

To : All News Media
From : Nicole Esteban
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ST. EUSTATIUS MARINE PARK RECEIVES NATIONAL PARK STATUS

Oranjestad. This year has been a major milestone for St. Eustatius Marine Park. It is ten years since the Marine Park first opened its office and started operations to install the first moorings for dive sites and yachts. During this time, the Marine Park has gone from strength to strength in its efforts to protect the 27.5km² of coral reef and sea grass beds in the waters around the entire island of St. Eustatius in the Dutch Caribbean.

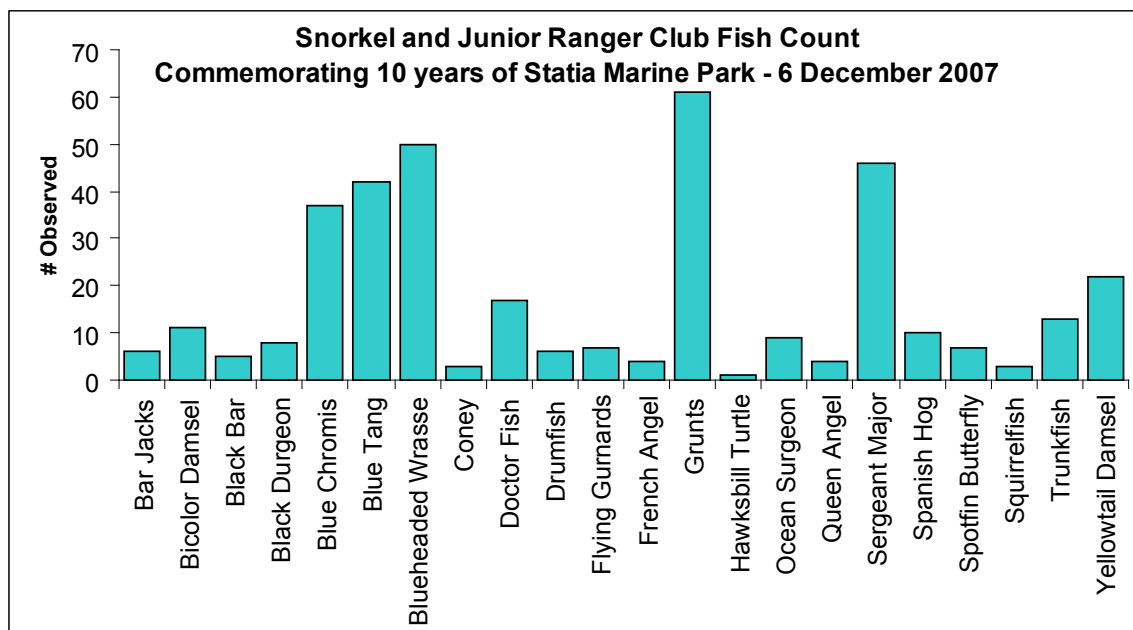
The events to celebrate this important anniversary commenced on 3rd December with an open-house and official opening of the National Park Visitor Centre. The highlight of this event was when Mr. Paul Hoetjes of MINA, the Department of Environment and Nature of the Netherlands Antilles, announced that the St Eustatius Marine Park had been designated by the Ministry as a National Park, 'St Eustatius has become the first island of the Netherlands Antilles to have two National Parks with the Statia National Marine Park – truly an example to follow for the other islands'. The Acting Governor General of the Netherlands Antilles Her Excellency Mrs. Adele van der Pluijm-Vrede officially opened the Visitor Centre and gave the keynote address focusing on the beauty of St. Eustatius and the challenges for conservation protection during social economic development. The President of STENAPA, Mr. Irving Brown, joined the Acting Governor General to unveil a plaque commemorating the opening of the Visitor Centre, and thanked Stichting Doen of the Netherlands for their financial support to professionalise the organisation over the past three years.

Commissioner for Tourism, Julian Woodley spoke of the Marine Park's efforts over the years to provide sustainable and responsible environmental management, 'today Statia boasts an environmental organisation that is active, vigilant and progressive ... because of STENAPA's consistency, inclusion of relevant stakeholders and professionalism, residents and visitors can see the fruits of dedicated work and sound planning. Today STENAPA hosts a series of programmes aimed at educating visitors and residents to the importance of responsible environment management'. National Park Manager, Mrs. Nicole Esteban, gave an insight into the diverse habitats that attract divers from around the world, and described the development of the Marine Park over the past ten years, acknowledging the important work of the Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance for their work to provide long term financial security through establishment of a conservation Trust Fund. The dive centres were well represented by Mrs. Rinda Hees from Dive Statia who congratulated the Marine Park on its 10th anniversary and explained some of the direct benefits for the dive industry 'buoys were a great help in both saving the coral and finding the dive sites, training new staff is now much quicker ... fish life has flourished with larger fish, more pelagics and also the rarer species'. The event was well coordinated by MC, Lady Alida Francis, Director of Tourism, and closed with an open house and viewing of the new documentary about the work of STENAPA.

During the entire week of events, the Marine Park, together with the St. Eustatius Tourism Development Foundation and Golden Rock Dive Centre and Scubaqua Dive Centre, hosted internationally-renowned photographer, Mr. Mauricio Handler who provided seminars and image workshops for resident and visiting divers on underwater digital photography. All divers were invited to enter photos to a Marine Park Anniversary competition and Mr. Handler was the judge of over 70 entries (macro-, wide-angle- and above-water categories) and presented prizes at the closing celebration party at the Old Gin House on 7th December.

A scavenger hunt for ‘treasure’ tags placed on the recently sunk wreck, 100 metre long Charles L Brown (former cable laying vessel) was highly successful and attracted divers from all three island dive centres, Dive Statia, Golden Rock and Scubaqua in a joint dive event to hunt for the tags. Prizes were awarded to all participants at the celebration party and ranged from original port holes and crew towels to commemorative mugs and photos showing the boat sinking in July 2003.

A number of activities were organised for children to enjoy the Marine Park festivities. Artwork contest entries were received from students at four different primary schools and Ruchandr  Redan from Grade 5 of Governor de Graaff School won first prize (snorkel set, souvenir fish identification slate, boat trip for two) for his picture of a diver swimming away from a moored boat and following a turtle. The Statia Park Splash welcomed over 150 children to enjoy a variety of marine-related games and activities (fish face paints, Pirates tattoos, ‘fishing’ for prizes, splashing the octopus, guessing weight of live lobster, colouring-in fish and coral artwork, Statia Marine Park treasure map, and more). All children (and many parents) had the chance to go on a 20 minute boat ride in Oranje Bay on board boats from the Marine Park, Dive Statia and Scubaqua dive centres. A fish training lesson and fun snorkel event was organised for members of Snorkel Club and Junior Ranger Clubs. The 14 participating snorkellers used a souvenir edition fish identification slate to identify the 29 fish and turtle species represented on the slate and count how many they saw.



Relaxed seminars were held at different restaurants each evening during the week to inform the local community and visitors about different aspects of the Marine Park. The guest speaker was Mrs. Kalli de Meyer, Executive Director and former Manager of Bonaire National Marine Park, who discussed the Marine Parks of the Dutch Caribbean with a focus on the development of Statia National Marine Park. Other seminars included a very well attended presentation about the biology and conservation of turtles around Statia by Sea Turtle Programme Coordinator, Mr. Arturo Herrera, and an overview of the benefits of the Marine Park in terms of nature and the economy by Park Manager, Mrs. Nicole Esteban.

More information and images of the events are available on the web site of St Eustatius National Parks (www.statiapark.org). These events were part funded by Stichting Doen of the Netherlands, coordinated in conjunction with the St. Eustatius Tourism Development Foundation and supported by a large number of local businesses, including Dive Statia, Scubaqua and Golden Rock dive centres, the Old Gin House hotel, Blue Bead restaurant, Golden Era hotel and Smoke Alley bar and restaurant.

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Photos:

- Statia Park Splash – boat ride for children on dive centre boats, different activities enjoyed by children from age 3+
- Opening of the National Park Visitor Centre – the Acting Governor General Adele van der Pluijm-Vrede (centre) with STENAPA President, Irving Brown and Park Manager, Nicole Esteban
- Winning photographic entries (wide-angle, macro, land categories)
- Winning school entry by Ruchandré Redan, Governor de Graaf School