

Planet Green Force Expands 'Greening Education' in the V.I.

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Newspapers are full of stories about climate change disasters — devastating floods, untamable wildfires, melting ice caps, and migrating microbes. Meanwhile, violence escalates as world powers fight to expand the flow of fossil fuels, which directly cause climate change.

Harith Wickrema, president of [Island Green Living](#), doesn't let the headlines get him down. Instead, he's focusing on the future through Island Green Living's latest initiative, Planet Green Force.

An international nonprofit organization dedicated to environmental education and sustainable practices, Planet Green Force's ideals echo three keywords — "Hopeful, resilient, and kind" — that coincidentally were highlighted in the latest episode of TV hit "Ted Lasso."

On Friday, Wickrema and other Island Green Living board members presented a \$50,000 check to the Gifft Hill School on St. John to serve as the territory's first school to put Planet Green Force into action.

"From pre-K, if we start teaching about the environment and leading a sustainable lifestyle, in a generation from now we'll have a workforce with a mindset to tackle climate change and perhaps overcome it," Wickrema said.



Darianny Peguero, grade 10, second from left, holds the check for \$50,000 from Island Green Living to launch Planet Green Force. From left: Liz Kinsella, GHS Head of School; Peguero, grade10; Leanna O'Neal, grade 8; Wiley Batten, grade 6; Cleo Kinsella, grade 12; Harith

Wickrema, Island Green President and Founder of Planet Green Force; Curtis Penn, Island Green Board Member and Treasurer. (Photo courtesy Island Green Living)



The Giffth Hill School was a natural place to start. Their curriculum has long included programs in gardening, and more recently in hydroponics and aquaponics. Students grow vegetables and study their nutritional value, and then learn to cook and present their harvest through the culinary arts program. With Island Green Living's encouragement, they've recycled aluminum cans and phased out the use of single-use plastics.



Giffth Hill School 8th grader Kevin Williams works with the Upper Campus aquaponics system. (Photo courtesy Giffth Hill School)

The establishment of Planet Green Force, which was developed in collaboration with UNESCO, allows the school to expand its efforts toward sustainability.

"PGF supports the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and incorporates principles associated with UNESCO's Greening Education Partnership, Climate Science Literacy, and related environmental education frameworks," according to its [website](#).

In practice, its goal is to empower young people to become advocates, innovators, and leaders in building a more sustainable world. Plans include establishing a Planet Green Force Society, which will implement research, writing, field trips, and competitions.

As drought conditions worsened in the territory this past year, food security has become an increasingly important issue. One core element of [Planet Green Force is its Seeds of Security Program](#), which focuses on learning to grow and prepare nourishing food from seed to table and incorporating the practice of composting.

As part of its Seeds of Progress pilot year, Giffit Hill students in grades 6-8 will begin planting chaya, a highly nutritious and easy-to-grow plant that will be featured as a signature ingredient in a school snack and later at a Farm-to-table dinner. Students will track metrics including germination rates, growth rates, and quantity of harvest.



EARTH teacher Motali Sofer-Greer shows third graders Aksel Tarr, Harper Neil, and Dalton Hedy how to plant basil seeds in the class's aquaponics system. (Photo courtesy Giffit Hill School)

In the upcoming year, students will take on research projects centered around sea grass, mangroves and coral, with a special presentation potentially timed for World Seagrass Day on March 1.

"With regard to our islands, we've had a [severe drought](#), which has brought up food security," said Wickrema. "We have [water security issues](#), and [energy security issues](#). We've been observing depletion of corals, seagrasses, mangroves. We've seen the lack of will to compost, the continuing influx of single use plastics. These are some of the reasons we're launching Project Green Force. At

PGF, we believe that since we were able to overcome the depletion of the ozone layer, we can tackle climate change.”



Third graders Greer McCoy, Banks Batten, Cayden Mahabir, and Rennard Prentice look for shrimp and guppies in the class's aquaponics system. (Photo courtesy Giff Hill School)

As they become more familiar with UNESCO's climate science education framework, students will be expected to share their practices at home and in the community. Giff Hill School students will collaborate with students from the Julius E. Sprauve School on at least one joint project this school year.

Planet Green Force has operated in Sri Lanka since 2024 at the country's largest public school, serving 7,000 male students in grades 1–13. It happens to be Wickrema's alma mater.

"I went to my old school, Ananda College, in Sri Lanka and met with the head of the school. He agreed to let me launch Planet Green Force there," said Wickrema. "We're building a Sustainability Center. The chief engineer, architect and chief contractor are my classmates from kindergarten. We have plans to partner with local girls' schools and expand to Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, and Buddhist parochial schools."

Progress on the program in Sri Lanka during these last two years has been a source of inspiration for Wickrema as the environmental movement in the Virgin Islands hit a major setback. Under the Biden administration in 2024, Island Green Living collaborated with nearly 10 local nonprofits to win a \$20 million federal grant. It would have provided funding to establish a comprehensive recycling program throughout St. Thomas and St. John.



Planet Green Force is constructing establishes Sustainability Center at Ananda College in Sri Lanka. (Photo courtesy Island Green Living)

But before the press release announcing the grant could be published in 2025, the Trump administration cut the funding.

Island Green Living continues to hold on to its vision for comprehensive recycling throughout the territory. The organization is hoping to raise funds through its [annual raffle](#) to win a St. John getaway valued at \$15,000. Tickets are now on sale, and the drawing will be held on Sept. 30.

"We are aligned with the principles of UNESCO," said Wickrema. "We must arm ourselves with the most powerful tool — education, and in this case, 'greening' education. We can help shape a more resilient future for our territory and beyond."
