

ST. JOHN TRADEWINDS

Island Green Living Association Launches Plastic Recycling Program While Calling for Further Action

By Amy H. Roberts

February 18, 2022



Officials cut the ribbon, from left, Sen. Steven Payne; Harith Wickrema, president of Island

Green Living Association, Del. Stacey Plaskett, Gov. Albert Bryan Jr., Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory, Kelley McKinney, executive director of Island Green; and Gary Barnett, CEO of the Plastics Division of PADNOS. (Photo by Amy H. Roberts)

There was much to celebrate at [Friday's ribbon-cutting ceremony](#) held at the ReSource Depot for Island Green Living Association's new Ocean-Bound Plastics Recycling Program.

The Resource Depot, best known for its aluminum can recycling program, is now collecting three types of plastics – commonly used for containers for water, milk, soft drinks, food, and cleansers – and processing them for recycling off-island.



Bales of aluminum cans line the ReSource Depot's staging area prior to the ceremony. (Photo by Amy H. Roberts)

But for Harith Wickrema, Island Green's president, the event was not about reveling in self-congratulations as much as it was an opportunity to look toward

the future of green practices and technology on St. John and throughout the islands.

Wickrema said it's time to implement a ban on all single-use plastics in the territory, including Styrofoam containers. "A bill is sitting in the Legislature's office," he said.

It's also time to seriously propose legislation to limit the number of imported vehicles that run on fossil fuels and put in place the infrastructure to charge electric vehicles, he continued.



A sign proclaims the number of cans recycled since Island Green began. (Photo by Amy H. Roberts)

The ceremony was attended by Gov. Albert Bryan Jr., Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, V.I. Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, and other officials, and Wickrema directly called upon them all to move forward on these initiatives. He also asked them to get serious about enforcing environmental laws that have passed in recent years but have not been fully implemented.

For example, the territory's ban on the sale of toxic sunscreens went into effect in March 2020, yet some businesses continue to sell these products. Unlike in Hawaii, information regarding the ban is not presented to visitors arriving by airlines, nor has it been posted on the V.I. Dept. of Tourism's website, Wickrema said.

Plastic straws have been outlawed since October 2019, yet Wickrema said he was served a drink with a plastic straw at a restaurant this past week.

According to the law, merchants can no longer package goods in single-use plastic bags, but they routinely send shoppers off with bags labeled “recyclable” that can only be processed on equipment unavailable in the Virgin Islands. “One supermarket even sued us for our plastic bag ban,” Wickrema said.

“Why do tourists come here? They come for snorkeling, diving, and boating,” said Wickrema. He warned that our beaches could become like some in Bali, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam, which have become choked with washed-up plastics. He urged officials to pay attention to the sustainable development goals that will be developed at the [United Nations Ocean Conference](#) to be held in Lisbon this spring.

At Friday’s ceremony, Ciena Clendenin, a junior at the Giff Hill School, stole the show when she spoke of the decline in mangroves and beaches she’s witnessed in her 16 years living in Coral Bay. “Sometimes the issue seems too difficult to face,” she said, but efforts must continue.



Ciena Clendenin, a student at the Giff Hill School, speaks about the importance of recycling while Harith Wickrema listens. (Photo by Amy H. Roberts)

“It takes 450 years for a water bottle to break down, creating problems with storage, the dispersal of toxic chemicals, and microplastics ingested by marine and terrestrial animals,” Clendenin said. “At the Giff Hill School, we held a grade-level competition to see who could collect the most plastics.”

Del. Plaskett responded to Clendenin’s comments. “Ciena, it sometimes seems that we adults are not hearing, but sometimes stuff goes under the surface that you don’t hear about.”

Plaskett spoke of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act which includes \$3.5 billion in weatherization to reduce energy costs for families, \$75 billion for electric vehicle charging stations, \$70 billion for power grid upgrades, and \$10 billion for NOAA projects to restore marine and coastal habitats. "We want to ensure the children of the Virgin Islands, and their children, that they will have the kind of pristine day we have today."

Sen. Frett-Gregory said, "We can no longer kick the plastic bottle down the road. Our young people get it. I hope the launch of this program will be the beginning of a structured recycling program throughout the territory. We have the vision; we just need the will."

Gov. Bryan spoke of his days as a youth in Savan when reusing materials was a way of life; an empty can became a container for screws and bolts or was used to start a plant until it rusted. "Nothing went in the garbage....three 55-gal. drums were the total capacity of the garbage bins for Savan," he said.

Bryan recalled a time when people ate less, planted gardens, walked everywhere, and lived in smaller homes that didn't require air-conditioning. "We're suffering from problems we created," he said.

He said the territory wasn't just recovering from the hurricanes, it was rebuilding for the future, noting a \$25 million plan which would include low-interest loans for residents to install solar equipment in their homes.

Earlier in the program, Wickrema called upon the government to fund a teacher in every school to lead programs in sustainability and agriculture. Bryan said, "We don't need 44 new teachers. We need to work with the ones we have."

Toward the end of the program, Wickrema said that his \$100,000 challenge grant to fund the Ocean-Bound Plastics Recycling Program had been met, thanks to a \$30,000 donation from George Rapier, the CEO of WellMed Medical Management, who attended the ceremony. Wickrema cheerfully handed his \$100,000 personal check to Kelly McKinney, the executive director of Island Green Living Association.



Three types of plastics – #1, #2, and #5 – are now being collected at the ReSource Depot. (Photo by Amy H. Roberts)

The Ocean-Bound Plastics Recycling Program is a partnership between PADNOS, a recycling company based in the Midwest, and Island Green. PADNOS is also buying the aluminum cans collected at the ReSource Depot.

Following the ceremony, Gary Barnett, CEO of the Plastics Division of PADNOS, showed the Source some products made with recycled plastics, including a hat made out of recycled water bottles.

In addition to supplying the equipment, [PADNOS](#) is buying and shipping the plastics collected at the ReSource Depot. When the bales of plastic reach one of their processing centers, “We grind it, wash it, dry it, and compound it into products people can use. A sustainable solution is also a profitable solution,” he said. Further details about their partnership with Island Green can be found [here](#).