Interviewer: Well, first off, thank you very much for agreeing to do this. We're very excited to be here with you today. We think that you offer quite a unique perspective, not only with your own personal background, educational and experiential but also your social networks that you're in – your familiar, your neighborhoods, your workplace. Basically, what we'd like to do here today is to hear Interviewee's story. I don't want to guide it too much. I just want you to feel free to talk and tell me – let me give you a for example. When you said the thing about the Antilles and what they said about the Antilles, I think that that is the kind of thing that people need to understand in terms of the mindset, the educational mindset, and what people are thinking about for the kids here on the island. Anyway, let me not guide this too much, but let me ask you just to go ahead and begin with your name, where you're from. Just go ahead and tell me your background. Tell me your story.

Interviewee Interviewee: Absolutely. Well, good afternoon.

Interviewer: Good afternoon.

Interviewee: It is definitely afternoon.

Interviewer: Definitely afternoon.

Interviewee: I'm hungry, so it's got to be. My name is Interviewee Interviewee, and professionally, I am the director of the Division of Territorial Parks and Protected Areas in the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, which I'm very proud of. So, I'm leading with that. Personally, I am Interviewee, and I am from St. Thomas. I was born and raised here. Really lucky to have family here and background here, but professionally, getting to work throughout the territory, I absolutely consider myself a Virgin Islander before I'm a St. Thomian most of the time, unless we're arguing about food; then I might change my mind a little bit. I was, like I said, born on St. Thomas. My family is not generational. However, my first cousin moved to St. Thomas in – I want to say the 1940s or 1950s, and my mom's family had been vacationing here for a long time, so we have an interesting connection to the territory. But my sister and I are the only ones in the family born here, which is really interesting. And now she has kids, but she had them while in the States and has moved down with them a few times. They actually just left, so I lost my nephews, but it's okay. It's really interesting for me to think about just my personal history in the Virgin Islands because it's easy to be in the Virgin Islands and not a part of the Virgin Islands, and I think that's just ridiculous. I have always been very connected to my home and to protecting it, and I'm very lucky that I am able to do that professionally and personally. I guess if we go way back to tiny little Interviewee, I was afraid of the ocean, and I was afraid of coral, actually, which is an interesting thing. I don't know what I thought it was going to do, but there are pictures of me as a toddler in a little kiddie pool on the beach. My parents would have this little plastic pool just a few feet above the high tide line that they would fill up with water, and I would snorkel in my tiny little thing. But I was really lucky because my dad is an amazing chef, and he would walk along the beach with us. Instead of learning the scientific names, we learned edible or not edible, which most things are edible. It was kind of, I think, a fun way to gain an appreciation of the ocean, even though I was afraid to really get into it a lot. Fast forwarding on that vein, I didn't learn how to swim until I was in my twenties. I would wade, I would bathe, and snorkel a little bit, but I learned how to dive in my twenties before I really learned how to swim. That just kind of blew my mind because I honestly learned how to dive because all my friends were divers, and they would go diving after work, and then they would go to happy hour. I'd already be home, and I'd be like, “Oh, man, if only I dove, I could go to happy hour.” [laughter] But I think that learning how to dive gave me an even bigger appreciation of our marine resources here in the Virgin Islands. People laugh a lot at that. I am obviously now well past my twenties, but still diving. Still not a great swimmer. [laughter]

Interviewer: It's like being able to run before you can walk.

Interviewee: Yeah, but I love diving because all that equipment – its only job in the world is to keep you breathing. You put it on, you just sink, and it's great, and flutter around and everything. I'm a better diver than I give myself credit for. But you just sink, and you keep breathing. Anyway, little diversion.

Interviewer: So how many years have you been diving? Since your twenties, so –?

Interviewee: About twenty years.

Interviewer: So you have twenty years of experience of diving in the water.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: That's awesome.

Interviewee: It is. I really love it.

Interviewer: In the last twenty years, have you seen – I'm imagining you dive in similar locations. Have you seen any changes in these locations?

Interviewee: Yeah. [laughter] It's rough. It's a rough time to be an ocean lover. We're facing extreme decline in coral health and fish health. It's really rough. I've gotten to a point where I don't dive my favorite places anymore because I'm afraid of what I'm going to see.

Interviewer: Wow.

Interviewee: In 2019, the US Virgin Islands were hit by the stony coral tissue loss disease. It had been running rampant in Florida, and we had kind of heard about it, and I had a little fact sheet on my desk. I was already working at DPNR. I joined Coastal Zone Management in 2017. So, by 2019, I’m sitting there with this little fact sheet on my desk – didn't really think much of it. Then, we saw it. We found it. Actually, a UVI [University of the Virgin Islands] professor found it, Dr. Marilyn Brandt at Flat Cay. From then on, it was kind of like, “Where can I dive that hasn't been decimated yet?” And we've had a lot of catastrophic events like that, and it seems like each one is worse than the last. There have been bleaching events where it's kind of like – [interruption in recording]

Interviewer: Please continue. Diving different spots, new spots. They found the sickness.

Interviewee: So, this coral disease hit in 2019, and I personally was kind of diving places where there wasn't disease because, one, we were looking for where the disease line was. My partner is a diver, and most of my friends are divers. My best friend was working with the department at the time, and so we weren't going out there.

Interviewer: The Department of –?

Interviewee: The Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

Interviewer: Oh, Planning and Natural Resources.

Interviewee: We were diving, looking for places that didn't have disease, looking for that line as it was progressing throughout the territory. That was professional. But personally, I was thinking, where is going to be left? I remember I dove Cane Bay, St. Croix, probably 2020. So, the disease had been in the territory for a while but hadn't really hit St. Croix. I dove Cane Bay, and a lot of people say it's nothing like it was. Shifting baselines are a real thing. But I looked around, and I was like, well, this is as good as it's ever going to be again. So, I enjoyed my dive. I didn't fill out a datasheet. I was one of those people, the government employee not doing the datasheet but really just enjoying it. A few months later, the disease did hit there, and I haven't been back, which is – I'm not proud of that. But every time I go back to one of my favorite dive sites, and it's just had such decline, it's really depressing. Like I said, this isn't the first environmental catastrophe we've had. It's blow-by-blow. We've had major bleaching events. We've had major hurricanes. We had the lionfish invasion, which I was on a non – I was on the board of directors for a nonprofit that did a lot of work with the lionfish invasion, the CORE [Caribbean Oceanographic Restoration and Education] Foundation. I remember we were thinking this is the worst catastrophe that will ever happen to the ocean, the impact that this is going to have is unfathomable, unmatched, all of this. But then everything that's happened since has just been worse.

Interviewer: Worse.

Interviewee: Every time, it's worse. So, it's hard, definitely, but I really focus on what we can do to help. I always joke that I'll be the most extreme environmentalist in the room, but we really have to. I think that we have to take these issues seriously, and so whether we're looking at very local issues – what is happening to this specific reef, what is happening to this beach, what is happening to this mangrove – we can look very locally and specifically at what's happening. But then, if you just keep on zooming out to a global scale, man, you want to have a spiral of a nervous breakdown. We had a category five hurricane on July 1st further south and further east than ever before in history. What? That is insane. Last year, I was on a dive; I'll say a sunset dive. It wasn't dark when we were diving, but we were out on the dinghy, and I was sitting up on the side of the inflatable and had my hand kind of hanging off. My hand touched the water, and it was hot. My brain said, “Hot engine. Get away from the propeller.” And I was like, “Oh.” But then I realized I was on the front of the boat, nowhere near the engine, which was turned off. It was not exhaust water. It was just that hot. And that was last July, I want to say, at night, just out at seventy feet of water sitting on the surface.

Interviewer: What temperature do you think that was?

Interviewee: Oh, I'm not very good at that.

Interviewer: Like eighties?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah. Eighties, for sure. We are consistently having water temps in the eighties.

Interviewer: Is this historically different, say, than forty years ago?

Interviewee: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I am not a scientist, so I don't want to speak on the actual scientific changes, but it's too hot. It’s crazy.

Interviewer: But you are a scientist. You're an observer.

Interviewee: I am a casual scientist.

Interviewer: You have all these observations, which systematically you've collected over time, which is fantastic.

Interviewee: So, it's really scary. Last year, we were looking at the news and watching ocean temps in Florida get over a hundred. That's crazy. So, whether you're zooming out and seeing these global impacts or zooming in to just this reef, it's absolutely insane.

Interviewer: Do you believe the temperature has had an impact on not only the intensity of the hurricanes but also on what's happening underneath the water?

Interviewee: Oh, absolutely. It is. That's just science.

Interviewer: Is it having an impact on fish as well as coral, do you think? Or on nursery areas, maybe?

Interviewee: It has to. It has to. Animals can't evolve that quickly. I'm sure we're seeing subtle changes that are leading to longer-term impacts, but there's no way we can survive this. Sorry. It's insane. I think that something we suffer from as humans is we fail to see the lines connecting things. I think we are surrounded by environmentalists. I actually did a TED Talk, a TEDx, the local St. Thomas TED Talk, about trendy environmentalism, where you do make these environmental choices because it's trendy, but without looking at the impacts and why you're doing it. A lot of these, quote-unquote, environmental choices are worse. I don't want to say a name brand while being recorded, but the newest cup you have to have – I'm a really big fan of my mug. [laughter] It's just a mug. You drink water out of it. Speaking of, I'm going to have a sip of water.

Interviewer: Of course. You mentioned to me that you come from a family that's been involved with the sea and that your current family, your current friends, are connected to the sea as well. Do you ever feel a conflict between your perspective and your position versus their perspective –?

Interviewee: Oh, absolutely.

Interviewer: – maybe as a fisherman or a local resident?

Interviewee: Yeah. So my partner – we've been together over twenty years, not married, so partner is fine. Whatever.

Interviewer: Legally married, basically.

Interviewee: His family is generational of French heritage, and his brother is a commercial fisher who you met yesterday. It's interesting because we see, through family but also just through observation, we have to feed ourselves. We need to feed ourselves, and it makes sense to feed ourselves locally. So, absolutely, I think that we should all be purchasing from local fishers. When I do my grocery shopping every week, first, on Saturday morning at 7:00 AM, I go down to the market, to Market Square, which is our traditional market square, where they've been selling fish –

Interviewer: Down in Charlotte Amalie? Right there.

Interviewee: Yeah, right down at the end of Main Street.

Interviewer: Is that the shops that they created for people to market dolls and dresses?

Interviewee: No, that's Vendor's Plaza. Market Square is at the other end of Main Street. If you're not there early on Saturday morning, you're not going to see anything. It looks like just a pavilion.

Interviewer: I heard the elder gentleman, a fisherman that was there yesterday, state that he's there at 3:00 AM on Saturday morning selling.

Interviewee: Yeah. It's crazy. I don't get there until seven because my lettuce guy usually still has lettuce at seven. That's my most important thing. I want to get lettuce and cucumbers. But I want to support local farmers and fishers, and I think that's hugely important. It's environmentally much more responsible than having stuff shipped in. But we also have to look at how we are doing these things. I think there's a lot of just reactionary pushback, too. Our fishing community is wary of government decisions because it can feel like decisions are being made that have no local input, and sometimes that happens. It sucks, but that absolutely has happened over the years. But it doesn't have to because a lot of the times you have government agencies who really want to hear what's happening locally, and they need that data. We all want a thriving ocean. We all want to keep on having fish. We're not going to keep on having fish if we have all of these impacts. It's not overfishing. It's not erosion. It's not temperature change. It's all of them. It's every single one of those impacts. I think with just family relations, it's fine because we have the fishers in the family, and my partner is a research diver, so he's at the university doing the research. A lot of that research feels untouchable by locals because it's federally funded, they write their report, and it gets sent off. Then in two years, a federal agency comes down and says, you're not allowed to catch this anymore. [laughter] Why? So like I said, it doesn't always happen like that, but I think that that's definitely the feeling. But my friends – I have a lot of friends who are researchers at the University, too – they're seeing these impacts every day. The fishers see it, too, but from a different way I think. Especially on St. Thomas, most of our fishers are from boats and then doing pots, and so they're looking down. They're seeing what's coming up in the traps, whereas the divers are seeing more the interactions and the structure of what's happening. I think it's really interesting because both of those are really important knowledge. We just have to keep on working together with it because it's all important.

Interviewer: Collaboration is the key, isn’t it?

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: You are obviously, I don't want to say unique, but you're a female in a position of power here as a director. Have you ever felt, being a woman, that you've been marginalized, or you felt that your voice wasn't heard, that you've been underserved? Do you feel like women that are involved in the fisheries –? Do you feel like they've been marginalized and that they're often not heard when it comes to things of importance?

Interviewee: I have a little bit of imposter syndrome. It's kind of baked into women as we mature. I often feel like – not that I'm marginalized, but that I don't deserve to be speaking in spaces. I have my little internal bout with myself and say, "No, I can." But I'm also a short, white girl with a stateside family, and quite often, I will be met with underhanded aggression or just kind of flippant, "We don't need you here," which, luckily, hasn't happened recently. I think I'm past that point in my career. Being a director is really cool. I don't like using my position, but I fought really hard to get here. So, I think that the relationships that I have grown in my career path have been really interesting and fun. Thinking about women in fisheries versus women in science, we have an amazingly strong network of women in science in the Virgin Islands. If you look up the UVI scientific diving team, it is a lot of badass women, and they're doing really cool stuff. As far as women in fisheries, I feel like they're there, but I think that women are more domineering in the science side than in the actual fishery side, fishing – the fishers side.

Interviewer: What role do women play in the fisheries side?

Interviewee: I mean, I don't want – I am not intimately aware, so I don't want to speak on it too much, but I know there are a lot of women working in organizations who are assisting with fisheries. I think an amazing example is our – I'm going to butcher her title – Nicole. What is Nicole's title?

Interviewer: Nicole Greaux?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: The liaison?

Interviewee: Yeah. So, she's the fisheries liaison with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. Her connection to not just her family but to the fishers and to the government agencies, I think, is amazing. She's doing a great job. So, I also know a lot of women who fish but not full-time professionally. I am forgetting about somebody. I don't want to say this because it's not happening. My mind is going through –

Interviewer: You mentioned the women that fish. Are they helpers? Are they actual captains? Are they commercial? Are they charter?

Interviewee: I don't know. My mind is going through my Instagram reel, and I'm seeing a lot of women I know fishing and pictures of it happening, but I don't know the actual what their official positions are. But I know that they have other full-time jobs and are doing it either recreationally –

Interviewer: Do you think they do that as a means of supporting economically – creating security in the family, and they fish to augment income, or do they do it because they like it?

Interviewee: I think they do it because they like it and because they have family who are commercial fishers. So, whether they are official helpers, because that is a technical term, or if they're just helping, I honestly don't know. I think that's a really good question. I can think of a few more people who you should interview who might help get to that answer.

Interviewer: That'd be great. That'll be awesome.

Interviewee: I'll write down some names when we're done.

Interviewer: Thank you. Thank you. You've mentioned the gender difference, or a little bit about gender issues in terms of women's roles and men's roles, and how you came up in your position and where you are today. You mentioned the word white – the short, white girl.

Interviewee: [laughter] Yes.

Interviewer: And not from here, but from here. Your stateside kind of thing. Still, even though you were born here, they call you a state – somehow, they see this stateside connection.

Interviewee: Sometimes, yes.

Interviewer: So, let's play on that a minute and think about taking it from an ethnicity point of view. What are the different ethnic groups that are here, and how does it interplay with fisheries and with relationships?

Interviewee: Well, I know that it's very different on each island. In St. Thomas, we have the French families, the Frenchies, who have been fishing for generations. It's really important culturally. If you look up old pictures of St. Thomas, you'll see the Frenchies fishing down in Frenchtown. You look at the faces, and you can see the families. It's families who have been doing this for generations, and that is really cool. I'm starting to notice younger generations coming up into it, which I think is so important because for a while, just anecdotally, me going to the market, it felt like everybody was getting a little old. No offense, guys. [laughter] But it feels like that has kind of kicked off, and we are seeing younger generations in the commercial realm, which I think is as important as cultural background. Just continuing the generations, I think, is really important. I've met a few of the fishers on St. Croix. I know that it's just a totally different community. They're diving. They're spearfishing. They're not really doing traps that much. There's not a French community on St. Croix. Some of them might move over there, but it's a totally different community, totally different world. It's really, really cool. I like going over there. I love St. Croix.

Interviewer: I do too.

Interviewee: I'm definitely going to move to St. Croix someday. [laughter]

Interviewer: I think it's a wonderful place, too. I love St. Thomas as well, but I think you're right; they're both very different. There used to be a story I would hear about North side and South side being different groups of folks, that they're all, quote/unquote, of “French” descent, but they came from the North side settled to do something. The South Side settled [inaudible] do something. Do you know anything about that story?

Interviewee: So, I mean, if you look through – it's mixed up a little bit now. People are moving around. I think it's easier to live in different parts of the island. So, if you're a fisher in Frenchtown, you don't necessarily live in Frenchtown. You could live anywhere on island. Housing is crazy. Find a place you could live wherever you can find a place to live. The families who came to St. Thomas in the, I think, late 1800s at the very earliest, I want to say, but early 1900s came from St. Barts, and different communities landed in different places. And there were mostly fishers in Frenchtown and mostly farmers up on the north side because they would go up the mountain and live up there. It’s really cool. I actually went to St. Barts last October with my partner and his family, and we drove around. It’s a tiny island. You can drive around a few times a day, but each community kind of linked to communities on St. Thomas, and it was really cool. You could see it in people's faces. It's the same last names. We went to the little town where my partner's mom's family was from, and everybody just kind of looked familiar. It was really cool.

Interviewer: That's really neat. That's really neat.

Interviewee: Then some people have done their research all the way back to France, and they can kind of break down which families came from different parts of France to St. Barts, the surrounding islands, and then up to St. Thomas.

Interviewer: But it was an immigration from France to St. Barts –

Interviewee: To St. Thomas.

Interviewer: – to St. Thomas. That's interesting. Do we know why they left St. Barts?

Interviewee: Families left St. Barts for opportunity, for land, for money, for family, for jobs.

Interviewer: St. Thomas seemed to be that place.

Interviewee: It was up and coming. Still had lush green mountainsides, still had plenty of land. We don't have plenty of land anymore.

Interviewer: There's a lot of development. A lot of development. In my studies of Barbados, I've written about the importance of the littoral zone and about the concept of edges. You mentioned earlier in our discussion how you would walk with your dad and do edible/non-edible, and that strikes my heart because that goes back to all of the teachings that I got regarding the different plants and animals and all their uses and the fact that it traced all the way back to enslaved times. In order to augment the protein or medicines, or whatever, they would turn to these places, these edges where sea and land meet, and it would provide. How did your dad have the knowledge of edible?

Interviewee: He just liked to cook.

Interviewer: He just figured? Did anyone teach him? I mean, like, "Do you want to try this berry and know if it's poisoned or not?

Interviewee: No, he was a surfer from New York. He came down in the ‘60s because he saw a picture of a wave in a magazine.

Interviewer: Hull Bay, it must have been, or Caret Bay.

Interviewee: Hull Bay. He was the president of Friends of Hull Bay, an environmental association. I grew up on the beach at Hull Bay, watching him surf. I don't surf.

Interviewer: I’ve surfed there.

Interviewee: Bad swimmer. Definitely a disappointment to my dad to this day that I don't surf. I know. He won't say it.

Interviewer: But did he teach you about medicines, or did he teach you about the foods?

Interviewee: No, it was all cheffy stuff.

Interviewer: All about eating, huh

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: And was it herbs and fruits?

Interviewee: Just the food.

Interviewer: Just food.

Interviewee: Yeah, just seafood.

Interviewer: Oh, seafood?

Interviewee: Just seafood.

Interviewer: So, you were collecting things like whelks and what kind of –? I don't want to put the words in your mouth.

Interviewee: I wish that I could say that we were out there scavenging for meals, but it was really more of just a fun way to pass the time, pointing at different stuff.

Interviewer: That's really cool.

Interviewee: As I've grown up and explored the island on my own, I absolutely know that the island can provide. I love to just say out loud that I'm hungry and wait for a passion fruit to fall, roll down the road next to me. It happens. [laughter] Not in my office here. I am hungry.

Interviewer: You’re still waiting for it to fall.

Interviewee: My office does not provide. [laughter]

Interviewer: We've mentioned your office. We've mentioned you're a director, but we haven't mentioned what you're a director of.

Interviewee: Yeah. So, this is really fun. We are the newest division in DPNR, so the Division of –

Interviewer: Congratulations.

Interviewee: Thank you. Thank you. I just hit my one-year anniversary last week. We're the Division of Territorial Parks and Protected Areas. In a lot of places in the world, you have different types of parks. In the US, we have a national park, the National Park Service – quite famous. Then, you have state parks, you have county parks, you have urban parks, you have recreational parks. In the Virgin Islands, we have the National Park Service, which has a very interesting history, another one of those federal decisions that didn't include the locals, doing amazing conservation work, but that inception point is a little iffy We don't have a territorial park system, and it's something that the territory has wanted for decades. Our current governor signed legislation for the creation of the division of territorial parks and protected areas, and I was hired as director. I am mandated with creating a park system, which is wild. Talk about a dream for me. My job is to find areas and protect them. But what's really cool is that this is local government. Even though I'm not generational, I'm still a Virgin Islander who's been working in conservation, whether professionally at the department – I've been here for almost eight years, but I've been involved in environmental nonprofits for almost twenty years. So, it's me and my team. I have two employees and one fellow, and we're all Caribbean women. I have a woman who was born and raised on St. Thomas, a woman who was born and raised on St. Croix, and then my fellow was born and raised on Puerto Rico. I did not do that on purpose.

Interviewer: Well, it worked out well, though.

Interviewee: They worked out really well. They were the ones who were so passionate in interviews about protecting our home.

Interviewer: Are they all women?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Well, that's great.

Interviewee: [laughter] Yeah, it's really cool. I did not go out to hire a bunch of Caribbean women, but that is who the universe gave me, and they are a really phenomenal team.

Interviewer: Before you go any further, how are you going to continue to promote that kind of activity to continue to happen, not only making sure that all people get a chance, but especially Virgin Islanders get a chance, or Puerto Rican?

Interviewee: I have an unofficial motto. Actually, have two unofficial mottos in the division. From when I started, I was in here by myself. Before the fellow started, before I was able to hire anybody, I kept on repeating, I am making VI [Virgin Island] parks for VI people. This is not a federal agency. Not anything against federal agencies. I'm a really big fan, but this is something that we have to create for ourselves. So, if we make a park system that is what we need as Virgin Islands people, we have to continue cultural resources. We have to make sure that we are protecting areas, but we're also protecting activities, and we're also protecting families, and we are protecting our home. My second motto is, don't forget to feed the director. [laughter] Anytime we go anywhere, we have to make sure there's time to feed me. Otherwise, I get distracted, and I can't concentrate anymore.

Interviewer: I should have brought a hamburger with me.

Interviewee: No, it's okay. The important one is VI parks for VI people. I think we all have that written on post-it notes on our desks. It's the drive that keeps us going.

Interviewer: Do you see the potential conflict in that statement?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I love conflict, kind of. I like to look at it from afar. I don't like to be in conflict. I believe that if we build this park system well and with what we need as a community, it's going to be great for everybody, and that's going to be amazing. I want to hear that people are researching trails that go through culturally significant areas, and we'll have visitors from Sweden. I don't know. Yes, absolutely, come visit the park system when we build it. But it will be great because we built it for ourselves, and we're not going to build it with anybody else in mind.

Interviewer: I know St. John has that underwater trail, that National Park Service. Do you have land or marine-based culturally significant places that these things can –? I mean, do you have an eye on some of this?

Interviewee: Yes. The government owns a lot of land, and it's kind of crazy. Actually, how convenient that this is within my reach. Let's see if I could do this – pick this up without knocking anything over.

Interviewer: It's quite a brick there.

Interviewee: Yes. When I found out – am I out of my shot? When I found out that I got this job, the commissioner called me into his office to tell me that I had been selected because I was already in the building, already working in coastal zone management. He handed me this giant, moldy three-ring binder filled with handwritten notes and all these typewriter-written – this is the history of people trying to make a territorial park service. There are photocopies of deeds from the 1940s where land was donated to the government of the Virgin Islands for inclusion in the soon-to-be-created territorial park. So, talk about what keeps me up at night or what jolts me awake at three o'clock in the morning. People have trusted that we would have a park system for decades. This land is owned by the government. It's sitting unused. If you pull up MapGeo and search for Government of the Virgin Islands, there's land all over the place, but it's not managed. And so it’s terrifying but amazing. We've digitized this. [laughter]

Interviewer: I was going to say I hope you digitized this because, heaven forbid, there be a fire or something and then you would lose the institutional memory of the park.

Interviewee: When my fellow first started – she's actually a NOAA coastal fellow, and she was working – she worked with me here in the office for the first nine months, and now she's finishing her fellowship, working from home in Puerto Rico. But her first duty was to digitize this. She downloaded Adobe Scanner on her phone, and she scanned every single document in here, and then all these pages with handwritten notes, she transcribed.

Interviewer: Oh, my Lord.

Interviewee: [laughter] So, I keep this because I just like to give myself –

Interviewer: It's the perfect memory.

Interviewee: It's crazy.

Interviewer: It's like whenever you're feeling down, this kicks you in the rump and says, “Come on, we got work to do.”

Interviewee: Yeah. “Do it.”

Interviewer: So, this is both land that's been donated or government-owned. But what about the maritime side of things?

Interviewee: We will have marine protected areas. We have not scratched that yet because –

Interviewer: That I can see as being an interesting negotiation.

Interviewee: It's going to be a lot of conversations, and honestly, I want to make sure – everything I'm doing, I want to make sure we're doing it right. I am taking my time. I am flying under the radar. I've been here a year, and we don't have a park yet. Tere are days where I'm like, “Fuck, we don't have a park yet. What am I doing?” But we've created a division. We've worked with other government departments that have division codes, we have org codes. We have all the financial everything so that we are ready to go. We have applied for grants. We are moving kind of silently so that when it's ready, when we're ready, we have grants that we're trying to get for land acquisition. But I didn't want to be like, “Let's go get a park,” and then be like, “Oh well, we don't have rules and regs,” and, “Oh, well, the deed actually doesn't have very strong restrictions. So, in ten years, somebody could just turn it into something else. I should have gone to law school. I also should have gone to accounting school. The number of topics that I'm just – [laughter]

Interviewer: I can imagine.

Interviewee: So, with the marine protected areas, I want to make sure that we can go into communities and sit down with my staff. I love my staff, but we need a few more before this can be done really well. We need to sit down with communities and say, “Of this whole territory, where do we need to protect? Where do we need to protect, but you can keep on fishing?” We want to make sure that it's protected from development, that it's protected from all of these impacts. But you can go out and cast your net for fry because there might be a small area where we're like, “You know what? This mangrove system is not doing well. The fish habitat is not great. We can't do anything in this area. We need to shut off this completely so that this can still be good.” But we need to have those conversations. Right now, I'm not ready yet. But we've got ideas. There are a few properties, terrestrial properties, that have really amazing nursery habitats connected to them. So, yeah, there are some areas that I've got my eyes on, but we can't just do it. It has to be not just a conversation. It has to be a joint effort. It has to be something that is good for everybody. I want to make sure that the family who lives in a neighborhood near the beach that their kids can walk to the park and do a hike and that whoever else, who doesn't want to hike, can sit on the beach and have a nice, safe protected area, that the family can come camping, and have a clean area to camp, and that the fishers can still come and have fish to catch. All those things have to happen.

Interviewer: That’s a tough balance.

Interviewee: Yeah. [laughter]

Interviewer: Good luck. [laughter]

Interviewee: Thanks. We're fine. Everything's fine.

Interviewer: One of the things I really enjoy about St. Croix and the East End Marine Park is the amount of time that they've created, looking at the use, the different resources, both coastal, terrestrial, and also marine. As you're engaging, you mentioned – I mentioned to you yesterday when we were talking – are you in charge of now the East End Marine Park? And you said, “Not yet.”

Interviewee: Not yet. So, that's one of those things where it will happen, but I can't bring on an existing structure when I don't have the capacity to support them. There's already staff in the East End Marine Park. It would be like taking somebody out of their home to come into my tent where I'm building a house next door. You stay in your house. Let's build this up, and we're going to bring that over cohesively.

Interviewer: Do you see the size of that park in St. Croix being something that you could create a comparable size in St. Thomas, or is that kind of a model, or are you going to do –?

Interviewee: Every property is going to be different. What's really cool about the East End Marine Park is it's all marine. There are management plans for the terrestrial plots, but they're not officially parks. There is a lot of government land out there, and so I'm really excited to look and see and talk to the community about how many of those parcels we can bring in, so we can have – and like I said, it's going to take a lot of research and work, but theoretically, we could have a park that has terrestrial and marine, and you could drive into it. That drive out to Point Udall is beautiful.

Interviewer: Listen, you don’t understand. Every time I'm in St. Croix, that's what I do.

Interviewee: Yeah, you have to just drive out to Point Udall. It's amazing.

Interviewer: I was in (NREP?) in May with my daughter. It was her twenty-first birthday week. The second night we were there, I said you have to come with me on my favorite drive. I've always showed her the pictures. When she got there, and we got out right there, and we looked around, she said, “I understand.”

Interviewee: Yeah. Oh, that's such a beautiful drive.

Interviewer: She goes, “I understand why you love those spots so much.”

Interviewee: Yeah. Yeah, it's beautiful. But to your question about something comparable on St. Thomas, I think the closest is the St. Thomas East End Reserves [STEER]. That is already a marine protected area. It is three different existing managed areas –

Interviewer: Managed by?

Interviewee: They're protected. It’s managed by DPNR, but not to the same level as the East End Marine Park. There's not a facility, there's not a staff, but it is a marine-protected area.

Interviewer: If one had to say who were to enforce, perhaps somebody that went in there to go fishing or something like that, that would be the DPNR?

Interviewee: Well, that's DPNR anyway because our enforcement officers are in charge of all natural resources. It doesn't matter, as long as it's not a National Park, because federal land is different. So, Sandy Point is federally managed, and the National Park is federally managed, and we have a few Fish and Wildlife Service properties. Whether it's a park or not, the Division of Environmental Enforcement is still the enforcement agency. So, that doesn't change. We will, I imagine in a few years, have Marine Protected Areas managed cohesively but as individual units as well. So within STEER, there are cays and little mangrove islands, which are government-owned. They are protected by DPNR but don't have active management strategies. We could combine that into one managed area, just like we're going to take the East End Marine Park into, which is one managed area. There are also pieces of property that are two acres back behind (Sivan?) that's just overgrown with bush. To be able to go into that community and say, “All right, within walking distance, you can have a hiking trail. You can have a food forest” – baby food forest. They're small. St. Thomas doesn't have a lot of land, but each property is going to be so different. I have a piece of paper on my monitor that says, “The Land dictates its use.” You have to look and understand an area to really know how to protect it but also how it can protect us. It’s providing food. It's providing shade. Talk about our catastrophic global impacts. If we had more trees, the temperature would go down a little bit. [laughter] They're all these things that we can do for the land, but the land can do for us.

Interviewer: True. Very true. Wow. I was gonna say as a final kind of thing, like, what do you see as the future? But you sort of just summed up that question for me. I love your ideas of collaboration and also reading what your environment is telling you. You know what I mean? And looking at the webs of connections.

Interviewee: Those connections are so important. I mentioned earlier that humans don't see connections. We've got massive impacts of industry. We're just going to speak super generally. But people aren't willing to give up habits because they don't see that those habits are making those impacts. Oh, I had gotten distracted because I started talking about my TED Talk, which, look it up – TEDx, Interviewee Interviewee, “Trendy Environmentalism.” I don't remember what year that was. I think it was two years ago. I don't know. Anyway, I talk about how every single thing we do has an impact. Every choice you make has an impact on the world around us, and that can be good or bad. Sometimes I get stuck in the bad spiral, and just how we've destroyed everything in a really short amount of time. But we can stop it too.

Interviewer: True.

Interviewee: We can stop it. Maybe. I don't know.

Interviewer: Don't [inaudible] back on it. But I appreciate your optimism.

Interviewee: I need it. It's not always there. [laughter]

Interviewer: I understand.

Interviewee: But one of the things that we can do is to support our local fishers and farmers and keep that local network.

Interviewer: I think that’s the key message.

Interviewee: I know we just had – Mango Melee was on St. Croix over the weekend, and the Good Food Coalition was there, and their tagline is, “First we feed ourselves.” And I think that's really important.

Interviewer: That brings me – before we end – and I'm sorry to continue on. If you’re tired, let me know.

Interviewee: No, it's okay. I'm here until five, at least. [laughter]

Interviewer: After the hurricanes, how do you guys survive? How did the fisherman survive? How does the island eat? How do people recover? When I saw the photos of St. Thomas, I cried because it was so – I couldn't imagine waking up the next morning not knowing what to do.

Interviewee: I'm going to start with a happy story.

Interviewer: Please do.

Interviewee: In 1989, we got hit by Hurricane Hugo.

Interviewer: Hugo was a bear.

Interviewee: It was intense. I was old enough to be scared but not old enough to understand. We lost most of the top level of our house, but like most St, Thomas houses, we lived in a concrete bunker, and the bottom level was just concrete. So, top level, pretty much gone, but one of our neighbors who I had never met before. I was in kindergarten or first grade, I can't remember. One of our neighbors in North Star Village owned a restaurant, and he had giant freezers at his house where he kept food. We didn't know when we were going to have power. For like a week and a half, every night, he would cook for the neighborhood. When I think back on Hugo, that's what I remember.

Interviewer: A giant barbecue. [laughter]

Interviewee: Yeah, just eating with neighbors I had never met before. That's not what my parents think about, for sure. But I think what's really amazing that we are able to do in the Caribbean and in small island communities is when disaster strikes, we come together. So, after the 2017 storms – I live on my partner's family property, and so he and I are in a house. His brother and his wife were in a house. His mom and, at that time, his dad were in a house. The next morning, we all emptied our kitchens, and we brought all the food to his parents’ house and built a cupboard. We had not enough generator power for all the houses, but we kept that kitchen running. We had breakfast, lunch, and dinner together, and we brought friends in who were helping to clean up. We had every meal together for three months. We didn't bring any food into any of our other kitchens. I can't remember what they called the cards, but the grocery cards, where we got emergency funding. You could take that card to Plaza Extra. I went and I signed up, and I had our entire family's list of social security numbers, and I got one card with all of our benefits on it. We would take turns. One of us would go to the grocery store. One of us would drive in line, waiting to get gas for the generator and for the trucks – fill out. As an extended family, we did all that together. I think that that's something that small island communities do. How do we feed ourselves together? One of my favorite children's stories, and I don't know if it's like from a storybook or whatever, but a guy comes into a town, and everyone in this village says they're starving. He says, “Not to worry, I can feed you all using nothing but stones.” And they're like, “What?” He's like, “Yeah, I'm gonna make you stone soup.” He gathers three big stones, and he says, “Oh, I just need to put them in a pot.” One of the townspeople says, “I have a giant pot,” and he puts the three stones in the pot, and then he's like, “Well, this would be better if we filled it with water.” And one of the neighbors says, “My well. My well is overflowing.” Whatever wells do. I don't have a well. So, they fill it with water. He's like, “If only I had a spoon to stir it,” and somebody else has a spoon. He's like, “Maybe just one tomato.” And he keeps on saying, “Maybe just one pepper.” By the end of the story, the village has made a giant pot of stew, and he did it with just three stones.

Interviewer: From small contributions.

Interviewee: I quite frequently say that I'm making stone soup. [laughter]

Interviewer: That's a fantastic analogy. So, did you feel the same sense –? Do you feel like it's because you live on family land that that makes that more likely to happen? Or if you had lived in three different spots on the island, would you still have all managed to find a way to come together for that?

Interviewee It would have been whoever was on that property. Every neighborhood was doing stuff like this.

Interviewer: What about fishing? Did the fisherman go out to fish to help feed the island?

Interviewee: I think so, yeah. I'm trying to remember how long it took for fishers to get back in the water. I really don't remember. I was lucky enough to come back to the office pretty quickly. So, I was really just very just very focused.

Interviewer: Hugo was what –? Six months with no power?

Interviewee: I'm trying to remember. I feel like about – I don't remember when we got power back in North Star Village. For Irma and Maria, we got power back, I think right after Christmas, which wasn't that bad.

Interviewer: Which was September to January.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: I love you saying it’s not that bad. I can see myself in Miami, absolutely just sweating there. Miserable.

Interviewee: [laughter] I mean, it just becomes life.

Interviewer: But you know how to deal with it. It’s becoming a part of how to survive. You know it’s coming.

Interviewee: Now, it shouldn't be. I will say it shouldn't be. [laughter]

Interviewer: Correct. When hurricane season preps up as Earth stuff that people do? Before that June 1st date, are people automatically thinking about saving money, putting staff for the freezer –?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah. You start putting cash aside because you're not going to be able to buy anything with a credit card. We have a box with all of our extra IDs and cash. You eat less canned soup. Start stockpiling the soup and everything, double-check batteries, and stuff like that. It's pretty ingrained. Now, that being said, with hurricanes coming earlier, it's kind of like, “Oh, crap.”

Interviewer: You go to start saving up in January.

Interviewee: “I’m not ready.” Yeah, yeah. Crazy.

Interviewer: I can't think of anything else. If you got anything else you want me to carry away from this.

Interviewee: Probably, but I think –

Interviewer: I can tell that you love what you do.

Interviewee: I do.

Interviewer: I can tell that you love who you are and where you are because I can see the emotion in your laughter. But also, I can see the concern in your eyes.

Interviewee: Oh, yeah, no, we're screwed. [laughter]

Interviewer: [laughter] And in your humor. Thank you for sharing that with me.

Interviewee: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks so much. I love talking.

Interviewer: Well, I'm glad.

Interviewee: I love being interviewed. People don't believe me –

Interviewer: Well, you're sharing this with the world. This is going to go on the Voices website, and this will be something that anybody –

Interviewee: I have to confess to you. I will never watch it. I love interviewing. I love public speaking. I love it. I always joke, don't give me a microphone. I've walked into events and emceed events that I had nothing to do with. Somebody needs to be on the microphone, but I refuse to watch myself.

Interviewer: Oh, well, I hope you'll at least listen to yourself or at least read the transcript because I think you don't recognize the amount of great information and knowledge that you've imparted on us and for all those who see this, we'll learn a great deal from your involvement. I appreciate that.

Interviewee: We'll keep a happy face.

Interviewer: Keep happy faces. There we go.

Interviewee: We'll keep a happy face. For anybody who thinks that climate impacts are not real –

Interviewer: To keep a sad face.

Interviewee: – look, the Caribbean is getting destroyed, and we're not happy about it.

Interviewer: Good. Well, we’ll make sure that that message gets conveyed.

Interviewee: [laughter] I’m obsessed with these guys.

Interviewer: That's great.

Interviewee: I have them all over my office.

Interviewer: That's awesome. Well, thank you, Interviewee. I appreciate it. Yeah, more happiness.

Interviewee: All right. Well, thanks so much.

Interviewer: No, thank you.

Interviewee: That was really fun.

----------------------------------END OF INTERVIEW-----------------------------------