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Letters to the Editor

Time to help make the 'Maroon Territorial Park' a reality

Dear Editor,

This year Americans are celebrating the 150th anniversary of Yellowstone National Park. The park was established on March 1, 1872 — the first park in the United States. It was Ulysses S. Grant, the 18th elected U.S. president (1869-1877), who signed the Yellowstone Protection Act into law for "the benefit and enjoyment of the people." With that being said, I am writing to the people of the Virgin Islands to request that they push for the preservation and protection of our culture with the creation of the U.S. Virgin Islands Maroon Territorial Park on the Northwest Quarter of St. Croix.

The northwest or "Maroon Country" is threatened by indiscriminate development that would forever change the historic landscape culturally, historically, naturally, archaeologically and destroy the pristine marine wilderness area.

This will be among the first in a series of letters explaining why the northwest and its sacred lands is embedded in the history and culture of the people of the Virgin Islands. It is a history that connects us to the wider Caribbean region as well as to Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Britain, Spain, and the Knights of Malta before the Danish West Indies was purchased by the U.S. in 1917.

For more than 30 years, I have been educating the public and the global community about the value of preserving the northwest forest and coastal wilderness area. It was the last refuge of enslaved Africans fighting for their freedom in the Danish era. I have protested, testified at public hearings, and taken thousands of people — locals and visitors alike — to the site. I have written many articles on the area and worked with many, including national and international students, teachers, professors, ordinary researchers and even anthropologists, relative to preserving the area. I've even written to the Rockefeller family, who once owned the property, to request assistance in its preservation.

In 1998 Karl Knight, now the chief of staff to Gov. Albert Bryan Jr., accompanied me for his first visit to the area along with a large group of Crucians who traveled to the northwest to physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually recreate the



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journey into our ancestors' realm. As a result, the group was inspired by their experiences — walking in the same path of runaway slaves and learning the natural and cultural history of the area — and the St. Croix Hiking Association was established with Knight being one of the founders.

I am not a politician, but an ordinary citizen looking out culturally and ecologically for the best interests of the people of these islands. Knight knows how significant the northwest is to the people of the Virgin Islands, and it's likely that this topic has come up with the governor. What do we know about the governor's record on the environment, particularly as it relates to the cultural preservation that reflects our history and its people? I believe this is a great opportunity for Gov. Bryan as well as others in the V.I. government, to stand with the people of the Virgin Islands to preserve the northwest in perpetuity.

In 2005, the St. Croix Action for Heritage Economic Development known as SUCCEED and of which I'm a member, was established. Our goal is to educate the public about the northwest and to brand St. Croix as a heritage tourism destination. A few years ago, SUCCEED came up with a petition to make the community aware of how important it is to preserve the northwest corner of St. Croix as a Maroon sanctuary.

The petition reads in part that "we the undersigned believe that the establishment of the Maroon Territorial Park is the best and wisest method of preserving and managing the outstanding cultural, historical, educational, economic, ecological, recreational, and spiritual values inherent to the

northwest quadrant of St. Croix, including Maroon Ridge, Hams Bluff, Annaly Bay, Maroon Hole, and Wills Bay, all of which fall within the Hams Bluff and Hams Bay watersheds.

"The Maroon Territorial Park will honor the heroic spirit of enslaved Africans who affirmed freedom and human dignity by flight, struggle, and the creation of independent communities. Its establishment will also contribute substantially to economic and community development by creating a unique, sustainable tourist attraction reflective of St. Croix's distinctive history and heritage.

"Moreover, the park would fulfill legislative mandates under 1) Title 32 of the Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 2 & 21 & 22, establishing a Territorial Park System for the Virgin Islands; 2) Virgin Islands Act No. 4881 & 3, which dedicated a 1,000-acre perpetual scenic and preservation easement lands of St. Croix, northwest Quarter, including Annaly Bay, Wills Bay and neighboring lands; and 3) Title 32 of the Virgin Islands Code Chapter 2A & 31 & 33, establishing a Territorial Park Trust Fund..."

If we are talking so much about the culture and history of these islands, let us as a people create a Maroon park that embodies all of us. It is the right thing to do in creating a park on the northwest side of St. Croix in honor of those who shed their blood for freedom that we today take so much for granted. Yellowstone didn't become a national park on its own. It took men like Ferdinand Vandiveer Hayden, Lieutenant Gustavus C. Done, Thomas Moran, and other explorers of the West to help establish the first park of our nation.

I encourage our governor to do the right thing, by establishing the first territorial park of the Virgin Islands. The territory can become the first place in the Caribbean where a Maroon park is established. I am asking the people of the Virgin Islands to write to their senators and to raise their voices to help make the Maroon park a reality. Let all of us make this park happen for our children and their children to come.

— Olasee Davis, St. Croix, is an ecologist active in the preservation of Virgin Islands history, culture and environment.

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The Daily News is always interested in publishing local views on topics of general interest affecting the Virgin Islands and its people. Space limitations do not always allow us to publish all the letters we receive, so we select those we believe will be of the greatest interest to our readers. Send Letters, Essays, Helos and Pitchforks, Cartoons or other original material about local issues of general interest to letters@dailynews.vi

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