

Blue Economy/Marine & Yachting Tourism

*Insights, Stakeholder-Recommended Policy Options and Minutes of
the sector meeting held at Maria's by the Sea, 4 March 2025*



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VI National Tourism Policy Meeting No. 1

Key Insights from the Blue Economy and Marine Industry Sector Consultation

The Marine Industry Sector Consultation provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities facing the British Virgin Islands (BVI) as a premier yachting and marine tourism destination. Stakeholders emphasized the need for strategic investment, regulatory improvements, and enhanced visitor experiences to ensure long-term industry sustainability.

1. **Modernizing Marine Infrastructure** - BVI must expand and upgrade marinas, mooring facilities, and port services to accommodate larger yachts and improve visitor convenience. Underutilized assets like Gunn Creek and Cyril B. Romney Tortola Pier Park should be repurposed for marine tourism.
2. **Reducing Bureaucracy and Streamlining Processes** - Licensing, work permits, and yacht registrations need to be streamlined through a one-stop-shop system to reduce administrative delays and improve business efficiency.
3. **Managing Capacity and Sustainability** - Overcrowding at anchorages and tourism hotspots must be controlled through clear capacity limits for yachts and cruise ships, ensuring environmental sustainability and visitor satisfaction.
4. **Strengthening Environmental Protections** - Regulations on waste disposal, sewage pump-out facilities, and reef conservation need urgent implementation to protect the BVI's marine ecosystem.
5. **Enhancing Safety Regulations** - High-traffic areas like White Bay require stricter safety oversight, particularly regarding cruise ship tender operations and marine traffic management.
6. **Revising Immigration Policies** - Tourist entry and visa policies should be reformed to allow automatic 90-day stays, making it easier for long-term visitors to remain in the territory without bureaucratic hurdles.
7. **Targeting High-Value Cruise Tourism** - BVI should prioritize smaller, high-spending cruise lines over mass-market vessels, ensuring greater economic benefits with minimal environmental impact.
8. **Investing in Workforce Development** - Expanding hospitality and marine training programs is essential to develop a skilled local workforce and maintain service excellence in the industry.
9. **Improving Customer Service Across All Sectors** - A national customer service initiative is needed to ensure that immigration officers, hospitality staff, and government agencies create a welcoming visitor experience.
10. **Strengthening Regional Collaboration** - BVI should work with neighbouring territories to enhance joint yachting itineraries and tourism packages, maintaining its competitive edge in the Caribbean.

Policy Implications of the Marine Industry Sector Consultation

Based **solely** on stakeholder discussions, the following policy recommendations **could** be considered by Government to ensure the sustainable growth and competitiveness of the British Virgin Islands (BVI) as a premier marine and yachting destination:

1. **Expand and Modernize Marine Infrastructure:** Invest in new and upgraded marinas, mooring buoys, and port facilities to accommodate larger yachts and enhance visitor convenience. Prioritize the redevelopment of Gunn Creek and Cyril B. Romney Tortola Pier Park waterfront for improved vessel clearance and docking services.
2. **Streamline Licensing, Permits, and Work Permits:** Establish a one-stop-shop system for business licensing, yacht registrations, and work permits to reduce bureaucratic delays and improve industry efficiency.
3. **Implement Sustainable Tourism Capacity Limits:** Develop and enforce capacity limits for yachts, cruise ships, and anchorages to prevent overcrowding, environmental degradation, and declining visitor satisfaction.
4. **Strengthen Environmental Regulations and Marine Protection:** Mandate the installation of sewage pump-out facilities and enforce stricter waste disposal regulations for yachts to protect BVI's marine ecosystems. Expand marine protected areas and reef restoration initiatives.
5. **Enhance Safety and Regulatory Oversight for Marine Traffic:** Establish formal safety protocols for high-traffic marine areas, including White Bay, and regulate cruise ship tender operations to prevent accidents and overcrowding.
6. **Improve Immigration Policies to Support Longer Stays:** Revise the current visa and entry policies to allow automatic 90-day stays for tourists, reducing administrative burdens on visitors and encouraging longer visits and higher spending.
7. **Prioritize High-Value Cruise Tourism:** Develop a cruise ship selection strategy that focuses on attracting smaller, high-spending cruise lines rather than mass-market vessels, ensuring greater economic benefits while minimizing environmental impact.
8. **Expand Training and Workforce Development in the Marine Sector:** Strengthen tourism and hospitality training programs at the secondary and tertiary levels, including the Marine Apprenticeship Program, to build a skilled local workforce for the industry.
9. **Improve Visitor Experience and Customer Service Culture:** Launch a national customer service training initiative targeting immigration officers, hospitality workers, and other frontline staff to enhance the visitor experience and reinforce BVI's reputation as a welcoming destination.
10. **Foster Regional Collaboration for a Competitive Advantage:** Develop stronger partnerships with neighbouring Caribbean territories to promote joint tourism packages and regional yacht itineraries, enhancing BVI's competitive edge in the global yachting industry.

Meeting's Discussion and Minutes

Introduction

5 The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sustainable Development, Joseph Smith-Abbott, formally welcomes attendees. He introduces the meeting as the first in a series of sector-based and island-wide consultations, scheduled to take place throughout March and April.

Remarks by the Junior Minister for Tourism and Culture

10 Honourable Luce Hodge-Smith, the Junior Minister for Tourism and Culture, delivers opening remarks. She describes the consultation as a key milestone in shaping the National Tourism Policy, which aims to promote sustainable development, cultural preservation, and an improved visitor experience. Tourism is described as more than just an economic sector—it is integral to the identity and economy of the Virgin Islands.

15 She highlights previous consultations in January 2024 as part of the OECS Regional Policy Development process, which engaged 70 local practitioners, civil society members, and government officials. Additionally, a recent tourism summit brought together key stakeholders to discuss challenges and solutions for tourism transformation. These past discussions serve as the foundation for developing a policy aligned with regional best practices.

The Junior Minister urges stakeholders to participate actively in shaping an inclusive, innovative, and sustainable tourism policy. She reaffirms the government's commitment to developing a long-term strategic vision for the sector.

20 Presentation on the National Tourism Policy Framework

Permanent Secretary Joseph Smith-Abbott begins his presentation by outlining the format and structure of the National Tourism Policy. He emphasizes that this consultation builds upon previous exchanges and seeks to deepen discussions on tourism-related issues.

25 He presents economic data, referencing the macroeconomic review by the Ministry of Finance for 2023-2025. In 2024, tourism's contribution to nominal GDP was estimated at \$1.75 billion, with a real GDP value of \$1.6 billion. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the sector contributed approximately 52% of GDP in 2023 when direct goods and services and tourism-related construction investments are aggregated.

30 The policy will be framed through the lens of sustainability, guided by three internationally recognized approaches:

1. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) – Ensuring economic, social, and environmental benefits for all stakeholders.
2. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) – Addressing the viability of tourism while minimizing environmental impacts and preserving local culture.
- 35 3. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – Focusing on biodiversity conservation, local economic support, and responsible tourism.

For the Virgin Islands, sustainability will be expanded beyond environmental and social aspects to include service quality and economic impact.

Defining Sustainability in Tourism

40 Sustainability is not only about environmental conservation but also about service delivery and guest satisfaction. The policy will consider both positive and negative guest experiences, recognizing their impact on economic success. It will assess how private and public sector efforts can enhance visitor satisfaction, ensuring long-term tourism growth.

45 The policy framework will cover the entire tourist experience, from the moment a traveller decides to visit the Virgin Islands to their departure. This requires an enabling environment that fosters meaningful experiences. A smooth, immersive, and seamless journey is central to sustainability, ensuring that cultural, natural, and hospitality elements contribute positively. Sustainability will also emphasize eco-friendly accommodations, responsible transportation, and ethical tourism activities.

Stakeholder Engagement and Policy Implementation

50 The policy development process is ongoing and builds on past consultations with stakeholders, government entities, communities, and NGOs. The aim is to create an enabling environment through regulatory frameworks and incentives that support sustainable tourism. The policy will provide a clear roadmap aligning tourism growth with environmental, cultural, and economic priorities.

55 Previous consultations, including tourism meetings across the Virgin Islands and the 2025 Tourism Summit, have shaped the approach. The policy framework will draw heavily from the OECS regional policy, expected to be issued at the end of the month. This ensures that the Virgin Islands' tourism policy aligns with broader regional strategies.

Policy Framework and Key Thematic Areas

60 The National Tourism Policy is rooted in the National Sustainable Development Plan and will ensure evidence-based decision-making. It will define partnerships between public and private sectors and establish clear success metrics.

The policy structure is visualized as a "house" with eight key pillars:

1. Inclusive growth and income distribution
2. Blue economy
- 65 3. Climate change and risk resilience
4. Product and niche market development
5. Biodiversity and ecosystem protection
6. Access and transport services
7. Tourist destination management
- 70 8. Institutional capacity

The meeting's focus is on Blue Tourism, addressing marine conservation, sustainable coastal development, and the economic opportunities linked to the ocean. Key initiatives include restoring coral reefs, managing beach use, improving coastal zone management, expanding marine protected areas, and promoting eco-tourism.

75 **Consultation Process**

The consultations will continue over the next few months, integrating stakeholder feedback to refine policy responses. The government aims to ensure evidence-based decision-making in shaping the final National Tourism Policy. The framework will be made publicly available for stakeholders to review, and the policy will be continuously informed by discussions with various tourism sector actors.

80 This marks the first step in a broader participatory process, ensuring that tourism development in the Virgin Islands is strategic, sustainable, and beneficial for all.

Presentation on Marine and Yachting Tourism

85 Assistant Secretary Ms. Flax delivers the second part of the presentation, focusing on marine and yachting tourism within the broader framework of shaping the future of tourism in the Virgin Islands. She highlights the British Virgin Islands (BVI) as a premier yachting and marine tourism destination, contributing significantly to GDP and employment. The sector includes sailing, chartering, boat rentals, marinas, regattas, and marine services.

90 A growing focus on sustainability and the blue economy is emphasized. The blue economy is defined as a sustainable approach to utilizing ocean resources for economic growth while balancing tourism, conservation, and community benefits. Key sectors within this concept include:

1. Yachting and charters
2. Marine conservation and ecotourism
3. Fisheries and ocean sustainability
4. Blue innovation and technology

95 Flax outlines key strengths and opportunities in marine and yachting tourism. Strengths include the territory's natural beauty, ideal sailing conditions, and a well-established reputation as the "sailing capital of the Caribbean." There is strong demand for both crewed and bareboat charters, and the BVI benefits from a network of experienced marine professionals and businesses. Opportunities for growth include expanding ecotourism and sustainable yachting, investing in green marine infrastructure, enhancing regulations for better management, and leveraging technology for maritime innovation.

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Challenges in Marine and Yachting Tourism

Despite its strengths, the marine tourism sector faces notable challenges:

- Environmental degradation, including damage from anchoring, pollution, and reef depletion.
- Overcrowding at key anchorages.
- 105 • Regional competition from other yachting hubs.
- Rising costs and operational challenges for businesses.
- Regulatory gaps that hinder sustainable growth.

Policy Considerations for Sustainable Marine Tourism

AS Flax presents key policy questions to guide the development of sustainable marine tourism in the BVI:

- 110 1. Sustainability and conservation – How can marine tourism be managed to balance environmental protection and economic growth?
2. Regulatory framework – What policies are needed for anchoring, waste disposal, and mooring regulations?
3. Business growth and support – How can local businesses benefit from the sector’s expansion?
- 115 4. Infrastructure development – What investments are necessary for marinas, docks, and other marine facilities?
5. Innovation and training – How can the workforce be developed to support the future of marine tourism?

Stakeholder Engagement and

120 The session transitions to stakeholder feedback, beginning with an industry professional requesting a SWOT analysis revision to include the "line-of-sight sailing" feature of the BVI, which is a strong marketing advantage. The multi-island experience is also emphasized as a unique feature of BVI tourism.

The discussion shifts to the designation of the BVI as the "Sailing Capital of the World" versus the "Sailing Capital of the Caribbean." While BVI appears in online searches as the latter, Rhode Island claims the global title due to its rich maritime history, consistent sailing conditions, and hosting major international sailing competitions such as the America’s Cup. Some stakeholders suggest marketing the BVI as the "Yachting Capital of the World" instead, as the industry includes a variety of boats beyond just sailing yachts.

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Infrastructure Challenges and Industry Perspectives

130 Stakeholders discuss challenges related to mooring infrastructure, particularly the increasing size of yachts. The lack of suitable mooring options for larger vessels is becoming a significant issue, limiting available anchorages and impacting the visitor experience. The demand for mooring buoys continues to rise, but their placement does not always accommodate newer, larger yachts.

A stakeholder from the charter industry notes that many existing mooring buoys are designed for smaller vessels, making it difficult for larger crewed yachts to find suitable anchorage. As the BVI seeks to attract mega yachts, there is a growing concern about insufficient infrastructure to accommodate them.

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Marketing the BVI’s Unique Geography and Experience

A stakeholder emphasizes that the proximity of islands in the BVI is a major selling point. Unlike other Caribbean destinations where sailing between islands can take hours, BVI visitors can sail between multiple islands within a day, making it a highly attractive destination for both short-term and long-term charters. Many first-time visitors are unaware of this unique advantage, highlighting the need for better marketing and education on the ease of inter-island travel.

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Concerns Over Overcrowding and Visitor Experience

A key challenge raised is overcrowding at popular sites. A stakeholder describes a personal experience where a large number of boats raced to anchor at a popular snorkelling site, indicating that high demand for limited anchorages is degrading the visitor experience. This highlights the need for better management of vessel numbers and visitor flow to ensure that the quality of the tourism experience is maintained.

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The discussion emphasizes the importance of balancing tourism growth with sustainable visitor management, ensuring that the marine environment is not compromised and that guests continue to have high-quality experiences.

Challenges of Bureaucracy in the Yachting Industry

A stakeholder representing a crewed yachting agency, raises concerns about government bureaucracy in the BVI. He notes that regulatory hurdles and excessive red tape have made operating within the yachting sector increasingly difficult, citing that ten years ago, administrative tasks did not consume four months of the year. He stresses the need for streamlining licensing, work permits, and other bureaucratic processes, suggesting that the government examine best practices from competitors such as St. Vincent, the Grenadines, and the Bahamas.

The speaker further questions when the industry will reach its capacity, noting that the lack of marina space is already a limiting factor. He emphasizes that while the BVI is often discussed as one of the world's leading yachting destinations, it lacks the infrastructure to support further expansion. Government officials encourage stakeholders to provide specific feedback on challenges related to bureaucracy so that these concerns can be addressed within policy reforms.

Another stakeholder highlights the Labour and Immigration departments as particularly problematic, stating that work permits for hiring yacht captains, chefs, and other crew members take an unacceptably long time to process—often up to two months. He argues that these delays hinder business operations and must be improved, particularly in an era where computerization should be expediting, not slowing, administrative tasks. A one-stop-shop approach for licensing and approvals is proposed as a potential solution.

The Need for Data-Driven Tourism Policy

A stakeholder stresses the importance of data collection and access in guiding tourism policy. He recalls a time when the BVI government provided detailed data on tourism, including breakdowns of overnight visitors, charter guests, and land-based tourists. Over the years, access to such granular data has diminished, making it harder to assess the true economic impact of the marine sector versus resorts and villas.

The stakeholder highlights the need for better GIS (Geographic Information Systems) data to understand the capacity of marinas, moorings, and boatyards. He asks whether the government has up-to-date figures on the number of berths available in marinas, the locations of mooring fields, and the potential for future expansion. Additionally, he points out the importance of hurricane season preparedness, suggesting that data on dry dock storage capacity should also be included in strategic planning.

In response, government officials acknowledge the importance of data and agree that policy decisions should be evidence-based. They note that while a significant amount of tourism data is already collected, there is often reluctance from both public and private sectors to share it. One of the challenges is ensuring that occupancy data for both land-based accommodations and yachts is reported accurately. The Ministry is working toward a more integrated spatial data infrastructure that could help visualize trends, opportunities, and challenges within the tourism sector.

Capacity Constraints and the Need for Smarter Growth

A government official reiterates that growth in the yachting sector must be managed carefully, as the BVI cannot physically expand its harbours, waters, or land to accommodate unlimited demand. Given these

constraints, policy decisions must be made strategically to balance economic benefits with environmental and logistical realities.

190 On the issue of labour and immigration, the official acknowledges that digitization efforts through the Border Management System and the Labour Management System are intended to streamline processing. However, he requests continued feedback from the industry to assess whether these digital systems are effectively reducing bureaucratic delays.

195 A stakeholder then broadens the discussion by arguing that government agencies and statutory bodies are too focused on extracting revenue from businesses rather than creating a streamlined system for payments and approvals. He describes the situation where multiple agencies—such as the Shipping Registry, Customs, the Finance Ministry, Labour, and Immigration—each impose separate fees and administrative burdens. He suggests a simplified, centralized payment system where businesses can pay a single, transparent fee rather than navigating multiple layers of government bureaucracy.

Safety Concerns in the Yachting Sector

200 A stakeholder raises safety concerns regarding the high density of boats in certain areas, particularly in Jost Van Dyke's White Bay. He warns that the lack of regulations governing boat traffic in these areas could lead to serious accidents, such as propeller injuries or collisions. Given that the BVI has limited marketing funds, a major safety incident could result in a PR disaster that would be difficult to recover from. He urges policymakers to review yachting regulations to prevent overcrowding and improve safety measures before
205 a crisis occurs.

Concerns Over Regulatory Inconsistencies

210 Another industry professional notes that inconsistency in the application of rules and fees is a persistent issue. The stakeholder highlights problems with the calculation of cruising permit fees, explaining that the charges vary depending on the port of entry or the officer handling the transaction. She suggests that clear, standardized signage displaying fee structures and policies at all ports would help eliminate confusion and ensure fairness. This issue underscores a broader concern about the lack of uniform enforcement of regulations, which can create frustration and inefficiencies for businesses operating within the sector.

The Need for Clear and Consistent Policies

215 A stakeholder raises concerns about inconsistencies in regulations and fees within the marine tourism industry. The stakeholder suggests that publishing clear policies and fee structures at ports would help eliminate confusion and ensure fair application of rules. This would prevent issues where different officers or ports apply varying charges for the same services.

220 The discussion shifts to broader policy improvements that could support the industry. While some believe the sector is already well-regulated, there is a pressing need for capacity planning. One stakeholder emphasizes the importance of setting limits on the number of yachts and cruise ships to prevent overburdening marine infrastructure. The lack of waste management solutions for yachts is also highlighted. Currently, there are no pump-out facilities for yacht sewage, meaning that effluent is often discharged into the sea, exacerbating environmental concerns. The Marine Association has established an internal policy for sewage disposal, but there is no official government mandate.

225 Calls for Capacity Planning and Industry Collaboration

A stakeholder supports the idea of implementing a formal capacity policy to protect the environment and maintain sustainable tourism. She notes that previous reports on this issue have been written but not enforced, and urges the government to finally take action.

230 The stakeholder also calls for greater collaboration between policymakers and industry stakeholders before new legislation is passed. She proposes a structured consultation process, ensuring that industry professionals have a chance to review and contribute to laws before they reach the House of Assembly. Another key point she raises is that marine tourism should not have a one-size-fits-all policy, as each island has different tourism needs and capacities. Safety, particularly the need for lifeguards at major beaches, should be a key focus, given that the BVI is a water-based tourism destination.

235 Another speaker echoes the need to reconsider tourism capacity, particularly in light of increasing yacht sizes. He explains that while the BVI became a premier charter destination due to its calm waters and proximity of islands, larger yachts are less affected by open water conditions. This means that ultra-high-net-worth travellers now have more destination options, making the BVI's exclusivity and service offerings more critical than ever. The industry must therefore not only consider the number of boats but also focus
240 on attracting high-value visitors.

Balancing Small and Large Charter Operations

A debate arises about the economic impact of large yachts versus smaller charter vessels. Some argue that mega yachts bring in high-spending guests who arrive by private jet and spend tens of thousands of dollars per week. Others counter that smaller charter operations provide more employment opportunities for locals.

245 One stakeholder clarifies that charter companies do not make excessive profits, despite misconceptions. Costs have risen dramatically since the hurricanes, with insurance premiums increasing by 30-40%, and expenses for storage, water, electricity, and labour also rising significantly. Additionally, the BVI no longer offers technical training for yacht maintenance, making it difficult to find skilled marine technicians. There is an urgent need to revive training programs to support local employment in the marine industry.

250 Debating the Value of Cruise Tourism

The conversation shifts to the role of cruise ships in the BVI economy. One stakeholder argues that the cruise industry primarily benefits the government treasury, with limited trickle-down effects to the local economy. The stakeholder points out that many cruise passengers spend very little money onshore, often purchasing only small souvenirs or bottles of water.

255 Environmental concerns are also raised, particularly regarding air pollution from cruise ships. A resident describes the thick plumes of smoke emitted when ships arrive in port, warning that this pollution negatively affects residents living in Road Town.

260 However, not all stakeholders share this negative view. A small charter business owner explains that his company relies on cruise passengers for day tours. The stakeholder acknowledges that some ships have passengers who do not engage in local activities, but others, such as Disney Cruise Line, actively encourage shore excursions. He stresses that eliminating cruise tourism would harm small charter operators who depend on these visitors.

A suggestion was made that the BVI can consider being more selective about which cruise ships it attracts. This would ensure that ships with passengers who engage in local activities are prioritized, while
265 minimizing the environmental and economic downsides of mass tourism.

Discussion on Training Programs and Workforce Development

270 The conversation shifts to the status of marine training programs at the local college. A stakeholder expresses surprise that a previously established marine apprenticeship program had been discontinued, but another attendee clarifies that it has been restarted. There are currently 18 students set to graduate from the program, who will soon be looking for positions in the industry. This signals progress in addressing the need for skilled labour within the marine sector.

Infrastructure Investments to Maintain BVI's Yachting Leadership

275 A local entrepreneur with decades of experience in the marine industry, shares insights on the changing landscape of yachting tourism. The stakeholder observes that larger yachts require more sophisticated infrastructure, and the BVI is falling behind in providing adequate facilities. While the territory remains a top destination, competing regions such as St. Thomas, St. Martin, and the Grenadines are upgrading their marinas to attract high-end clientele.

280 The stakeholder stresses the importance of developing environmentally sustainable marinas that cater to luxury yacht visitors, who expect high-end dockside services. Without modernized marina infrastructure, the BVI risks losing these lucrative guests to destinations with superior facilities. Investment in world-class marinas would not only attract high-spending visitors, but also create employment opportunities.

Safety Concerns and the Need for Infrastructure at White Bay

285 An entrepreneur based in White Bay, raises serious safety concerns regarding cruise ship operations. He reports that some cruise lines use their lifeboats as tenders to transport passengers directly onto the shore. This practice creates a dangerous situation for swimmers and smaller vessels, with frequent near-miss incidents.

290 Additionally, White Bay lacks proper docking facilities, forcing charter boats, cruise ship tenders, and other vessels to compete for limited space. The existing dock is deteriorating, and Henderson calls for government investment in new infrastructure. He also highlights an inconsistency in environmental levies, noting that cruise ships are not subject to the same environmental fees as visiting yachts. He suggests that levying similar charges on cruise ships could provide additional revenue for infrastructure improvements.

295 It is also noted that fewer luxury yachts visited the BVI for New Year's celebrations compared to previous years. He attributes this shift to St. Martin and Anguilla strengthening their regional partnerships, making them a more attractive destination. He recommends that the BVI collaborate with neighbouring territories to offer a more diverse and competitive tourism product. Lastly, he reiterates the need for a one-stop-shop approach to simplify business operations and reduce bureaucratic barriers.

Cruise Tourism Strategy and the Need for Alternative Attractions

300 A stakeholder reaffirms the importance of selecting the right cruise partners for the BVI. Not all cruise lines contribute equally to the economy, and some passengers have a much lower economic impact than others. It is suggested that BVI's tourism strategy should focus on attracting cruise lines with higher-spending guests.

Also highlighted is a lack of attractions to accommodate large volumes of cruise passengers on peak days. Without alternative tourism sites, an influx of cruise visitors can overcrowd key destinations, negatively

305 impacting yachting tourists and other high-end visitors. As a potential solution, she suggests that one or more of the uninhabited islands could be developed into a controlled attraction site to disperse visitor numbers more evenly across the territory.

Investing in People and Preparing for Global Economic Changes

310 A stakeholder underscores that investment in people is the most important factor in maintaining BVI's tourism leadership. The quality of the visitor experience is directly tied to the skills, knowledge, and service quality of tourism industry professionals. The stakeholder stresses that training programs must be continuous and well-supported, ensuring that employees remain skilled, knowledgeable, and passionate about the industry.

315 Also raised are concerns about global economic uncertainty and how it may impact BVI tourism. With major economic shifts occurring worldwide—including trade tensions, inflation, and geopolitical instability—she urges proactive planning to ensure that BVI tourism remains resilient and adaptable.

Improving Ports of Entry and Immigration Policies

320 A stakeholder highlights serious issues at BVI's ports of entry, noting that current facilities struggle to handle visitor volume. At ferry terminals such as Road Town, West End, and Jost Van Dyke, passengers often wait in long lines outdoors without shelter, enduring rain or excessive sun exposure. The stakeholder calls for immediate investments in terminal infrastructure to improve the arrival and departure experience.

The immigration process also presents challenges. Unlike the U.S., where visitors receive a 90-day stamp upon entry, BVI grants visas only for the exact number of days stated by visitors upon arrival. Tourists who wish to extend their stay must travel to Road Town, visit the Immigration Office, and undergo a bureaucratic process—a significant inconvenience that frustrates long-term visitors.

325 Another stakeholder emphasizes that this restrictive policy discourages extended stays, particularly for villa renters and long-term yachting visitors. Tourists who originally plan to stay for a few weeks but later decide to extend their visit should not have to waste a full day dealing with immigration paperwork. The government is urged to adopt a more visitor-friendly policy, potentially granting longer initial visa periods to accommodate extended stays without requiring additional approvals.

330 Challenges in Visitor Experience and Hospitality

A stakeholder highlights major shortcomings in the visitor experience at BVI's ports of entry, criticizing the lack of a welcoming atmosphere. She argues that the first impression given to visitors is cold and uninviting, with immigration officers barely making eye contact or greeting tourists. This contrasts with other destinations where visitors are warmly welcomed, encouraged to explore, and made to feel valued.

335 The stakeholder laments the decline in personalized service, recalling how in the past, tourists would remember and praise individual hospitality staff by name, whereas now, that personal connection has diminished. It is stressed that tourism is no longer just competing within the Caribbean but on a global scale, and BVI must improve its service culture to remain competitive.

340 Additionally, the stakeholder notes that local communities need to be more aware of the importance of tourism. Unlike in Porto Rico, where tourism is ingrained in the culture, many in the BVI see hospitality jobs as just employment rather than a passion or a crucial part of the economy. The stakeholder warns that

while financial services could decline, tourism is a long-term industry that must be nurtured, emphasizing that poor service and negative experiences are already affecting repeat visitation rates.

Maximizing Underutilized Government Assets

345 A participant suggests leveraging existing but underused government assets to enhance the tourism experience. She specifically mentions:

- Gunn Creek, which could be repurposed for vessel clearance services, relieving congestion at other entry points.
 - The unutilized waterfront section at Cyril B. Romney Tortola Pier Park, which has remained unrepaired since the hurricanes. She suggests rebuilding this space to serve as an additional docking facility for visitors, including Puerto Rican boaters, who find Road Town's docks inadequate.
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The stakeholder highlights that these sites could cater to visiting yachts and provide shopping and dining experiences, making the BVI a more attractive destination for longer stays.

Investment in Education and Workforce Development

355 Another stakeholder emphasizes the need for long-term investment in education, particularly in tourism and hospitality. He argues that training in hospitality should start from high school and continue into the college level, ensuring that future professionals understand customer service, tourism management, and industry best practices.

360 He notes that while the BVI places heavy focus on fields like law and accounting, tourism—the territory's economic backbone—often lacks structured, formalized education pathways.

Closing Remarks and Future Consultation Plans

As the meeting concludes, officials encourage attendees to provide additional feedback via a digital survey, allowing those who could not attend in person to contribute.

365 They also emphasize that this is just the first of many consultations, with sector-specific and island-wide meetings planned. Future discussions will be held on Jost Van Dyke and the sister islands, ensuring a comprehensive national tourism policy that incorporates diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Minister's Closing Remarks: Policy Direction and Industry Collaboration

370 The Junior Minister for Tourism and Culture expresses gratitude for the passionate and insightful discussions. She acknowledges that the goal is to complete the National Tourism Policy by June, necessitating a packed consultation schedule.

Key takeaways from the discussion include:

- Government does consider industry feedback in legislative processes. She cites the Commercial Recreational Vessels License Bill as an example, which was revised based on stakeholder input before being sent to the House of Assembly.
 - The need for larger yacht accommodations was an "eye-opener." She commits to working with industry leaders to determine the necessary investments in moorings, buoys, and docking facilities.
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- Balancing cruise and yachting tourism remain a challenge. While some past policies limited cruise ship arrivals, the current approach seeks to diversify visitors while protecting the environment.
- 380 • Investment in customer service and training is critical. This includes not just front-line hospitality workers but all public service employees, as tourism impacts multiple sectors, including immigration, customs, and local businesses.
- Ports of entry improvements are underway, including planned upgrades for the West End Dock and Road Town Jetty.
- 385 • Gun Creek and Pier Park redevelopment will be explored as potential solutions to enhance visitor convenience and experience.

The minister encourages continued engagement, inviting stakeholders to attend future consultations and contribute to refining policies that will ensure a sustainable and competitive tourism industry.

Meeting’s Key Takeaways:

390 Stakeholders highlighted several critical challenges facing the BVI’s marine and yachting tourism industry, including:

1. Excessive bureaucracy and slow government processes, particularly in labour, immigration, and licensing.
- 395 2. The lack of comprehensive, publicly accessible tourism data, including yacht and land based occupancy rates, marina capacity, and dry storage availability.
3. Infrastructure limitations, as the BVI’s harbours and marinas are struggling to accommodate increasing demand.
4. The need for regulatory reform, including clearer and more consistent rules on cruising permits and safety measures.
- 400 5. Concerns over uncontrolled growth, with stakeholders calling for a strategic approach to managing visitor numbers to preserve the BVI’s quality of experience.

Critical areas for improvement in BVI’s tourism sector, particularly regarding visitor experience, infrastructure, education, and policy development include:

- 405 1. Improving visitor reception and hospitality training to create a warmer, more welcoming destination.
2. Maximizing government-owned assets like Gunn Creek and Tortola Pier Park to enhance yachting facilities.
3. Investing in tourism education and workforce development to ensure long-term industry success.
4. Enhancing infrastructure at ports of entry to reduce congestion and improve efficiency.
- 410 5. Balancing cruise tourism growth with environmental and economic sustainability.
6. Ensuring that new policies reflect industry feedback before legislative approval.

Critical policy gaps and opportunities in the marine tourism sector:

1. Clearer policies and enforcement – Publishing consistent regulations and fee structures at ports would reduce confusion.
- 415 2. Capacity planning – A formal policy is needed to determine the maximum sustainable number of yachts and cruise ships.
3. Collaboration on legislation – Industry stakeholders should have input on policies before they reach the House of Assembly.

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4. Economic strategy – The government must balance the needs of large yacht tourism with those of smaller charter operations.
 5. Workforce development – There is a pressing need to reintroduce technical training programs for marine sector jobs.
 6. Cruise tourism review – The BVI should focus on attracting ships whose passengers actively contribute to the local economy while addressing environmental concerns.

425 Critical areas requiring urgent investment and reform:

1. Strengthening training programs – Workforce development is essential to maintaining service quality and industry competitiveness.
2. Upgrading marina infrastructure – Larger yachts require modern marinas with high-end facilities to remain competitive with rival Caribbean destinations.
- 430 3. Addressing safety concerns in White Bay – Unregulated cruise ship tender operations pose safety risks; the area needs better docking infrastructure.
4. Improving regional partnerships – The BVI should collaborate with neighbouring territories to offer a more diverse tourism product.
- 435 5. Refining cruise tourism strategy – The BVI must prioritize high-value cruise partners and develop alternative attractions to disperse visitor numbers.
6. Enhancing ports of entry – Long wait times, inadequate facilities, and inefficient processing at ferry terminals and airports damage the visitor experience.
7. Reforming immigration policies – Granting longer initial visa periods would encourage extended stays and increase tourism spending.