



WIDECAST

Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network



WIDECAST

BRIDGING SCIENCE AND POLICY FOR THE BENEFIT OF CARIBBEAN COMMUNITIES

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

KAREN L. ECKERT, Ph.D.

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Capis Beach Hotel, Heraklion, Crete (Greece)

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Can we imagine a world without sea turtles?

Endangered and struggling for survival, sea turtles push us to the edge of our imagination, the frontiers of our knowledge, and the limits of our political will. They define all that is ancient and seamless about our blue planet. They also define all that is deeply complex and challenging about modern fisheries policy, the sustainable use of natural resources in developing economies, and transboundary ocean governance.

Sea turtles once shared the Earth with the dinosaurs; they have quietly watched the theater of evolution for eons. Among the most migratory of all creatures, sea turtles will survive our generation only if nations join together on their behalf. To that end, the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) – a volunteer coalition of scientists, policy-makers, educators and community-based conservationists – has been working tirelessly for more than two decades and has achieved remarkable success in the developing economies of the Caribbean Sea.

International conservation is every bit as difficult as it sounds, but it's far from impossible. By investing in Caribbean people, people willing to collaborate to create a shared vision of the future, WIDECAST has demonstrated that positive change is possible, even across vast geographic (and geo-political) landscapes. With a history of successful innovation, integration, grassroots involvement and science-based

advocacy, WIDECAS T provides exceptional long-term program and financial value to its partners and donors.



*In joining together to protect future options with regard to the use of sea turtles, participants in the network recognize **essential linkages between a healthy Caribbean ecosystem and economic prosperity for Caribbean people.** A thriving biodiversity base brings economic choices, economic diversity, and economic wealth over the long term, whereas a depleted resource base is far more likely to invite economic dependence, restricted choices, and poverty.*

OVERVIEW

The Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAS T), founded in the Dominican Republic in 1981 ‘[to prepare a] Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plan ... consistent with the Action Plan for the Caribbean Environment Programme’, is a volunteer expert network and Partner Organization to the UNEP-CEP with specific emphasis on the objectives of its regional SPAW Programme.

With 55 Country Coordinators active in more than 40 nations and territories, WIDECAS T embraces the largest network of sea turtle research and conservation projects in the world, successfully integrating once isolated efforts into an effective, collective response to the challenge of chronically depleted populations. The network provides an essential link between grassroots concerns and expertise and international decision-making, specifically with regard to the SPAW Protocol.

WIDECAS T provides a unique framework for collaboration that emphasizes science-based tools to develop a regionally unified approach to the management and conservation of migratory species, using sea turtles as a model. Widely seen as one of the most significant information-sharing venues in the Western Hemisphere, the network has been instrumental in promoting best practices, training and institution strengthening, strengthening and harmonizing legislation, encouraging community involvement, reducing threats to sea turtle survival, and raising public awareness of the endangered status of the region’s six species of sea turtles.

WIDECAST is all about partnerships – building bridges to the future that encourage inclusive management planning, facilitate and strengthen conservation action, and help to ensure sustainable resource utilization practices.

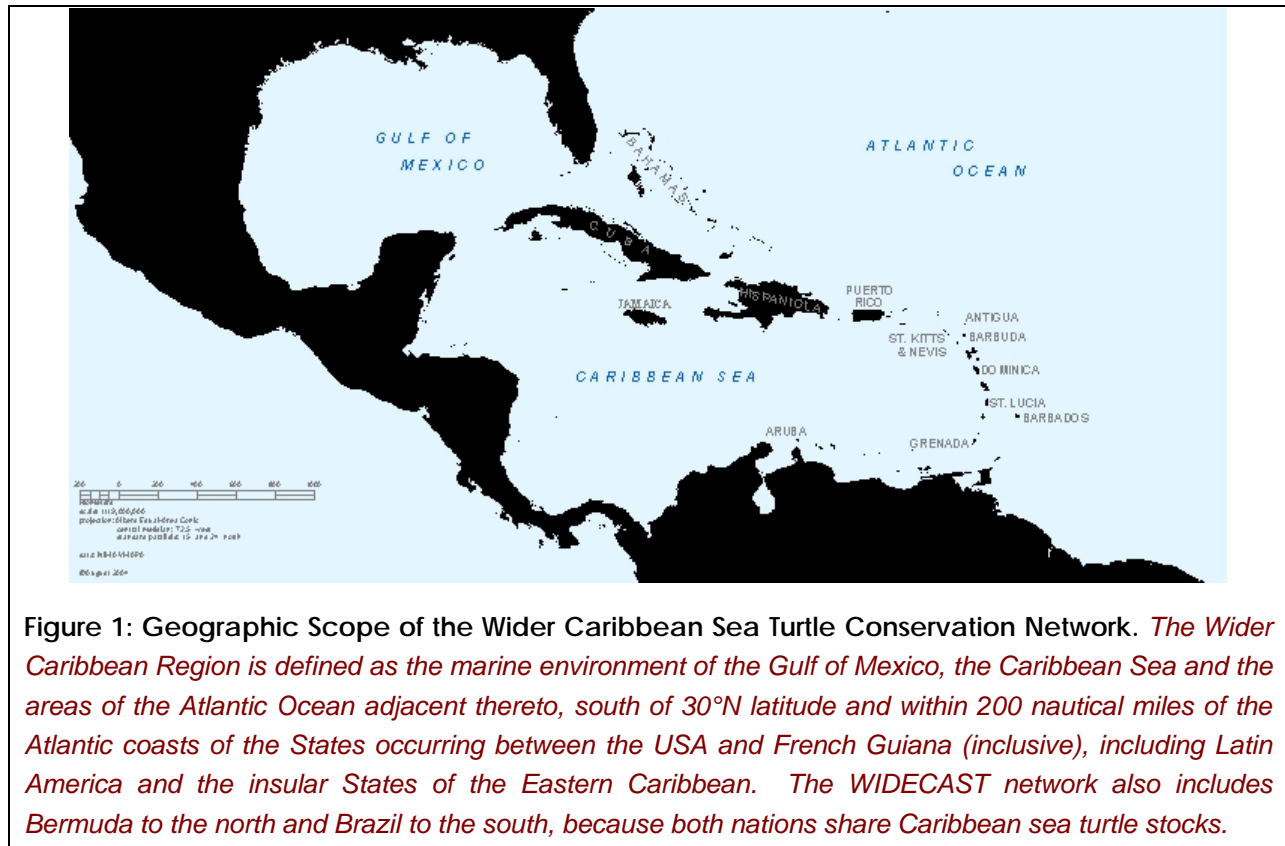


Figure 1: Geographic Scope of the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network. *The Wider Caribbean Region is defined as the marine environment of the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea and the areas of the Atlantic Ocean adjacent thereto, south of 30°N latitude and within 200 nautical miles of the Atlantic coasts of the States occurring between the USA and French Guiana (inclusive), including Latin America and the insular States of the Eastern Caribbean. The WIDECAST network also includes Bermuda to the north and Brazil to the south, because both nations share Caribbean sea turtle stocks.*

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

With affiliated programs in nearly all Caribbean nations and territories, WIDECAST is a proactive and inclusive mechanism for developing and disseminating science-based tools that empower stakeholders – including communities, Government, and civil society more broadly – to conserve and manage biodiversity resources, and that promote sustainable development at national and regional scales.

The geographic scope of WIDECAST is coincident with that of the UNEP Caribbean Environment Programme (Fig1) and further embraces Bermuda (UK) to the north and Brazil to the south. In all, 29 sovereign States (the 28 States associated with the CEP, plus Brazil) actively participate in WIDECAST and together contribute substantively to implementation of the SPAW Protocol at local, national and regional levels. As every constituent nation and territory is host to at least four species of sea turtle, and all

struggle with similar socio-political issues, all benefit equally from the capacity engendered by working together to promote sustainable conservation policies.



*Country Coordinators are often called upon to share their expertise, such as by participating in national delegations to conferences and intergovernmental meetings. It is hard to imagine where the region would be without the collective expertise embodied in the WIDECAST network, which has nurtured and trained many of the region's natural resource professionals over 25 years. **This grassroots involvement in regional coalition building has had a profound effect on the capacity of the region to assume a leadership role in issues of transboundary conservation concern.***

VISION

The collective vision of the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) is to realize a future where all inhabitants of the Wider Caribbean Region, human and sea turtle alike, can live together in balance.

CORE BELIEFS

WIDECAST is rooted in the belief that conservation must be nurtured from within, it cannot be commanded from outside.

By involving stakeholders at all levels and encouraging policy-oriented research, WIDECAST puts science to practical use in conserving biodiversity and advocates for grassroots involvement in decision-making and project implementation.

It is widely recognized that sea turtles will not survive in the Caribbean Sea without unflinching regional cooperation and coordination of conservation and management programs. WIDECAST – one of the oldest and most active biodiversity networks in the world, and working in partnership with the UNEP Caribbean Environment Programme – provides the mechanism for such collaboration.

With Country Coordinators and partner organizations throughout the Western Central Atlantic, the network is instrumental in developing and promoting best practices, creating conservation models, training and institution strengthening, harmonizing legislation, encouraging community involvement, and raising public awareness ... and in sharing this approach with other regions of the world, to broader benefit.



RATIONALE

Sea turtles, once abundant in the Caribbean Sea and serving as keystone species in tropical marine ecosystems, are severely reduced from historical levels, both in population size and range. According to the IUCN *Red List of Threatened Species*, persistent over-exploitation, especially of gravid females, and widespread collection of eggs are primarily responsible for observed declines at regional and global scales.

In addition to a largely unmanaged harvest that has spanned centuries, sea turtles are accidentally captured in active or abandoned fishing gear, resulting in death to tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of turtles annually. Moreover, coral reef and seagrass degradation, oil spills, chemical waste, persistent plastic and other marine debris, high density coastal development, and an increase in ocean-based tourism have damaged or eliminated nesting beaches and feeding areas.

Reversing population declines is complicated. Threats to sea turtle populations can accumulate over long periods of time, and can occur anywhere in the population's range. Because sea turtles are highly migratory by habit, what appears as a decline in a local population may be a direct consequence of the activities of peoples many hundreds or thousands of kilometers away. Thus while local conservation is crucial, cooperative action is also called for at international levels.

"We see WIDECAS^T as a model initiative. By defining conservation priorities based on sound science, promoting consensus and emphasizing public awareness, the network has successfully integrated once isolated efforts into a collaborative regional response to the shared challenge of depleted sea turtle populations in our region."

~ Alessandra Vanzella-Khourⁱ, UN Environment Programme, Kingston, Jamaica



*In the past decade, **implementation of STRAP recommendations has resulted in changes** in fisheries regulations; designation of protected areas; realization of long-term sea turtle population monitoring programs; adoption of standardized record-keeping and database management protocols; training of enforcement and natural resource officers; development of new public awareness materials; creation of new grassroots organizations; promotion of sustainable livelihoods in marginalized communities; a commitment to new partnerships (such as co-management); and a broadly enhanced capacity for sea turtle management within the nations of the CEP.*

GOALS

In support of the SPAW Protocol – “Recognizing that the ... protection of threatened and endangered species will enhance the cultural heritage and values of the countries and territories in the Wider Caribbean Region and bring increased economic and ecological benefits to them” [*Preamble*] – WIDECAST is structured to define and address national and international conservation priorities for sea turtles and for the habitats upon which they depend. To that end, *members of the WIDECAST network seek to:*

- Bring the best available science to sea turtle management, conservation, and governance and empower stakeholders to make effective use of science in the policy process;
- Train Caribbean scientists, managers and policy-makers in the science of sea turtle management through academic and field courses, thematic workshops, and mentoring and exchange programs;
- Provide an ongoing mechanism for collaboration within/ among range States;
- Develop integrated natural resource management models and replicate successful initiatives, especially involving partnerships with communities;
- Secure funding to develop and enhance management capacity within government and non-governmental sectors;
- Improve the long-term financial, institutional, and social sustainability of marine biodiversity protection in the Wider Caribbean Region; and
- Promote the creation of political and institutional mechanisms to ensure the "mainstreaming" of environmental concerns into other sectors, including planning, education, and media.



OBJECTIVES

WIDECAST's short-term objectives are to provide Wider Caribbean governments with updated information on the status of sea turtles in the region, to provide specific recommendations for the management and recovery of endangered, threatened, and vulnerable sea turtle stocks, and to assist governments in the discharge of their obligations under national law and international agreements, including the Cartagena Convention and its SPAW Protocol.

For example, in support of Article 10 of the SPAW Protocol – “Each Party shall ... carry out species recovery, management, planning and other measures to effect the survival of [endangered and threatened species]” – WIDECAST experts collaborate with local stakeholders to develop comprehensive national conservation blueprints known as “Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plans” .

WIDECAST's longer-term objectives are to promote a regional capability to implement scientifically sound sea turtle management and conservation programs, enabling a collective regional response to a common problem – the progressive disappearance of sea turtles in the Western Central Atlantic basin.

To this end, WIDECAST is committed to:

- Providing mutual technical assistance designed to strengthen the capacity of existing institutions, programs and expertise (at national and regional levels) to determine and evaluate sea turtle conservation priorities, and to participate in science-based management planning and project implementation;
- Strengthening the regulatory framework by assisting governments in the formulation of legislation, policies, and standards, as appropriate, for the management of sea turtles at local, national and regional levels;



*“By bringing the best available science to bear on decision-making, emphasizing information exchange and training, and encouraging harmonized practices, we **promote enduring linkages between science, policy and public participation** in the design and implementation of sea turtle management programs. In so doing, we invite a future where sea turtles again fulfill their economic, ecological and spiritual/cultural roles.”* ~ Karen Eckert, WIDECAST Executive Director

- Encouraging integrated resource management by assisting stakeholders in the establishment of mechanisms that will ensure a coordinated and collaborative approach to research and monitoring;
- Facilitating institutional strengthening in governmental agencies responsible for the management of sea turtles, as well as in relevant academic and non-governmental organizations, by offering training and exchange programs;
- Facilitating institutional strengthening by developing and promoting the basic capabilities and skills required to identify, analyze and resolve issues relevant to the region’s marine and coastal resources;
- Supporting the standardization of approaches and methodologies by developing and disseminating standardized procedures and criteria for sea turtle population assessment, monitoring, and recovery;
- Promoting public participation by promoting the active involvement of all sectors of society in the management and conservation of sea turtles;
- Encouraging policy-oriented research; that is, basic and applied research that supports environmental policy needs and decision-making and keeps policy-makers aware of advancing knowledge;
- Promoting the exchange of information among the region’s environmental agencies and organizations, thus strengthening information management capabilities and increasing communication among principal stakeholders;
- Promoting the joint management of transboundary resources by establishing, maintaining and/or strengthening mechanisms for collaboration; and
- Fund raising to support research, management, conservation, population monitoring, community development, and public outreach/education priorities.



NETWORK STRUCTURE

WIDECAS^T is comprised of Country Coordinators (sea turtle experts, natural resource officers, and community-based conservationists drawn from professional governmental and NGO sectors) in more than 40 countries. They must have significant sea turtle research and/or management experience and responsibility, and they participate in WIDECAS^T as volunteers. The network is coordinated by an Executive Director.

Country Coordinators ensure that current information is available to local and national stakeholders, and they take the lead in international collaborations. Each Country Coordinator works closely with a national coalition of stakeholders, including biologists, conservationists, resource managers, resource users, policy-makers, educators and others, to ensure that everyone has access to the dialogue, as well as to the unique products and services of the regional network.

Country Coordinators meet annually to evaluate the WIDECAS^T workplan, set priorities, and re-energize their collective commitment to fully recovered Caribbean populations. They discuss and rank conservation priorities, identify gaps, commit to the development innovative research and management tools, and create new partnerships that enable proactive and progressive avenues of collaboration. They remain in contact via email, program exchanges and peer-training, and the regular sharing of data and analyses.

Among the many tangible results of such active coalition-building and mutual support is a significantly strengthened (national) regulatory framework, full protection to the region's migratory sea turtles from two modern treaties (UNEP's Protocol [to the Cartagena Convention] concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife, and the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles), and clear evidence of rising sea turtle populations throughout the Central Western Atlantic.

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*Keeping abreast of the best available science and taking the lead in applying it to national and regional management challenges, **WIDECAST Country Coordinators developed and lead most of the region's sea turtle projects**, including basic and applied research, management and conservation efforts, and public outreach. They sponsor pilot projects, mentor less experienced colleagues, and give freely of their time, their resources, and their commitment to a sustainable future.*

DEFINING SUCCESS

As a result of WIDECAST's cooperative structure and apolitical advocacy, a number of important achievements have been realized in the Caribbean region in recent years, including a significantly enhanced use of science in management and policy-making, as well as dramatic improvements in the protection offered to sea turtles by national legislation (revised in more than a dozen nations) and regional agreements.

The network has successfully led efforts to survey critical habitats, initiate (sea turtle) population monitoring programs in nearly all Caribbean countries, reduce illegal sea turtle product sales, create science-based best practices for research, management and ecotourism, establish marine-theme curriculum activities in Caribbean schools, organize citizen involvement projects (nest rescue, beach clean-up), generate livelihood choices for poachers, and publish comprehensive national 'sea turtle recovery plans' in 11 nations (12 more are in preparation). More than 1,000 Caribbean biologists (including graduate students) and natural resource managers have been trained by WIDECAST-affiliated experts.

Finally, community-level involvement in management and conservation projects is clearly seen throughout the region, as is increased protection of critical habitat, enhanced public awareness, increased funding for sea turtle protection, and an inclusive and ongoing regional dialogue on important issues. These have led to innovative pilot projects that "think outside the box" and embrace concepts of co-management, incentive driven conservation, and multilateral approaches.

In stark contrast to the situation in 1981, there is now some level of sea turtle population monitoring in nearly every Caribbean country, two regional treaties devoted to the protection of all six Caribbean sea turtle species, and an end to the sale of tortoiseshell

products in the islands of the Eastern Caribbean. Country Coordinators have taken the lead in developing research and conservation tools ranging from Caribbean-based curriculum handbooks to database management software to training modules for rural communities keen to participate in eco-tourism programs. A Marine Turtle Tagging Centre is maintained at the University of the West Indies (Barbados) and a regional Sea Turtle Trauma Response Corps, among many other innovations, will soon be launched.

In 2002, UNEP adopted the sea turtle as the logo of the Caribbean Environment Programme and cited the region's efforts to "promote best management practices for turtle survival, such as community-based eco-tourism, alternatives to beachfront lighting, protecting coral reefs and other feeding habitats, and improving law enforcement and the regulatory framework" as evidence that, "through the Caribbean Environment Programme, governments are co-operating to create a more sustainable future for marine and coastal resources in the Wider Caribbean Region." (UNEP2002)

GOVERNING BODY

WIDECAS, Inc. is governed by an international Board of Directors consisting of 5 persons elected to three-year terms. They are expected to represent the organization, remain faithful to the Mission, and act at all times with the best interests of WIDECAS at heart. They have the following responsibilities:

- Legal and fiduciary: ensuring that WIDECAS meets all its legal requirements, and that proper financial controls are in place;
- Oversight: ensuring that WIDECAS is well run, to which end the Board of Directors has the power to hire or remove the Executive Director;
- Business practices: to conduct, manage and control the affairs and business of the network, making such rules and regulations as they deem in the best interest of the network and its mission;

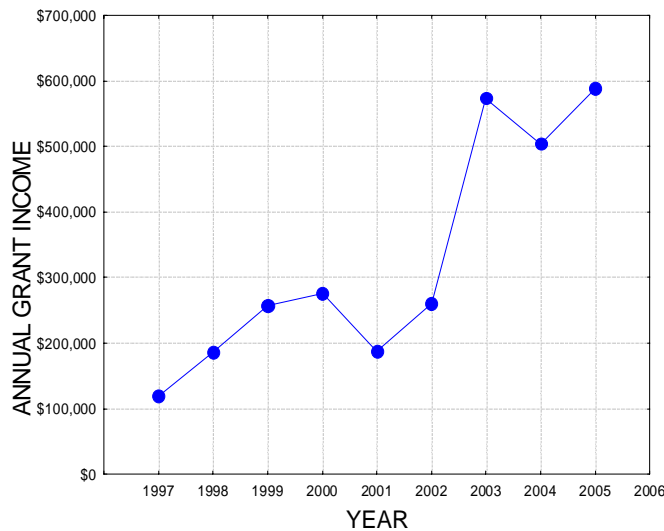
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The coordinating office of WIDECAS has, since 2003, been located at the Nicholas School Marine Laboratory of Duke University in Beaufort, North Carolina USA.

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Executive Director's Report – 2006 Annual Meeting of WIDECAS

3-4 April 2006 – Aghia Pelaghia, Heraklion, Crete



Caribbean sea turtles have been exploited for millennia, and are severely reduced from historical levels of abundance. Notwithstanding, the Caribbean is now the only region on Earth where you can find at least some populations of all sea turtle species rising. This is the direct result of some of the most innovative and persistent conservation planning in the world – all nations are involved and everyone is welcome at the table.

Figure 2. WIDECAST fundraising: 1997-2005

FINANCIAL STATUS

WIDECAST has a diverse funding base. For the period 1997-2004, 50% of funds were received from Government entities (USA and others, as well as intergovernmental entities), 22% from private foundations (mostly in the USA), and 11% from other nonprofit organizations (such as the World Wildlife Fund). Corporations (such as Anheuser Busch-Sea World, BHP Petroleum, and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines) contribute about 7%, with individuals and AZA members (public zoos/aquaria) contributing about 5% each.

Grants to WIDECAST have risen confidently over the years (Fig2). Moreover, 60% (29 of 49 donors) of all donors contributing to WIDECAST projects during 2003 and 2004 were repeat contributors, underscoring both the satisfaction that our donor partners feel in supporting the work of this uniquely effective and cost-efficient international coalition – and the significant extent to which new contributors join us each year.

The Executive Director, in partnership with network members, takes the lead in raising funds to support priority regional conservation initiatives: since nonprofit incorporation in 1997, the WIDECAST Executive Director has raised more than US\$ 3 Million for Caribbean sea turtle research and conservation projects. Now, with ever-increasing demands placed on the network for assistance in assessing the status of migratory populations, unifying and strengthening the policy framework, and reaching out to communities in meaningful ways, we have identified the need to cultivate reliable core funding for a small, international staff to co-ordinate the workplan and take the lead in fundraising.



THE WAY FORWARD

In order to successfully undertake an increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive suite of programmatic responsibilities within the Wider Caribbean Region, the volunteer WIDECAST network recognizes that a leap in its own institutional capacity must occur. Successful discharge of the priorities for the coming seven years (2007-2013: see BUDGET) will require a significant increase in staff attention and fundraising capacity. The network no longer boasts an agenda that the Executive Director, alone, can coordinate. Similarly, local partners need assistance in contributing meaningfully to coordination activities given the existing workloads of NGOs and the chronic lack of funding that characterizes the developing nations of the region.

The priority is to enlarge the institutional and implementational capacity of WIDECAST by securing funding for six (6) full-time multi-lingual staff – Executive Director; Director of Science; Technical Officer; Regional Coordinator for the Eastern Caribbean (based at the SPAW Regional Activity Centre in Guadeloupe); Regional Coordinator for Latin America; and a Latin American Senior Science Officer – operating from four CEP range States.

[Specific budgetary information for the 2007-2013 Work Plan, including staff and program projections, has been removed for website posting. ~ Karen Eckert, Executive Director]

“Through WIDECAST, my staff has received training at sites throughout the Caribbean and attended several international scientific symposia, which have enabled them to effectively communicate to the fishing community and the public the latest scientific information on the biology and management of sea turtles; to assist local school teachers in teaching conservation issues; and greatly enhanced our abilities to make more informed decisions surrounding coastal development, law enforcement priorities, etc.”

~ Bertrand Lettsome, Chief, Conservation and Fisheries Department, British Virgin Islands