

REVISION 1, July 17

**Testimony of Harith Wickrema, President
Island Green Living Association
Before the
Committee on Rules and Judiciary
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States of America
on
Nomination to: Virgin Islands Conservation District, Land Occupier –
District of St. John**

July 18, 2024, 11 am

Good morning.

I am Harith Wickrema, president of Island Green Living Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding sustainability and food security in the territory and beyond. First I would like to say thank you to Senator Capehart for the time she graciously spent on the phone with me yesterday in preparation for this hearing. Your insights are extremely valuable and very much appreciated. I am honored to have been nominated by the Governor to serve on the board of the Virgin Islands Conservation District, and I embrace the prospect of being part of efforts to revitalize the role this important entity can serve for the people of the territory.

As those who know me can attest, I have been advocating for the conservation and protection of the territory's natural resources since my arrival here in 2008 – and indeed my dedication to sustainability and environmental responsibility spans my entire life, going back to my schoolboy days and throughout my career.

I fell in love with St. John and the USVI while visiting in my capacity as president of Harith Productions, my event management company, and decided to put roots down here. I have served on the board of Island Green Living on a voluntary basis since 2013, and as board president for the last eight years. The organization's conservation accomplishments over its twenty-year history make me proud. We support sustainable "resource" management on St. John, creating green jobs with benefits and a living wage.

I use the word "resource" vs. "waste" because one of the things that is very near and dear to my heart is changing the way people view trash – so much of it is a resource that has value. Our programs include ocean-bound plastic and aluminum collection and recycling, and the ReSource Depot reuse store, which provides a clearinghouse for donated building, household and other materials that would otherwise waste away in the landfill. Our efforts to date have extended the productive life cycle of more than 3.6 million aluminum cans, 90,000 pounds of ocean-bound plastics and one million plus pounds of building & household materials. What's more, we have been strong advocates of expanding source separation and recycling across the territory. In fact, I served on the Governor's Recycling Task Force under Governor Mapp.

Additionally the organization supports food security, clean energy, community education and green advocacy including successful efforts to ban toxic sunscreen to protect our coral, marine life and human health; plastic bags and straws. Recently we held an informative PLANET vs. PLASTICS community event focused on the plastic pollution crisis, health and environmental dangers, and viable solutions, at which the committee

vice chair, Senator Milton Potter, here today, took part. We have also held composting demos and forums and are partners in the “Share the Sun” solar energy affordability program.

I am humbled to have personally received the EPA Environmental Champion Award in 2017. Island Green was honored with a “Commitment to Action” citation by the Clinton Foundation in 2020, a Clinton Global Initiative / Island Innovation “Sustainable Company of the Year” award in 2022, and the GuideStar Gold Seal in 2023.

Highlighting my commitment to food security, I served on the Governor’s Agricultural Plan Task Force, charged with developing an agricultural plan to increase food sovereignty in the territory, and I am now on the Local Food and Farm Council, responsible for overseeing its implementation. Key to this is the thoughtful and responsible management of our natural resources for the benefit of the agricultural community. I look forward to being part of efforts to strengthen this vital endeavor and collaborate with other entities and agencies to see it to fruition. We are stronger when we work together.

Our green and brown debris is definitely NOT waste – it is a valuable RESOURCE that can be returned to nourish and enrich our soil through composting. Our farmers and agricultural sector are in desperate need of compost, and the people of the territory are in desperate need of our farmers’ success.

I am gratified to have been a part of the “Ban the Burn” movement following the 2017 hurricanes, which successfully prevented the burning of

vegetative debris brought down by the storms. In my capacity as volunteer VI Waste Management Chairman, which I held from January 2016 – March 2018, I helped develop a Debris Management Plan that called for chipping and composting of these resources. The ban contributed to the territory's excellent air quality, among only three places in the world meeting the WHO's clean air standards. Unfortunately however, crucial elements of Act 8018, which included a mandate to start chipping and composting the material, was not followed.

Because this, a fire at the green debris area of the Bovoni landfill last year took weeks and a million dollars to extinguish. The smoke put some of our most vulnerable community members, including children and seniors, at risk and forced businesses and schools to close. This air pollution was due directly to a lack of proper natural resource management.

As a result, Waste Management has stopped accepting vegetative debris. This forces people to dump green waste, at times with household trash to avoid two trips, which causes stormwater runoff, especially toxic during heavy rains. It is not sustainable. We need to get serious about putting this natural resource to good use through territory-wide composting.

Prior to my move to the territory, I was a faculty member at Temple University and introduced the school's first sustainable event management curriculum while running Harith Productions. I have been a staunch advocate for sustainability throughout my career, with multiple awards including Greenest Event Planner Award, International Event Planner of the Year Award, along with more than 80 other awards and nominations. As chairman of the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE), I

implemented sustainability as a key component in measuring and rewarding success in the incentive industry.

I am deeply passionate about educating the next generation of green ambassadors and to that end, have collaborated with UNESCO to launch Planet Green Force, envisioned as a worldwide league for youth K-12 with the mission to educate, engage, build awareness and mount meaningful change in eradicating hunger, battling global warming, embracing green initiatives and fighting for environmental justice. PGF has been inaugurated in Sri Lanka and I am working closely with the VI Department of Education commissioner and the new sustainability director to embed it into our young people's schooling, titled "Seeds of Security."

Where I grew up, sustainability was simply a way of life – people did without and there was very little waste. This instilled in me a concern and respect for the environment from a young age that continues to inspire and motivate me today.

The wealth of experience and expertise I've outlined I believe would be an asset to the VI Conservation District, and I would be gratified to be part of the Board. My key priority areas would be to encourage widespread composting; enhance green education, both of our young people and also sustainability education and training for our farming community; and to promote collaboration, communication and partnership between government departments, CBOs, our agricultural community and other entities to ensure we are all working in concert toward goals. For example, Island Green is working with other nonprofits on an EPA Environmental and

Climate Justice Community Change Grant proposal that could bring in \$20 million to aid with territory-wide composting, recycling, clean drinking water and education should we win the funds.

In closing, I would like to emphasize my dedication and the tenacity I pledge to bring to the Virgin Islands Conservation District should my nomination be approved. There is so much we can accomplish. I feel I have been blessed over the years and at this point in my life, I am committed to giving back by serving the community and supporting environmental and educational causes. In addition to my volunteer efforts, I have donated nearly half a million dollars to territory charitable organizations to date. I would be honored to serve on the VI Conservation District board and work collaboratively with others across the territory to continue to further resiliency.

Thank you.