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Individually or collectively we have the power to help the planet

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This year's Earth Day theme is "Our Power, Our Planet."

We, individually and collectively, have the power to green our planet. The ozone layer is recovering due to joint global efforts, and scientists foresee that it will fully close. This is just one example of how success can be achieved when we combine our will, advancements and sheer people power to mend man-made disasters. Nature is resilient and so is the power we yield.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, we are fortunate to have so many dedicated organizations, individuals, and government officials who are committed to advancing sustainability in order to benefit both our environment

and our community. Their efforts span recycling, food security and composting, pollution reduction, coral and marine life conservation, renewable energy, greening education and much more. With this level of commitment, imagine the progress that could be made if rather than working in silos, there was increased collaboration to harness our resources and power, while engaging and inspiring more community members to lend their strength to the cause.

Our Governor, within days of our request, convened a meeting with five key members of his Cabinet — Agriculture, Education, DPNR, Property and Procurement, Energy and Waste Management — to discuss an approach to enhance composting, recycling, greening education, food security, among others. Each Cabinet member committed to teamwork and combining resources vs. working in silos.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture both at times have funded projects with the same deliverables. However if we pool these funds and projects and look at the territory as one, results could be sustainable vs. one-time projects. This is true with regard to local nonprofits as well.

Thank you, Governor Bryan, Commissioners [Jean Pierre] Oriol, [Arthur] Petersen, [Dionne] Wells-Hedrington and Alejandro, Director [Ian] Fleming, and WMA Acting ED Griffith: a hopeful harbinger of what the future might bring.

One of the most critical factors in improving sustainability is to change the mindset of our community and encourage behavior shifts around what people typically consider “waste.” Much of the material that is currently being discarded can be reused, composted, or recycled and is a RESOURCE. This is especially significant considering that nine pounds of trash is generated per day, per person in the U.S. Virgin Islands and sent to our landfills, 40% above the U.S. average. Once material is part of the waste stream, recycling helps to mitigate the impact, but RETHINKING purchases and consumption, and reusing or composting items whenever possible, is the ultimate goal. This is especially true here since, for now, there isn’t a territory-wide recycling program and our dump sites are over-capacity.

Lifestyle changes, such as avoiding disposable plastics, can make a huge impact. Seemingly “small” adjustments — utilizing reusable shopping bags; avoiding plastic straws (though banned, some restaurants still offer straws), eating utensils and tableware; opting for reusable drinking bottles; choosing detergent tablets vs. plastic jugs; reusable cleaning cloths vs. wipes, etc. — go far in making a difference. Similarly it is important to choose natural fiber clothing since microplastics in synthetic fabric leach into the environment throughout the product lifecycle, contaminating water and food supplies.

Likewise, shifting from the use of toxic sunscreen containing oxybenzone, octinoxate and octocrylene, to mineral sunscreen with zinc oxide or titanium dioxide is essential to protect coral, marine life and human health. Continuing to build awareness of the territorial ban and healthy alternatives must remain a priority, as must efforts to educate people about not touching sea life or stepping on coral, not mooring in protected areas, etc.

Education of our young people is a key way to move the needle on sustainability because they, in turn, spread the word to their families and the community. VIDE is in the process of instituting an innovative Planet Green Force “Seeds of Security” pilot program that utilizes experiential learning centering on agriculture, a requirement of the territorial Agricultural Plan, while highlighting the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The mission is to foster awareness and ignite passion in the quest to expand food sovereignty, fight climate change, and embrace green initiatives. Thank you, Dr. Renee Charleswell, Cydney Meadows and Eco Schools.

Currently 97% of food is imported in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This is not sustainable. It makes us vulnerable to shortages, impacts freshness and nutritional value, and increases carbon emissions and pollution while increasing costs. We need to support our local farmers and fishers and make locally produced, healthier food more available.

In order to fully understand the growing process firsthand, “Seeds of Security” students will receive instruction and supplies to create their own container gardens at home. Progress will be recorded and rewarded, and families benefit from the “crops.” School gardens are being created, including hydroponics and/or aquaponics facilities, as well as instruction on how food scraps and other organic waste can be composted, with hands-on lessons students can take away. Agricultural and “greening” education, highlighting the circular economy, environmental studies, and climate science literacy will be incorporated into the curriculum and community engagement will be encouraged. In this way, the territory will grow the next generation of green leaders and advocates who help sow the “Seeds of Security” in the community.

We need to reset the territory to embrace the mantra of “rethink, reduce, reuse, recycle;” focus on food security and sustainable agriculture; and ensure our air, land and water are clean and free of pollution. The territory is strongest when we work together – businesses, academia, nonprofits, government officials, community members and other stakeholders — through collaboration and partnership. Let’s combine forces, resources, budgets and regular communication to power unified collaboration. Government, private sector and nonprofits combining resources, intellectual capital and creativity will empower us to build a greener, more sustainable U.S. Virgin Islands. “Our Power, Our Planet.”

— Harith Wickrema, St. John, is board president of Island Green Living.