

# Help build awareness early on in youth about environmental concerns

**Dear Editor,**

This Earth Day, as we take note of the rich bounty in the U.S. Virgin Islands, it is our youth who stand as our most precious and invaluable natural resource. This year's theme, "Our Power, Our Planet," is never truer than when we invest in educating and empowering our children to become the future leaders and innovators who will work to ensure a cleaner, healthier and more sustainable earth.

Sustainability continues to be a challenge in the territory. The Virgin Islands waste stream includes 62% recyclable or compostable resources. We have overflowing landfills with no room to expand. Yet territorywide municipal recycling is non-existent. Island Green has kept the equivalent of 6.5 million plastic bottles, 5.2 million aluminum cans, and more than 1 million pounds of used building and household materials, clothing, etc. out of the landfill. Many other organizations have played a significant role as well.

We cannot depend solely on government entities to manage sustainable waste – or even to fund external initiatives with that goal: termination of the \$20 million EPA grant that Island Green and our partners were awarded, and non-fulfilment of Island Green's legislative financial appropriation are examples. Make it an election issue. Demand each candidate include sustainability as part of



**Harith  
Wickrema**

their platform.

The Education Department adopted "Seeds of Security" initiatives as part of the territorial agricultural plan, in collaboration with Planet Green Force and Island Green Living, with the goal of providing foundational "greening" and agricultural education to K-12 students. The emphasis is on issues that hit closest to home such as food security.

Ninety-seven percent of the territory's food supply is imported and one of the biggest challenges for our farmers is the poor quality of our soil. Soil health is the prelude to human health. We have an abundance of green debris that could enrich our soil, but the lack of commitment from the government, WMA, and senators is hurting our farmers.

Additionally one of the best ways to reduce landfill fires and keep our air untainted is to start chipping, mulching and composting now. Instead, the VI. Waste Management Authority and senators are drafting legislation to amend the "ban the burn" law that was passed in 2017.

Ask the senators why it was "special ordered?" Voters have the power to influence senators to take action to reduce landfill green waste by chipping, mulching and composting immediately. Machines are here, and additional machines are needed. Materials were being processed but this has stopped. Instead, there is lobbying to spend \$6.7 million to incinerate the valuable material, robbing our farmers, the community and home gardeners of this much-needed resource.

As we inspire and build awareness of environmental issues from a young age, it instills habits and mindsets that carry on for a lifetime. It ensures logical reasoning and science-based facts prevail in fighting climate change. Children also bring those messages home to their families and communities, along with new ideas and innovations.

Let's engage 14,000 public school students, 4,000 private and home-schooled children, along with University of Virgin Islands (UVI) students and faculty, and create a force that will be so powerful, our islands will march toward a sustainable eco territory for generations to enjoy.

Let's collaborate as one with all government agencies, especially the Education Department, and UVI to lead the change, infusing sustainability into our daily lives by greening our education.

Under the visionary and energetic

leadership of Dr. Safiya George, collaborative acceleration of sustainable education would give UVI a higher profile globally and could be a game changer for the territory.

Power is within each of us, whether a tiny change like taking a reusable bag when shopping or challenging the corporate world by boycotting environmentally harmful practices. Let's start at home by standing up to restaurants that give out plastic straws and grocery stores that provide plastic bags.

Before every purchase ask "do I want it or do I need it." Buy used vs new. Repurpose. Say no to single-use plastic. Opt for reusable bags, containers, cups, utensils, etc. vs disposable.

Reduce consumption of electricity and opt for renewable energy when possible vs WAPA. Electric vehicles vs fossil fuel. Filtered water vs bottled water. Follow local laws that ban toxic chemical sunscreen and plastic straws to protect our marine life. Support sustainable efforts by nonprofits financially if you are able and through volunteering – and by source-separating and recycling where available.

Let's be an example for our youth, educating, empowering and inspiring them to live by the theme "Our Power, Our Planet."

— Harith Wickrema, St. John, is founder of Island Green Living Association, which advocates on environmental issues.