



“Nature Foundation St. Maarten 2020-2021 Junior Rangers”

Funded by the American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine and
the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied



American University
of the Caribbean
School of Medicine



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Project Information

In 2020 the Nature Foundation St. Maarten launched its first year-long Junior Ranger Program. This program was developed to help educate St. Maarten's youth by raising awareness about the state of our natural environment on the island. Several islands throughout the Caribbean already have a strong and established program for Junior Rangers or snorkel clubs which lead to better community involvement and a sense of responsibility for local youth to take part in the preservation of these resources.

Many of the residents of St. Maarten feel little responsibility for the health and protection of their environment, environmental and nature education is insufficient available on the island that leads to less care for our natural habitats and environment. However, the interest in making St. Maarten a better and more sustainable island is there. Education about the importance of our nature can highly increase the care for St. Maarten's environment. To facilitate the spread of education the Nature Foundation has formed a Junior Ranger Program for the youth of St. Maarten, which initially will run from August 2020 until February 2021. This program is a popular one on other islands in the Caribbean and produces students who are motivated and properly educated to become ambassadors for the environment and natural habitats.

The experiences of this program will help members become conservation advocates who will lead to public support of higher protection of our natural resources focusing specifically on coral reefs. As the local youth better understands the value of these natural resources they will pollute less and become ambassadors for its protection. This knowledge will be the difference, as these students become adults and decision makers on our island to secure a better future for the environment of St. Maarten.

Events and Equipment Funded by Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied

Coral Scuba Diver Course

Funding from the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied gave four local students ages 12-14 the opportunity to participate in the Coral Scuba Diver Course. The students that were accepted attend four different local schools on the island of St. Maarten. The course took place over several weeks during which students learned the basics of scuba diving, how to be an eco-friendly diver, the basics of coral education, the threats facing St. Maarten's coral reefs, and what is being done to help protect them, as well as necessary advanced diving skills.

Throughout several classroom and pools sessions and four open water dives these students received their PADI Junior Open Water Diver Certification and their Nature Foundation Coral Scuba Diver Awareness Certificate. This is an invaluable experience for the students who have now been able to see our underwater ecosystem firsthand at an early and impressionable age. Exposing these students to the beauty of our coral reefs will instill a sense of responsibility to protect and preserve this natural resource and encourage them to be conservation ambassadors within their communities.



In addition to receiving this amazing lifetime certification these four students were able to purchase basic scuba gear including masks, snorkels, and fins. Being able to learn to dive in gear that fit them properly made an exceptional difference for these students and they were able to choose gear that they can use for future dive or snorkel experiences, many of whom would not have been able to afford to do so. Personal gear including masks also enhanced safety protocol during these courses. Many of these students would not have been able to invest the necessary funds to purchase their own equipment.



Events and Equipment Funded by the American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine.

Monthly Educational Activities

Funding from the American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine (AUC) provided the opportunity for the Nature Foundation Junior Rangers to attend monthly meetings which included a learning/educational presentation session and a practical application of the skills learned.

Mangroves of St. Maarten- During this activity the student learned about the island's Mangroves, the threats they are facing, and what can be done to help preserve them. After the presentation the students kayaked into the mangroves to clean up garbage that has collected there.



The effects of Single-Use Plastic- For this activity the students took part in a beach clean-up at Mullet Bay Beach along with several members of the AUC Medical Fraternity Phi Chi. After collecting and measuring the garbage the students had a discussion about the negative effects of single-use plastic and how to limit their use of these items.



Native Flora and Fauna of St. Maarten- The Junior Rangers took a 'field trip' to Les Fruits de Mer on the French side of the island to view their amazing center with materials that cover native, non-native, endemic, invasive, and naturalized species. After looking through the materials there the students took part in two scavenger hunts around the facility that helped them explore the topic of plants and animals of St. Maarten event further. The students also

received two educational books about the plant and animal life of St. Maarten to take with them as personal resources.



The Junior Rangers took part in many more events throughout the year including a virtual Bio-Quiz, Coral Education Snorkel, an activity highlighting the importance of volunteering, and much more. These students were highly motivated and interested in all of the topics covered. Often after their presentations they would ask what more could be done and how else they could help. They acted as important conservation advocates within their communities and inspired friends and family members to join volunteer efforts with the Nature Foundation.

Materials

Funding provided by the American Medical University of the Caribbean also provided rashguard shirts for all the Junior Rangers members. These shirts are UPF 50 protective against the sun and can be worn in and out of the water. With the Nature Foundation logo and motto “Nature is Our Future” printed on them the Rangers will be able to wear these rashguards to show their participation in this amazing program and support of the Foundation’s efforts.



Project Conclusion

The Nature Foundation Junior Rangers Program provided these students an amazing opportunity to learn about several different aspects of our natural environment. These topics are often not covered in general school curriculum in St. Maarten. As such it was the first time they had been given in-depth knowledge about these topics and the opportunity to make a physical impact on the health of our island. Throughout their time as Junior Rangers these four students acted as conservation advocates and leaders among their peers.

Inspiring younger generations to value and protect their natural resources is an essential part of conservation. These students will, one day, be in a position of leadership. If from a young age they can learn that these ecosystems are essential and must be protected they are more likely to value them as adults. There are many Dutch Caribbean islands that currently have long standing and successful Junior Rangers programs that have led to an excellent source of volunteers and educated residents that value and protect their islands. It is essential that these programs be established on St. Maarten so that our island is given its best chance of endurance against the many threats that face our delicate ecosystems.

Through presentations, courses, hands on activities, and diving certifications the Nature Foundation introduced these St. Maarten students to in depth nature education. By a great measure of success these students learned and retained information about many conservation topics and were very involved in discussion about what threatens them most and how we can protect them.

The main goal of the Nature Foundation Junior Rangers Program to increase awareness and knowledge about the importance of protecting our natural environment and to urge the youth to feel a sense of responsibility to safeguard this significant ecosystem to secure its existence in the future. With the support of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied and the American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine the Nature Foundation was able to succeed in this goal. Projects like the Junior Rangers are very important for the future of our island and should be a focus for our communities.