
Identifying a network of Tropical Important Plant Areas (TIPAs) in the British Virgin Islands

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Abstract

The British Virgin Islands (BVI), a UK Overseas Territory in the Caribbean Sea, have more than 50 islands, keys and rocks. The territory is part of the Puerto Rican Bank Floristic Province that has an endemism of 13.6% with 292 endemic taxa, four of which are endemic to the BVI. The National Parks Trust of the Virgin Islands and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, along with local and international partners, have been researching and working to conserve the plants of the BVI for over 20 years. The botanical expertise, species and habitat management skills and robust datasets on the local flora and terrestrial habitats generated during this collaboration created the opportunity for the group to embark on a three-year project to identify the BVI's Tropical Important Plant Areas (TIPAs). Baseline plant data and gap analysis identified priority species and islands that required further surveys. After completion of fieldwork and data collation, a total of 3688 geo-referenced high-resolution (+/-10m) records from herbarium specimens and field observations of the priority plant species were used to: (a) prepare and submit to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species a total of 36 plant species assessments, including 25 globally threatened species; (b) identify highly restricted and range restricted endemics; (c) consolidate and agree a national list of 35 species of national high conservation importance. Analyses of land cover data identified five nationally threatened habitats in the BVI, each covering < 10% of the total national land area and in decline. Species and habitat data imported into a GIS were used by the BVI TIPAs national team during a series of workshops to apply the TIPAs criteria and identify a network of 18 TIPAs across 13 islands of the BVI archipelago. This recognition of BVI's important sites for botanical richness and threatened plant species and habitats, applying international standards to robust data, is an important tool for long-term species and habitat management to ensure the future of the BVI's unique flora.

Keywords: threatened species, plant diversity, threatened habitats, Caribbean, conservation

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