

# Great Smoky Mountains Crew Rehabilitating Reef Bay Trail

By **Andrea Milam**  
*St. John Tradewinds*

The Reef Bay Trail's significant popularity is not without its consequences. The 2.2-mile trail has become heavily eroded due to the Virgin Islands National Park's guided hikes, which happen up to three times a week during high season, and the countless others who hike the trail on their own. Thanks to a case of the right person being in the right place at the right time, the trail is now undergoing some much-needed rehabilitation.

Eric Wood of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park's Trails Forever Program, which reconstructs and rehabilitates trails within the North Carolina/Tennessee-area park, noticed the condition of Reef Bay and other heavily used VINP trails during his St. John vacation last year.

Employees of the Trails Forever Program are furloughed during the winter months, and Wood saw an opportunity to fill that gap by working in the VINP. He reached out to local park officials and a few months later, Wood was back on St. John with Trails Forever Supervisor Tobias Miller conducting a detailed survey of Reef Bay, L'Esperance, and Ram Head hiking trails.

"They put together a funding proposal so we would understand the time, speed, and cost, and I liked what I saw," said VINP Superintendent Brion FitzGerald. "The idea is that we will bring a crew down here every year for somewhere between six and eight weeks to do rehab work on the heaviest used trails. They're beginning that rehab work with the first 1,300 feet at the upper portion of the Reef Bay Trail."

This year's stint, which started the first week of January, is expected to last for six weeks and cost approximately \$50,000. The VINP will use fee revenue generated by their moorings and Trunk Bay to cover the cost, however, FitzGerald hopes to find a different funding source in the future.

"The four-person crew is staying at Cinnamon Bay campground and trying to keep the overall cost to a bare minimum while doing an outstanding job," said FitzGerald.

The crew is addressing grading, heavy erosion, and exposure of roots by using native materials, non-motorized hand tools, and hand-powered rigging to move large stones. The goal of Wood and Miller's crew is to rehabilitate the trail while ensuring that minimal labor-intensive maintenance is needed to keep the trail in good condition. One of the tactics they're using to help cut down the trail's erosion is to direct water runoff.

"Their preference is to not create water bars, which by their very nature get filled up with stones and other debris," said FitzGerald. "If you don't clean them, they get completely buried or washed out in heavy rain. So instead, they contour the trail in varying dis-



*St. John Tradewinds News Photo courtesy of VINP.*

**Eric Wood with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park's Trails Forever Program pitched in to help stave off erosion along the Reef Bay Trail, above.**

tances depending on elevation to slope outward allowing the water to run off the trail naturally."

The winding trail with sloping sections keeps the water from building up speed, FitzGerald continued.

"Rather than having a 500-foot-long straight section of trail that ends in a water bar, which allows the water to build up a head speed, they'll have maybe six to 10 curves in that 500-foot-long section allowing the water to run off every 15 to 20 feet," said the VINP superintendent. "Therefore the water can't build up speed and have as large of an erosional impact as it would in the long, straight run."

To mitigate the large roots that have surfaced on portions of the trail, Wood and his crew are cutting dirt from the trail's upper bank and using it to fill overtop of the roots and harden the outside edges of the trail. Additionally, they've already remedied the large drop off at the end of the trail head's stone stairway by building more stairs.

The complete rehabilitation of the Reef Bay Trail is expected to take up several of the group's annual six-to-eight-week visits before they can set their sights on other heavily used VINP trails. FitzGerald does not expect any trail closures during the crew's 2016 stint on the island.