, without a doubt.

I've seen more hummingbirds just recently than I have in a long time since the hurricanes.

But it took a while.

I don't know if we're back where we were before, and actually that's kind of part of why we do regular bird counts, is so we can track, you know, how we're doing.

But they seem to be coming back, which is great.

>> That's great. That is great.

>> Yeah.

>> What do you see for the future of this organization.

>> That's great

I -- [ Laughs ]

Do we have another hour?

>> I think -- You know, we kind of went through a little bit of a bottleneck, again, I think probably like a lot of people post hurricane where we were just trying to survive, and in some ways that's given us a chance to really take a step back and say "Who are we?" and "What do we want to do?"

And I love the direction that we're in right now where we're really reaching out to people, telling them, you know -- education.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> You know, I think that is a gap, and one that we can fill.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> I love these on-the-ground conservation programs.

The thing that we probably -- I hope to get us doing a little bit more of is more advocacy, you know, sort of small-scale advocacy but also maybe some larger-scale advocacy, working with other organizations to look at some of the projects that are going on in St. Croix, and, you know, are they good for St. Croix or not?

>> Right.

>> We're not there yet.

We don't have the time or the --

[ Laughs ] But we...

That's something St. Croix Environmental Association has done in the past and that I think we can do more of in the future.

>> So, you know, research is -- I'm sure --

You're talking about environmental impact.

What would be the result of a particular project on the community or on the, you know, the natural state of affairs, that type of thing.

>> Yeah.

I mean, I'm a scientist, and so I want to have data to -- you know, and I want to have the information about how to do things correctly and write, and our board is made up of a lot of scientists and educators that, same thing, you know, we really want to -- If we're going to take a stand on something, we want to have the facts, and we want to have solutions, and so that takes time, and so we're trying to put the time into it.

>> Time and research.

>> Yeah.

>> And resources.

>> Exactly.

[ Both laugh ]

>> Well, how have you found the community at large as far as, you know, as reactions -- or education.

I mean, are people open to new ideas or, you know, are we as a community hearing the trends?

>> I think so.

Sometimes -- not everybody, of course -- But I do think so, and I think sometimes it takes --

You know, some of the explanations that I've given you -- You know, "Why should I care?"

Why should I care?"

Well, it's important -- and this is where our job is -- is to connect people to the

environment.

Like, this is how this affects your everyday life.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> It's not just something, you know, tree huggers do or these other people.

The environment is affecting all of us.

Even if you never ever go for a hike, you do breathe the air, you do --

>> Drink the water.

>> You are gonna be affected by climate change.

You drink the water.

So it's important for everyone.

>> You mentioned mental health.

Can you make that connection as to how the environment can or has an impact on one's psyche?

>> Well, there have been a lot of studies that have found that putting -- you know, having people spend a little bit of time in nature -- Again, it doesn't have to be exercise.

It can be sitting on a bench, it can be watching birds, it can be, you know, just contemplating the tree [laughs] does a lot to calm and de-stress and focus and overall general mental health.

And so I think -- I mean, I found that to be true with myself.

Post hurricane we did this big giveaway of hummingbird feeders.

I've had so many people tell me after the hurricane when they didn't know what to do they felt helpless, they felt out of control, they just didn't know what to do.

They put up their hummingbird feeder, and they watched the birds, and that made them feel like they were doing something and that they were helping, and it was their entertainment, too, you know, when nobody had TVs or anything like that.

And I think that -- That made a big impact on me in terms of,

you know, "Yes, what I'm saying is true."

And so I think that's kind of the -- That's what I see as the main connection to mental health.

>> Sure.

Now, if somebody was interested in finding out more about your organization and what your organization is doing, how can they get in touch with your office?

>> Okay.

Well, we have an online presence.

So we have a website, which is [stxenvironmental.org](http://stxenvironmental.org).

We have a Facebook page, and that's "St. Croix Environmental."

We have a Instagram and Twitter and all of those things.

>> Uh-huh.

>> We also have a actual, physical office, which is in Gallows Bay, two doors down from Maria's Cantina.

You're welcome to call us, and our phone number is 773-1989.

And e-mail -- We also have e-mail.

You can e-mail me at [sea.educator@gmail.com](mailto:sea.educator@gmail.com).

So lots and lots of options for getting in touch with us.

And if you forgot all of that, our website does have a "Contact Us" form, so if you just find us on the Internet, then, you know, leave us a message, and we'll find you.

>> So, do you have any specific activities planned in the next little while?

>> Yes. Oh, I'm glad you asked.

[ Both laugh ]

On -- Oh, gosh -- the third October -- Not third October.

The third Saturday of each month, August, September, and October, we have snorkel clinics.

I'm blanking on the date for

this month, but it's the third Saturday, and it's 10:00 to 12:00 at Cane Bay Beach. You don't need to sign up, you don't need to bring any money. Just show up and be ready to get in the water and learn to snorkel.

>> What if you can't swim?

>> If you can't swim -- You have to be a little comfortable in the water.

I mean, you don't have to be an excellent swimmer, but we do bring flotation aides like noodles to help.

If you just won't go in the water, it might be good to practice that first.

>> Sure, sure.

>> Yeah.

The other really exciting thing that's coming up in October is October 12th we have -- We're celebrating World Migratory Bird Day, and this is us and a number of other countries around the world are celebrating birds and, you know, their migrations.

And we'll be doing this at Sandy Point.

We're gonna actually have birds that people can see.

Toni Lance, who is a Bird Rehabilitator is gonna bring her hawk.

We're gonna set up some nets so that we can catch some, you know, bananaquits and warblers and show they look up close.

We have art activities, we're gonna do cleanups, do a beach cleanup, lot's of great activities.

We're still planning it, so I don't have times for you.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> But keep a lookout for announcements about that, and we're really excited.

This is the first year that St. Croix has done it, and so we actually the Caribbean

coordinator coming to help us out with it.

>> That's great.

>> Yeah.

>> Migratory Bird Day?

>> Yeah! [ Laughs ]

>> Okay!

Sounds like a mouthful.

>> It is, it is.

[ Both laugh ]

>> Okay, well, we're gonna take another little break.

You're listening to "Ability Radio," and, folks, if you've missed any portion of today's show, it will be posted on our website located at [drcvi.org](http://drcvi.org), and it will be transcribed as well.

We'll be right back.

>> You're listening to "Ability Radio."

We are back.

I am one of your co-hosts, Amelia Headley LaMont, and today's guest is Jen Valiulis, the Acting E.D., Executive Director, of the St. Croix Environmental Association. In the minute we have left, what would you like our listening audience to know more than anything else...

[ Both laugh ]

about the St. Croix Environmental Association?

>> Well -- gosh.

>> I know. [ Chuckles ]

>> I guess I would like everyone to know that we can be a resource for the environment.

If you have questions about environment, about nature, get in touch with us.

And if you have, particularly, questions about what you can do to help, we would love to help give you ideas and solutions, because there's a lot of very achievable things that all of us can do to make our environment better.

>> What do you see as some of the immediate needs here in the

V.I.?

>> You know, reduction of trash, we really need to get ahold of the amount of stuff that we have.

But there are a lot of ways to do that -- you know, bringing your own cup with you when you go out, refusing straws, refusing to-go -- Like, bring your own Tupperware to-go container, composting.

Composting is huge.

So trash reduction, and then I'm gonna say it again, 'cause I love to say it, plant trees -- plant trees, plant plants, you know, as much vegetation as we can have, that's going to really help us in so many ways.

>> That's excellent.

Well, this has been a very educational program, and I appreciate you taking the time to share it with us, because we are all impacted by a healthy environment.

>> Yeah, it's my pleasure.

>> Thank you. Thank you so much.

Folks, you've been listening to "Ability Radio."

Have a good day, and we'll see you next week.

Bye-bye.