Guns have no place on Buck Island

The shooting at Buck Island Reef National Monument that left one person injured was very unfortunate. The rise of crime in the Virgin Islands has now spread to smaller offshore islands from the major populated ones. Buck Island should not be a place for crimes, but a place of tranquility to the human spirit.

"We also have to be good stewards of the precious natural resources at the Buck Island National Monument, that is why we are going the extra mile to keep Buck Island accessible to everyone." Gov. Albert Bryan Jr. said of the natural and marine resources of the island during a response to the shooting.

I've found that we're a very patriotic people when it comes protection of the culture, natural resources and history of the Virgin Islands. We tend to gravitate to other cultures rather than our own. There might be reason for the lack of knowledge of ourselves as Virgin Islanders. In a subsequent column I plan to focus on the natural resources, but today I will address the connection and rich cultural history of Buck Island Reef National Monument to the people of the Virgin Islands.

Many tend to look at Buck Island as sand, sun and sea — just pure fun. This might be all good and well, but the cultural history of Buck Island is deeper than swimming and snorkeling in one of the finest marine gardens in the Caribbean or the world.

According to archeologists, the Amerindians migrated to St. Croix over 2,000 years ago from the Lesser Antilles and the Lower Orinoco River of Central America and the coastal areas of Guyana.

These indigenous people were the first to inhabit Buck Island. They fished, hunted large kallaloo crabs and gathered conch, and sea turtles and their eggs. Archeological research revealed that the indigenous people lived in the coastal region of Buck Island and left behind conch shells, pieces of pottery, etc.

Since the 1700s, enslaved Africans were sent to Buck Island by the European colonists of Croix to harvest lignum vitae trees to be used for medicine, build sugar mills and great houses as well as to gather lobsters, shellfish and land crabs. They also tended to goats and sheep that were taken to the island to graze. The list of owners

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of Buck Island is long — and here are a few:

Johann Hendrich Diedrichs: In 1754, Buck Island was known as Diedrichs Estate, named after the first person to settle the island, according to historical records. Diedrichs constructed the first buildings on Buck Island and lived there along with 14 people; 12 of them were enslaved Africans. He owned the island until 1773.

Nicholay Salamons: In 1773, Salamons, from St. Eustatius and owner of Mount Welcome Estate on St. Croix, purchased the island. During his ownership two slaves and two former slaves lived on the island.

Joseph Coakley: In 1775, Coakley acquired the island. He likely was a relative to the Coakleys who once owned Coakley Bay Plantation on St. Croix.

John Heyliger Abrahamsen: In 1818, Abrahamsen served as the caretaker and taxpayer of Buck Island. He would serve in this position in 1818 and from 1823 to 1826.

John Benners: In 1779, Brenners also served in this position until 1802, when he was replaced by John de Graff Godette.

Whenever I conduct tours of Buck Island — it's been hundreds over the years — for locals and visitors, we hike the various trails. There's one spot, however, we stop at that is very sacred to Virgin Islands cultural and marine archeological history. Believe me, when you leave Buck Island, you are a different individual. In the cultural marine resources of Buck Island are several shipwrecks. Literally hundreds of shipwrecks are along the ocean floor of the British and U.S. Virgin Islands waters. There were two 18th century slave shipwrecks off the north coast of Buck Island: Mary and General Abercrombie. In March 1797, the slave ship Mary, captained by James Hunter of Liverpool, England, struck Buck Island reef off the north bank of

the Island and sank. The ship had 240 slaves who were saved and brought into Christiansted jail.

The second slave ship was General Abercrombie, owned by a wealthy Tobin firm. On Feb. 28, 1803, the slave ship sailed for St. Croix filled with goods and 339 slaves. It struck the reef off the north coast of Buck Island. James Booth of Liverpool was the captain of the slave ship. The ship began to take in water immediately, causing chaos for the crew and the hundreds of enslaved Africans below the deck, cramped like sardines.

As a result, much of the goods were thrown overboard. The slaves spent the night at sea in the wrecked ship while the crews were rescued and brought to Christiansted. The following day, the slaves were rescued and locked up in Christiansted jail. To hear locals tell it, the cries of the enslaved Africans over 200 years ago can still be heard if you listen carefully to the waves of the north coast of Buck Island as they crash against the rocky, sandy shore.

Buck Island is special in our cultural and marine history. Slaves worked the land on Buck Island after surviving the rough seas in the area where the ships sank. The wrecks of the ships, which lie today at the bottom of the ocean, are testimonies to the resilience of the enslaved people.

According to historians, there are five cultural resources that have been recommended for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. They are the Signal Station site, Buck Island Prehistoric site, Foundation site, West Beach Historic (or Goby) site, and the Bigeye/West End Historic Midden site.

"These sites could contribute useful information about the lifeways and subsistence activities, and related economic issues from colonial times to the present," wrote Cultural Resources Specialist Diane Rhodes about Buck Island history.

When you visit Buck Island, explore the island's natural and cultural resources and leave your guns at home. Guns have no place in Buck Island's cultural history.

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