

Rafe Boulon

Managing Visitor Impacts to Coastal & Submerged Resource in the V.I National Park & Coral Reef National Monument

Biography

Rafe Boulon is presently the Chief of Resource Management for the Virgin Islands National Park and the Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument. Rafe received his undergraduate degree from the College of the Virgin Islands in Marine and Environmental Science. He continued by receiving a Masters degree from the University of Puerto Rico in Biological Oceanography. Following that, he worked for the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, Division of Fish and Wildlife as Chief of Environmental Education and Endangered Species for 18 years. He has been with the National Park Service for over six years.

Abstract

The Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument receive approximately one million visitors per year. Visitors include residents and tourists and most visit the park to view and enjoy our coastal and marine resources. They arrive via land and sea to swim at the beaches, snorkel coral reefs and seagrass beds, recreate on their boats, and secure vessels from hurricane waves and winds. Impacts from these visitors are varied, ranging from damage to coastal vegetation at beaches to coral breakage from snorkelers to anchor and vessel damage to marine resources. The National Park Service managers have developed various measures to reduce or eliminate these impacts. Beach access ramps have been installed at several beaches to prevent damage to beach forests and revegetation has been initiated to eliminate and stabilize old social trails. Signs are being used to increase awareness of potential damage to shallow reefs by snorkelers prior to using more drastic measures. Regulatory buoys are successful in demarcating areas of sensitive shallow marine habitats that have been significantly impacted by careless and inexperienced boaters in the past. Moorings in park bays and at popular dive areas have eliminated anchoring impacts. Studies on benthic communities where moorings have been placed indicate that these areas can recover from the impacts associated with anchors and chains. Hurricane chain moorings have been installed in traditional hurricane refuge bays and a system of vessel registration for hurricane "berths" has been developed in collaboration with the boating community. Management of people and their impacts is crucial to protecting and preserving our natural resources.