SANDY CAY FIELD TRIPS:
Annual Report for 2006

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INTRODUCTION

During 2006, the Island Resources Foundation, with local institutional and individual support from its associates, undertook ten field trips to Sandy Cay, primarily focused on the Rat Monitoring Program. As customary when visiting the island, participants obtained bird counts and made observations on the overall status of the island's flora and fauna, trail condition and recreational usage. Two of the field trips were carried out with Chris Thomas from Resortscapes, Inc. and six of the trips with members of the Jost van Dykes Preservation Society, which is responsible for trail maintenance and also, as of June 2006, responsible for carrying out the rat monitoring.

This annual report provides a summary of 2006 field trip activities, monitoring observations and overall Sandy Cay environment-related issues.

2006 FIELD TRIP SCHEDULE

Date	Participants	Activity
1/8/06	Clive Petrovic (IRF)	Bird count and general observations
2/19/06	JVD Preservation Society members C. Thomas (Resortscapes) J.P. Bacle (IRF)	Rat monitoring and general observations Trail maintenance and termite control Coconut tree count
2/22/06	Jost Van Dykes Society members B. Moody (RBF) J.P. Bacle, C. Petrovic (IRF)	Moody annual visit Review of environmental issues and ongoing monitoring activities
6/11/06	JVD Preservation Society members J.P. Bacle (IRF)	Meeting in Jost Van Dyke with Preservation Society members regarding rat monitoring, general observations, and trail maintenance issues
6/13/06	Dave Blyden, (JVDPS) J.P. Bacle (IRF)	Training on rat monitoring and other monitoring activities Trail maintenance
7/4/06	Dave Blyden (JVDPS)	Rat monitoring (under IRF supervision)
8/16/06	Dave Blyden (JVD Society)	Rat monitoring (under IRF supervision)
9/23/06	C. Thomas (Resortscapes) D. Blyden and Foxy Callwood (JVDPS) K. Lindsay and J.P. Bacle (IRF)	Trail maintenance, rat monitoring, and general observations
12/3/06	IRF staff and Bill Moody (RBF)	Ed Towle Memorial Trip to Sandy Cay General observation
12/9/06	Dave Blyden (JVDPS) Jean-Pierre Bacle (IRF)	Rat Monitoring Minor trail maintenance General observation

IRF Island Resources Foundation
RBF Rockefeller Brothers Fund
JVDPS Jost Van Dykes Preservation Society

POST-RAT-ERADICATION MONITORING

During all our trips to the island, we observed no sign of rat activity. Other indicators related to rodent behavior were absent such as tooth marks (gnawing) on fruits and branches and rat trails in the interior salt pond.

This year we replaced 4 old stations with new ones designed to be more effective in limiting crab access (Photo #1). Thus far, these new stations have proven to be successful in 75% of the case. In other words, at three of the four stations, the bait was not consumed by the hermit crabs. Because of this positive development, IRF will continue replacing the remaining old stations with the new model.

In June, David Blyden (JVDPS and caretaker of Sandy Cay) underwent on-site training to participate in the post-rat-eradication monitoring program. Since June, David completed 3 monitoring trips to the island and transmitted his observations to IRF. In 2007, IRF will continue providing oversight as David takes over the rat monitoring regime for the next 10 months.

TRAIL CONDITION

During our visits associated primarily with rat monitoring, the trail appeared in excellent condition. Trail maintenance activities were usually limited to removing palm fronts and minor pruning where vegetation has encroached.

Two years ago, Mr. Bacle (IRF) assisted Chris Thomas (Resortscapes) in cutting a new 30 meter trail section to bypass a section of the southeast trail that was damaged by coastal erosion and beach "foot" traffic. The abandoned trail section is now completely overgrown with beach vegetation and coastal shrubs.

BIRD OBSERVATIONS

Bird counts were made during all visits to the island (see Table #1). As in previous visits to Sandy Cay, bird observations were made along the entire trail loop and shoreline. A total of 23 different species were recorded during the year, which is three more then the previous year.

Although the diversity of species tends to remain the same from year to year, in June we noticed that bird activity on the island was very high, the most it has been in many years. This was particularly so for the perching birds, which were nesting throughout the island. Most active nests were from the following species: Scaly-naped pigeons (*Columba squamosa*), Zenaida doves (*Zenaida aurita*), Grey kingbirds (*Tyrannus dominicensis*), Bananaquits (*Coereba flaveola*), and Yellow warblers (*Dendroica petechia*).

Table 1. Recent bird observations at Sandy Cay.

Species	1/8/06	2/19/06	2/22/06	6/13/06	9/23/06	12/3/06	12/9/06
Red-billed Tropicbird	3*	2*	2*				
White-tailed Tropicbird					1	3	
Magnificent Frigatebird			1	4	1	1	3
Brown Pelican	1	6	1	5	6	2	6
Brown Booby	2	2	3	2	2	2	4
Laughing Gull				21*	1		
Royal Tern				4			
Briddle Tern				7*			
Least Tern				8			
Noody Tern				3			
Wilson's Plover							5
Semipalmated Plover		1	1		1		
Semipalmated Sandpiper					2		
American Oystercatcher							2
White-cheeked Pintail				2			
Scaly-napped Pigeon		2		19*	5	12	15
Common Ground Dove		1		2	1	2	1
Zenaida Dove		5		26*	2	8	5
Green-throated Carib		2	1	2	6		1
Gray Kingbird	2		1	8*	7		3
Yellow Warbler	6	7	6	16*	10	12	18
Bananaquit	21	11	22*	28*	14	16	21
Black-faced Grassquit				1	2		
* *nesting activity*							

SEA TURTLE ACTIVITY

Signs of sea turtle activity were recorded a number of times during 2006. Throughout the year we noted at least two dozen inactive nest pits within the beach vegetation line. During our last trip on December 9th we observed an active nest site along the west shoreline (Photo #2). The nest was partially uncovered by heavy surf-induced erosion. We estimated that the nest contained at least 20 eggs, none of which had hatched.

Our findings and observations will be forwarded to marine biologist Shannon Gore, who is engaged in the ongoing turtle monitoring program of the BVI Department of Conservation and Fisheries.

VISITATION

Team members visited Sandy Cay on at least 10 occasions during the year. As customary, we recorded the maximum number of boats anchored and people utilizing the beach at a given time during the 11 am to 2 pm peak hours. For persons walking the trail, we kept track of the numbers we encountered while engaged in our field work.

Visitation records with daily averages and annual estimates are shown in Table #2. Table #3 provides boat counts that Clive Petrovic took during the year from a vantage point on Tortola. Observations were limited to anchored boats only since he did not have a clear view of the beach. It is noteworthy that the daily averages of anchored boats in both tables are similar.

Table 2. Visitation at Sandy Cay on selected days, 2006.

	1/8	2/19	2/22	6/13	7/4	7/29	8/12	8/16	9/23	12/9	Daily Average	Estimated* Total Annual
Anchored boats	8	19	11	5	9	5	3	4	3	11	8	2,920
Persons on the beach	40	23	29	13	45	5	13	50	16	35	27	9,855
Persons on the trail	35	37	8	11	n/a	1	1	7	3	13	12	4,380

Table 3. Remote observations of visitation at Sandy Cay in 2006.

	5/27	8/11	8/13	8/20	8/27	9/16	10/11	Daily Average
Anchored boats	16	4	16	6	4	2	12	9
Time of day	2pm	3pm	3pm	1pm	3pm	3pm	4:30pm	

- annual estimate based on daily average

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Vegetation. Overall, the flora on Sandy Cay is in healthy condition largely due to the abundance of rain in the last few years. During most of our trips we observed many species with blooming flowers, for example: ground plants (*Hymenocallis caribaea* and *Sesuvium portulacastrum*); trees (*Plumeria alba, Coccoloba uvifera*, and *Pisonia subcordata*); cactus (*Pilosocerreus royenii* and *Opuntia dillenii*); shrubs (*Lantana involucrata* and *Jacquinia aborea*).

The only negative news to report is the loss of a large Ficus tree (*Ficus citrifolia*) on the eastern rock ridge. Following our September trip, Chris Thomas reported the serious state of decline of this tree probably due to an insect borer followed in combination with a fungus. We noted during our last trip in December that the tree was no longer alive.

Shoreline Erosion. In the last few years, many Coconut palms (*Cocos nucifera*) have fallen victim to seasonal shoreline erosion particularly along the western side of the island, and many more are in precarious situation (Photo # 3). Unfortunately, there is little we can do to counter this cycle. On a brighter side, we noticed an increase in coconut seedlings (self-sown). During our second December trip, at least six coconut seedlings were noted near the trail and along the shoreline (see Photo # 4 as an example).

Photo#1: New bait station #4 constructed of PVC pipes.

Photo #2: Turtle nest recently uncovered by shoreline erosion (December 9, 2006).

Photo #3: Mr. Blyden standing in front of an eroding shoreline bluff and tilting palm tree.

Photo #4: Palm seedling (3 feet tall) along the southwest beach zone.