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Educators Take Part in Marine Debris Teacher Workshop



[1]After participating in an all-day workshop on Tuesday at the University of the Virgin Islands on St. Thomas, 30 of the territory's educators are better equipped to teach their students about marine debris issues in the Virgin Islands.

With almost \$100,000 from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Marine Debris Program, Tuesday's workshop marks the beginning of an initiative that will fund marine debris educational and outreach programs in the territory through December 2017.

The goal of the workshop was to introduce the educators to new marine debris curricula and other educational resources that are both classroom friendly and relevant to the Virgin Islands. About 40 elementary educators that primarily teach science and math applied to participate, but there was only space for 30 of them.

Cait Goodwin of Oregon Sea Grant was on-island to discuss the creation and implementation of a similar debris education program in her home. While the Oregon debris education program was used as a guide to develop the territory's program, issues specific to the Virgin Islands were incorporated, such as how sea turtles often eat plastic bags after mistaking them for jellyfish.

"The idea is to introduce students to this global issue, but to do so with local relevance while promoting student involvement and citizen science," Goodwin explained.

During the workshop, educators learned about many aspects of marine debris, including its composition, abundance, sources, transport, impacts and solutions.

According to NOAA, marine debris consists of materials that are persistent, solid, manufactured, processed, disposed or abandoned. That means that things like decomposable food aren't debris but could be considered marine trash.

Kristin Wilson Grimes, director for the Virgin Islands Water Resources Research Institute and a research assistant professor of Watershed Ecology at the Center for Marine and Environmental Studies at UVI, said that the program is one of 15 out of 162 that was awarded funding after applying.

Grimes said she hopes the workshop helps educators teach students about the source of most of the territory's marine debris .

“It’s really important to understand that the majority of marine debris comes from land-based sources and is preventable,” Grimes said, adding that 30 teachers sharing this information with hundreds of the territory’s students really could make a difference.

Grimes continued, “In the spring, we’ll host linked beach and gut cleanups, so students can see how trash gets washed into guts at the top of the mountain, which then carry it down to the ocean.”

Participating educators were given what’s called a “beach box” full of sand and items picked up from the beach at Brewers Bay. The exercise helped them better identify marine debris and gave them ideas for hands-on activities they can use in their own classrooms.

One table of teachers and a UVI master’s student had trouble deciding if a bone constitutes marine debris and they all commented on how many chicken wings are left on the territory’s beaches especially after a holiday weekend.

Adam Guandt, a teacher at Antilles School, said his school has taught about marine debris in the past, while Alvita Benjamin of Gladys A. Abraham Elementary said there have been no such lessons at her school before. Benjamin explained that funding constraints limit field trips and that the beach box exercise would be an informative substitute.

To reiterate that the lesson plans are a work in progress, Sennai Habtes, a research assistant professor of biological oceanography at UVI, told attendees that their input is needed to help improve the content and how it’s taught.

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