

# ST. THOMAS SOURCE

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## Coral Reef Task Force Gets Up-Close Tour of Botany Bay

by Molly Morris



*Louis Petersen, of UVI's cooperative extension service, explains the function of a water-retention pond to task force visitors.*

Oct. 27, 2006 -- About 20 or so members of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force got out of their hotel confines late this week for a tour of one of the island's most pristine areas, Botany Bay. As an added attraction, they also got a firsthand look at one of the island's unique water-retention ponds, which help protect coral reefs and also furnish water for the Bordeaux farmers.

The 200-member group of scientists from the states and territories has been meeting this week at a symposium at Marriott's Frenchman's Reef Beach Resort. (See ["Experts Issue Dire Predictions for Coral Reef Health."](#)).

Botany Bay (now known as Botany Bay Preserve) is currently being developed by Timbers Company of Colorado. Today it is a massive construction site, filled with every type of earth-moving machine imaginable. Reaching the Beach House, where the tour began, is not something one would want to do to their vehicle; it's almost two miles of nearly impassable road, only occasionally paved.

Efforts to develop St. Thomas' ecologically and archaeologically sensitive West End have gone on for years. The project has had a contentious history from its first public hearing before the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) more than five years ago. In September 2002, the St. Thomas Coastal Zone Management Committee approved a major permit for the group, against the recommendations of its own staff, and amid stiff opposition from the Environmental Association of St. Thomas-St. John (EAST), the League of Women Voters, some senators and individual environmentalists.

In 2004, Botany Bay Partners chose to relinquish that permit -- which would have allowed it to build a resort then estimated at \$169 million -- saying it still planned to develop the property, but only for private residences. Now, the developers plan to build a \$200 million resort, along with private dwellings, which are currently advertised on several local real estate sites.

Donald Parris, project director, and William McComb, project environmental engineer, greeted the group at the rough road's end -- the Beach House at the water's edge. It faces what appears to be an Olympic-size swimming pool with surrounding amenities already in place. Lush vegetation surrounds the area, especially green with the recent rains.

Parris spoke of his interest in preserving the environment. "We try to work very closely with the local agencies, the Coastal Zone Management or the V. I. State Historic Preservation Office," he said. "The beauty of this development is the water and the scenery. It's the last thing we want to destroy."

The CZM agency issues permits essential for building in what is called Tier One, usually in proximity to the coastal areas. Tier Two doesn't require the permits. The divisions between the two are loosely defined, sometimes only by ridges on hills, said William Rohring, CZM assistant director. Rohring was part of a contingent of several government agencies accompanying the tour Thursday.

McComb, saying that he works from an "environmental inventory," talked of ongoing work, with an emphasis on conservation efforts incorporated by the project.

Many of the visitors had educated questions, including an inquiry into protecting sea turtles. McComb explained that the turtles at neighboring Sandy Bay (and the shore of the bay itself) are a seasonal proposition. He said the beach is combed for turtle nests in season, and the eggs are relocated if they are thought to be in danger.

He explained that the project uses double-reinforced silt fencing, constructed with metal posts, instead of wooden ones, which are more prone to collapse. The fences hold back the earth from erosion during the road-paving process. He stressed, "We are moving quickly on the roads. Unpaved roads are one of the biggest contributors to sedimentation in coastal waters." McComb said the project uses straw erosion mats for any soil not touched within a two-week period.

Work was surely proceeding rapidly Thursday; the road to the beach glugged at points with heavy equipment.

Parris, before a trip to a point over Sandy Beach, which he calls his "favorite spot," noted that the project is working with neighboring Bordeaux farmers. "We look for their input," he said. He also said that vehicles wouldn't be using the roads. "People will park at the top, and we will use golf carts to shuttle them down."

The group moved to the Bordeaux area for a look at a water-retention pond. Louis Petersen, a district supervisor with UVI's cooperative extension service, took the group down a path to the mid-sized pond, which is one of six. The largest, Petersen said, holds about two million gallons and is located on the top of the hill.

The group climbed to the pool's edge over a polyethylene lining. Petersen said the pond had been rehabilitated (with new excavation and lining) and now holds about three times as much water, though he could not give an exact amount.

According to Petersen, the ponds were originally constructed in the 1960s by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to retain storm-water runoff in order to mitigate downstream erosion and sediment imparts to adjacent coastal waters, and to provide supplemental water to the farming community.

The pond was of interest to the coral scientists, in that agricultural runoff can affect ocean corals. Petersen explained the process in which the ponds prevent the runoff. "By intercepting the runoff and its sediment," he said, "it never gets to the sea as it moves across the watershed, having been trapped in the ponds. If it got to the sea, it could destroy the coral and contribute to the degradation of associated life."

The pond now has a solar-operated pump, for which Petersen said he is very grateful. "Before, we had to haul out the sediment with our hands. The Department of Energy [a DPNR agency] supplied this about two years ago," he said.

The ponds supply water to the 35 or so farmers who belong to We Grow Food, Inc., a cooperative that holds markets (usually the last Sunday of the month) and sells produce, along with other farmers, at Market Square downtown.

The task force group was also treated to a tour of Buck Island on the Atlantis submarine in the afternoon. Their meeting concluded Friday.