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# ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLES IN PARADISE: PUERTO RICAN CASES, CARIBBEAN LESSONS

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*Sherrie Baver*

## *ABSTRACT*

Unlike other parts of Latin America where environmental conflicts over natural resources involve mining, forests, oil or natural gas, Caribbean environmental struggles typically involve tourism development, control over coasts, and control over protected natural areas. A political ecology lens is used to orient the discussion on social forms of access and control over resources and to understand Caribbean tourism as a corporate construction of a secular paradise. Puerto Rico serves as a case study of citizen struggles involving control over their natural resources, specifically, the coasts. Two ongoing struggles are examined: 1) Vieques, where key issues are not only the scale and control of tourism development, but also the future of the Caribbean National Wildlife Refuge and the negative health consequences of military toxics; and 2) the Luquillo-Fajardo Northeast Ecological Corridor, where the issues are the balance between conservation and development and who benefits from development.

**Keywords:** political ecology, Puerto Rico, Vieques, Northeast Ecological Corridor, coasts, tourism, conservation

## *RESUMEN*

Distinto a otras partes de América Latina, donde los conflictos del medio ambiente sobre recursos naturales implican la minería, los bosques, el petróleo o el gas natural, los conflictos del medio ambiente en el Caribe típicamente implican grandes proyectos turísticos, control sobre las costas, y control sobre las áreas naturales protegidas. Este estudio emplea el marco de ecología política para discutir las formas sociales de acceso y control sobre los recursos y para entender el turismo caribeño como una construcción artificial de un paraíso secular. Puerto Rico sirve como un estudio de caso de ciudadanos luchando por el control sobre sus recursos naturales, específicamente las costas. El estudio enfoca en dos conflictos actuales: 1) Vieques, donde el asunto principal no es sólo el control del desarrollo turístico, sino también el futuro del Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre y las enfermedades de los viequenses como resultado de la presencia de contaminación militar; y 2) El Corredor Ecológico del Noreste entre Luquillo y Fajardo, donde las discusiones giran en torno al balance

entre la protección de la naturaleza y el desarrollo comercial, además de quiénes se benefician del desarrollo turístico en esta área.

**Palabras clave:** ecología política, Puerto Rico, Vieques, Corredor Ecológico del Noreste, costas, turismo, conservación

### RÉSUMÉ

Contrairement aux autres pays de l'Amérique du Sud où les conflits environnementaux relatifs aux ressources naturelles incluent l'exploitation minière, les forêts, le pétrole, ou le gaz naturel, les conflits environnementaux dans la Caraïbe comprennent de grands projets touristiques, le contrôle des côtes, et le contrôle des régions naturelles protégées. Cette étude se sert d'une lentille de l'écologie politique pour discuter les formes sociales d'accès et de contrôle des ressources ; l'étude permet de comprendre le tourisme de la région caribéenne comme une construction d'entreprise d'un paradis séculaire. Porto Rico sert comme une étude de cas de citoyens en lutte pour obtenir le contrôle de leurs ressources naturelles, spécifiquement les côtes. Deux cas de luttes continues sont examinées : 1. l'île de Vieques où la problématique principale constitue non seulement le contrôle du développement du tourisme, mais aussi l'avenir de la réserve naturelle nationale et les maladies des habitants de cette île causées par la contamination des matériels militaires abandonnés ; et 2. le Corridor Écologique du Nord-est entre Luquillo-Fajardo, où les discussions demeurent vives en ce qui a trait à l'équilibre entre la protection de la nature et le développement commercial, ainsi que ceux qui bénéficient du développement de cette zone.

**Mots-clés :** écologie politique, conflits environnementaux, Porto Rico, Vieques, le Corridor Écologique Nord-est, les côtes, le tourisme, la conservation

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Unlike other parts of Latin America where environmental conflicts over natural resources involve mining, forests, oil, or natural gas, Caribbean environmental conflicts typically involve tourism development and control over the coasts and protected natural areas. There is diversity within the Caribbean region in terms of language and culture, government form, capacity and level of economic development. Still most analysts see more similarities than differences among the nations and territories of the region given their shared history of colonization, plantation agriculture, African slavery, and recently,

economic dependency. It is within this overall context of similarity that conflicts over controlling Caribbean coasts and nature have become increasingly common.

This study will examine two cases in Puerto Rico, the struggle for local control of development in Vieques and in the Northeast Ecological Corridor between the towns of Luquillo and Fajardo.<sup>1</sup> The point is to show that in these coastal landscapes, community residents are typically not making key development decisions or benefitting from such development in a meaningful way. These Puerto Rican cases have resonance throughout the region.

### **Using the Lens of Political Ecology**

One way to understand the struggle over Caribbean tourism development is through the lens of political ecology. This approach highlights the tension between nature and society by analyzing the social forms of access and control over resources as well as their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods. The approach spotlights how global capitalism produces local landscapes as well as the movements that arise to protest the unequal distribution of social and environmental costs of globalization (Peet and Watson 2004:4). Political ecologists broadly contextualize the nature-human interactions, identifying proximate and local forces causing ecological disturbances. Furthermore, they maintain that environmental change occurs primarily due to political and economic processes and not due solely to natural causes (Robbins 2004: chapter 1).

Finally, some political ecologists, especially those concerned with issue-framing and discourse analysis, examine how political interests construct the dominant view of environments and landscapes. Simply put, “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood, water, and rock” (Schama 1995:61).<sup>2</sup> For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the present, and filtered through the media, different Caribbean islands have served as the playground for North Americans and Europeans vacationers offering sun, sand, surf, for all as well as sex and gambling for many. “The environmental and societal side-effects of the corporate construction of a secular paradise are carefully airbrushed away” (Lynch 2006:158). Neil Smith also has noted the “almost instinctive romanticism pervading most treatments of Caribbean nature (1996:49). Yet the “paradise” landscape represented by the tropical coastal Caribbean is socially produced and is an essential part of the commodification of Caribbean nature.

Behind this seeming paradise are ordinary citizens who try to live and work with dignity. Jamaica Kincaid (1988), for example, portrayed

the ambivalent, uneasy coexistence of locals and tourists in her powerful essay, *A Small Place*. For the most part, Caribbean states have been unable or unwilling to use their natural patrimony—turquoise waters and coral reefs—as a way to negotiate globalization to benefit the large majority of their citizens. These governments are making development choices, often resulting in a rapid expansion of the tourism sector and often with unanticipated consequences. While some consequences are sociological, for instance, indirectly forcing their citizens to continue the region's long history of labor migration, others are environmental. Caribbean islands are especially vulnerable to the consequences of large-scale tourism projects, especially environmental degradation (e.g. McGregor 2009).

Tourists to the Caribbean benefit from the emphasis on biodiversity conservation—the parrots, iguanas, and orchids—but are shielded from the day-to-day environmental deterioration faced by many, often poor, Caribbean citizens. These environmental realities involve unsafe drinking water, excessive pesticide use, rapid and unplanned urbanization, inadequate garbage removal and disposal, unregulated industrial emission, and unrestricted coastal development. While most governments in the region have adopted modern environmental laws and regulations, they lack the capacity to enforce them. And so, the major question for Caribbean residents increasingly is, “who controls the stunning landscape, local citizens or outside tourism developers?”

### **Environmental Struggles in Puerto Rico: An Overview**

While such questioning is going on throughout the Caribbean region, some of the most visible recent struggles have taken place in Puerto Rico. Why might this be the case? First, as a territory of the United States and as U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans have access not only to local laws and regulations but also to federal environmental legislation, which is enforceable. Thus, at least theoretically, they have the rights of access to environmental information, participation, and justice in environmental matters.<sup>3</sup> Second, Puerto Rico is, perhaps, unique in the Caribbean given the length and extent of its industrialization experience and the sophisticated environmental movement that has grown over the decades in opposition to it, with notable successes (García-Martínez, García-Ramos, Rivera-Rivera 2006). While Puerto Rican environmental activists are not technically part of a transnational movement, Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora have worked on joint campaigns since the 1960s (Gandy 2002); and this linkage can serve as a model for other Caribbean environmental and social justice struggles. Puerto Rican environmentalists were first sparked to action by a proposed copper mining

project in the mid-1960s and later by the Commonwealth government's turn to capital-intensive industrialization with petrochemical plants and proposals for massive infrastructure projects such as an oil transshipment superport in the 1970s. Activists successfully mobilized in blocking both the mining venture and the superport. Still, Puerto Rico is far from a pristine paradise with its fourteen Superfund sites now under remediation, its urban sprawl, polluted reservoirs, a dismal recycling rate, dying coral reefs and fisheries in decline.<sup>4</sup>

Starting in the mid-1980s and especially in the 1990s, as the Commonwealth government reduced its focus on industrialization and moved to tourism development with renewed vigor, new environmental conflicts emerged involving control over coastal real estate.<sup>5</sup> One of Puerto Rico's recent cases, Vieques, is in some ways unique because of its previous status as a military training area, but it and other Puerto Rican cases, such as the struggle over the Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC) have resonance throughout the Caribbean. In Vieques, throughout Puerto Rico and throughout the Caribbean, coastal real estate is attracting luxury home buyers and developers who are displacing long-term local residents. Locals are, at times, priced out of their own communities and blocked from beaches (while beaches in Puerto Rico are, typically, publicly-owned, access to beaches can be privately-controlled by hotels or condominiums). In addition, local residents who earn at least part of their income from fishing may benefit from increased tourism in the short term from tourists requesting their services, but may lose the overall viability of the fishing enterprise in the long term with increased pollution from rapid coastal development (Griffith and Valdés-Pizzini 2002).

Both Puerto Rican cases look at the contentious politics involving protected coastal areas in a small densely-populated territory. Worldwide, "protected" is a formal designation for an area of special importance because of its rich biodiversity, geological characteristics or other special interest and is reserved for research and conservation. In theory, an expert panel decides on the appropriate level of protection for an area based on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) categories.<sup>6</sup> In reality, however, the formal designation is based partly on science and partly on politics since governments ultimately legislate how much or little human activity can occur in the area under protection. Most governments, including the Government of Puerto Rico, consider the interests of both ecology and economic development and usually tend toward supporting more rather than less development. In the United States, the management philosophy for protected areas has rarely been strict preservation; governments have typically sought compromises through their goal of "multiple use" (Klyza and Sousa 2008).

Furthermore, in both cases, a majority of residents in affected

communities try to assert their citizenship rights and feel they are being blocked—in the case of Vieques by the Federal government and in the case of the Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC) by the Commonwealth government of Puerto Rico. Most local residents oppose more high impact megatourism projects and support the idea of ecotourism. Admittedly the definition of ecotourism is not precise, but at the least, it connotes: 1) an appreciation of an area in its natural state, 2) that much of the income generated from it is reinvested to maintain the natural area, and 3) the integration of nearby communities in resource management and as the main beneficiaries of the economic activities in the protected area. Local residents should be the employers not the employees of the businesses (Patullo 1996, McLaren 1998, Honey 1999).

The Vieques case is not only a struggle to develop the island and its lush landscape in a manner that maximizes benefits for local residents. Viequesens not only want to reduce or eliminate their protected area (wilderness) designation but also want to remediate sixty years of military contamination and to receive compensation for ill health resulting from their exposure to toxics. This aspect of the mobilization makes it a classic environmental justice struggle, an issue of deep concern for political ecologists. The second case is the Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC) a coastal fringe of Puerto Rico between Luquillo and Fajardo and close to The Caribbean National Forest, known locally as El Yunque: the proposed corridor is an area recognized by large numbers of environmental organizations for its natural beauty and biodiversity. In the NEC case and in most struggles to designate an area as “protected” on small Caribbean islands, there are major pressures to develop parts of the area, and at times, to allow for large scale tourism development. Where the two cases differ from each other, though, is that in one case, Vieques, locals would like the protected area lessened (or eliminated) while in the other case, the Northeast Ecological Corridor, locals would like the original size of the protected area maintained. They are comparable cases, however, because both communities believe they have been excluded from meaningful participation in how the areas should be drawn and ultimately used.

### **The Case of Vieques**

The most notable instance of a massive and successful social protest in Puerto Rico in recent years has been in Vieques between 1999-2003. This was a rare case in which Puerto Ricans were able to overcome their partisan divisions to end the U.S. Navy’s sixty-years of training on this small island off the main island’s east coast. Part of the reason for the Vieques victory, including gaining support from influential U.S.

politicians, was that leaders framed the protest in terms of human rights, public health and environmental degradation rather than “*Yanqui imperialism*” (Baver 2006).

The history of Vieques and its recent struggle has been told many times but a brief summary is in order (Barreto 2002, McCaffrey 2002). In the early years of World War II, the U.S. government expropriated nearly three-quarters of Vieques, for military training. The municipality, the poorest in Puerto Rico, had roughly 9-10,000 residents. A second military expropriation occurred in 1947 involving over 4,000 acres on the eastern part of the island. During these expropriations, many local residents were either displaced from their homes to other parts of Vieques, to the main island of Puerto Rico, or to neighboring St. Croix.

In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, Viequenses renewed their long-simmering struggle to expel the U.S. military from their island. The movement gained momentum in 1999 after a stray missile killed a civilian employed by the Navy. Still, it took four years of protests and two U.S. presidents to get the Navy out. The process began in a January 2000 Executive Order, when President Bill Clinton pledged to withdraw the Navy from the naval ammunition facility on the western side of the island and return the entire western area to civilian use. On May 1, 2001 as part of this agreement, the military gave up 8,100 acres to local and federal entities; 4,300 went to the *municipio* of Vieques, 3,100 acres to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and 800 acres to the Puerto Rican Conservation Trust, a non-profit group that maintains land in the public interest.

It took two more years for the departure of the military and full transfer of the lands under military jurisdiction. On May 1, 2003, the Navy gave up nearly 14,671 acres on the eastern side of the island, including Camp García and the 900 acre bombing range. The problem with the transfer, however, was that much of the land, including the 900 acre bombing range, was placed under the Fish and Wildlife Service jurisdiction and declared a “wildlife refuge.” Public access to most of the refuge is prohibited indefinitely because of the real danger of unexploded ordnance and chemical hazards. Many have pointed out the obvious irony that this area is far from what “a wildlife refuge” connotes, that is, a place undisturbed by humans. Furthermore, the logic of designating the area “a wilderness” became even more tortured in 2004 when Puerto Rican Governor, Sila Calderón, declared the bombing range a Superfund site, a label reserved for the most seriously contaminated places in the United States (Wargo 2009:127). At present, what is known as the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge covers nearly 18,000 acres with 3,100 acres on the western, “clean” side and close to 15,000 on the eastern side under the jurisdiction of the FWS. Simply put, this means that three-fourths



of the island still remains in federal government hands.

Since the 2003 Navy departure, Viequenses, especially the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV), have continued their struggle on several related fronts. One front involves demanding federal compensation for the negative health effects of exposure to decades of military toxics, so far without much success. A second battle challenges the manner of the remediation now underway in eastern Vieques, the former Atlantic Flight Weapons Training Area. A third front involves building a sustainable community by controlling the pace and type of tourism development including control of the wildlife refuge on "la isla nena," as Vieques is known in Puerto Rico. We now turn to a brief discussion of those related battles.

Perhaps the most pressing demand of the Viequenses is the demand for compensation for the ill health of many long-time residents. Much has been written about locals' significant health problems over the decades of exposure to contaminants including their high rates of various cancers, asthma, kidney failure, diabetes, and hypertension (Cruz Pérez 1988; Berman Santana 2006). In Vieques, as is often the case in environmental justice struggles, sick people typically confront an inability to link illnesses directly to the source of the contamination, and a more general problem of the politicization of scientific findings (Beck 1992, Fischer 2000). As Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss (2001) have written, what are, in fact, "disputes over values and policy get transformed into scientific disputes ...that may be particularly inaccessible for communities of color and lower incomes" (2001:18). The Vieques struggle for compensation continues to play out through various locations in the Federal government.

One prominent site of contention has been in the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) in the Centers for Disease Control of the U.S, Department of Health and Human Services. ATSDR is the federal bureaucracy charged with determining if a link exists between human illness and the contamination found at U.S. Superfund sites. After undertaking numerous studies on Vieques, in 2003, the agency concluded that it had found little evidence of contamination in the air, soil, fish and shellfish or groundwater from naval activities (ATSDR 2003). These findings, however, changed later in the decade, possibly reflecting the shift from Republican to Democratic control of the government after the 2008 election. In November 2009, the ATSDR Director announced the agency was discarding some of its previous conclusions about contamination on Vieques, now seeing a link between military toxics and high rates of illness.<sup>7</sup> This announcement essentially reversed the 2003 conclusion that the Navy's activities had caused no health problems; in May 2010, the agency formally admitted in a draft

report that its earlier clean bill of health for Vieques was unwarranted.

A second key issue in the Vieques struggle is cleanup of both toxics and unexploded ordnance from this “paradise” that is also a federal Superfund site. Between 2003 and 2010, about \$100 million had been spent on cleanup; and in August 2010, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced that \$400 million more had been allotted for cleanup purposes but that the process might last until 2022. A major issue for municipality residents is that the cleanup process involves open detonation of explosives, which not only causes disturbing explosions but also continues to expose residents to contaminants. Another aspect of the cleanup process, burning contaminated vegetation, means additional toxic exposure for residents. Residents have demonstrated for other forms of remediation, for example, the less harmful procedures used to remediate the Massachusetts Military Reservation on Cape Cod (Wargo 2009:131-135). Vieques protestors did, at least, force the U.S. EPA to set up an air monitoring station. By December 2010, the ATDSR announced it would oppose the burning of vegetation and open detonation of unexploded ordnance; but as of mid-2011, the open burn and open explosion methods were still being used on Vieques by Navy contractors.

While the negative health effects of decades of military toxics and the pace and methods of remediation are aspects of the environmental injustice in this community, another key issue is the status of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge. In short, because much of the former military land, especially on the eastern side of the island, is so contaminated, riddled with unexploded ordnance, or both, the Federal government has drastically limited access to the area through its refuge designation. The government deems it prohibitively expensive to clean up the area to a level safe for human use; it also may want it kept in reserve for possible future military training.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the land remains in federal hands and inaccessible to the people of Vieques.

A political ecology lens may be especially helpful in exposing the reality of this wildlife refuge and many other refuges in the United States. Since a basic tenet of the approach is that nature is socially constructed (Robbins 2004:109; Cronon 1995); by employing this lens, it becomes easier to understand what is being advertised as a lush wildlife sanctuary is, at the same time, a noxious Superfund site. Furthermore, political ecology focuses on issues of community access to natural resources so the analyst is drawn to the question of how long-time residents feel about a protected area that comprises 55% of the island, in the larger context of municipal development. For some background, in 2010, Vieques had had a median household income of \$10,000 and a 36% unemployment rate. Most long-time Vieques residents understand that the main economic driver on the island is tourism, but they support an approach to

tourism that primarily benefits the local community. Furthermore, they understand that a major attraction on their island is the largest and most ecologically diverse wildlife refuge in the Caribbean; but they would like some of the refuge to be remediated and returned (or devolved) to the *municipio* to be used for other purposes. They argue they did not struggle to dislodge the Navy to bring in outside developers, speculators, luxury second-homeowners, five star spas and boutique inns. While the selling of available property in Vieques slowed, somewhat, between 2008-2009 at the depth of the global recession, it picked up again in 2010. Land prices have increased but so has unemployment and criminality.<sup>9</sup>

The main activist group that first came together in the 1990s to expel the Navy and is now trying to articulate the needs of long-time residents, is The Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV). Their goal is to implement the 2004 Master Plan for Vieques and Culebra, based on Commonwealth Planning Law 153 of 2002. The stated goal of Law 153 is to promote sustainable development in Puerto Rico's municipalities that is predominantly controlled by the local communities. The Vieques and Culebra Master Plan, which the Commonwealth Government signed on to in 2004, was developed over several years by local residents with input from Puerto Rican professionals and academics. The Plan recommends low-impact tourism projects and assisting residents to establish cooperative business ventures.

The vision articulated in the Master Plan for small inns with an ecotourism focus is being challenged by outside developers as well as wealthy off-island luxury second home buyers. Indeed, the impetus to create the 2004 Master Plan was sparked by the opening of the exclusive Martineau Bay Resort and Spa first built by Wyndham in 2003. After a disappointing start, the complex was later sold to the W group. The property, which has 156 extra-grand rooms in 17 buildings, reopened 2009 as the first five star retreat and spa in the Caribbean. While the resort may be attractive, it is, essentially, the antithesis of ecotourism and sustainable local development.

To date, some construction projects on Vieques have been blocked. One proposal, "Dos Palmas", a sixty-four condo, 180 car parking lot in sleepy hamlet of Esperanza, was stopped. Nevertheless, three area plans prepared by a former mayor, approved by the outgoing legislature a week before municipal elections in November 2008, and approved by the local Planning Board may well lead to several new, large-scale developments, essentially burying the Master Plan. The biggest fear for long-term residents is their displacement by outsiders as they recall the cases of Hawaii and nearby St. Croix. Since 2004, residents have had some success in establishing a coop movie theater, a hydroponic farm, a cultural tourism program highlighting a pre-Colombian archaeological

site, and a microenterprise incubator in 2009.

Vieques residents are trying to secure both their individual and collective citizenship rights using different political strategies, however, to date, with little success. The first strategy involves a class action lawsuit, *Sanchez v. United States*, initially filed in 2007. The class is comprised of 7,000 long-term Vieques residents who have been exposed to military toxics. The Federal government has maintained a defense of "sovereign immunity," or that one of its essential functions is to maintain national security through military training. Thus it cannot be sued for maintaining the island's bombing range. As of mid-2011, the case had reached the Federal Appellate Court in Boston but remained unresolved. (Editor's Note: The Appeals Court dismissed the suit on February 14, 2012). The second political strategy has involved legislation introduced into the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress by Representative Steven Rothman (D-NJ), "The Vieques Recovery and Development Act of 2011." The bill may have symbolic appeal in highlighting the islanders' needs, but it has virtually no chance of passage, not the least reason being the partisan make-up of the House of Representatives. The third strategy involved lobbying the Executive Branch as the White House prepared its *Task Force Report on Puerto Rico's Status*. The report was released in March 2011 and contained a special section on Vieques to address health and development needs.<sup>10</sup> All three initiatives seek some compensation for individuals with serious or health problems. The Rothman bill and the 2011 *Task Force Report* also seek improved health facilities on the island. In addition, some specific demands to promote economic development on Vieques are: updated ferry service, funding for a wind park to produce renewable energy, and a research center to study the health and environment effects of military toxics. To date there is little to show for these efforts.

Because of the presence of the wildlife refuge, Vieques will remain relatively underdeveloped in comparison the rest of Puerto Rico. Long-time residents, many with serious health problems, are witnessing rapid gentrification with housing prices rising and homes in beachfront neighborhoods especially in demand. Economic incentives suggest they should sell their land but then "thus residents are doubly excluded, both by the refuge and the real estate frenzy that it stimulated" (McCaffrey 2009:5). While the fight against large-scale tourism projects is notable on Vieques, this is not the only site of contentious environmental politics in Puerto Rico. In each case, local citizens believe one or all of the following, they: are being denied access to their coasts, have not been properly consulted, will not receive reasonable benefits, or the project overtaxes environmentally-sensitive areas. The struggle for participation in and control over development of coastal resources resonates on Puerto Rico's main island as well, as the following case will demonstrate.

## The Northeast Ecological Corridor

The proposed Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC) is on the coastal fringe between the Puerto Rican towns of Luquillo and Fajardo. It comprises approximately 3,200 acres and Federal agencies such as The Fish and Wildlife Service and The Forest Service along with various national and international environmental groups, including The Sierra Club, Surfrider Foundation, and World Wildlife Fund, have recognized the extraordinary value of this area for its nature and landscape. The Puerto Rican government first officially recognized its natural value in 1977 when its Planning Board included it in its Coastal Zone Management Plan.

Residents of Puerto Rico's Northeast coast have experienced both relocations of poor residents and overbuilding for tourist and residential projects for the wealthy for decades. The area is saturated with high-impact tourism developments such as Río Mar Beach Resort and Gran Meliá Golf Resort, both in Río Grande as well as El Conquistador in Fajardo. In the 1970s, in a well-publicized struggle against overbuilding, the population of Río Grande lost access to local beaches and fishers lost a small strip of land, Las Picúas, to moor boats and land their catch. The case of Las Picúas "became a legal landmark and it had a profound impact on the environmental movement" (Valdés Pizzini 2006:54).

The effort to create a Nature Reserve began in the 1990s when residents of Luquillo and Fajardo learned of plans for two large tourism-residential projects, Marriott's Dos Mares and Four Seasons' San Miguel Resort. Both projects would involve golf courses, hotels and condominiums and would also restrict public access to the beaches. Furthermore, both would be built on land the Federal government has designated as floodplains, hence in danger of coastal surges and sea-level rise. Another project, Costa Serena in Piñones, was dropped in 2007, after the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released maps showing the area was prone to flooding and unsuitable for development. Despite their proposed locations on floodplains and their having been enmeshed in lawsuits brought by environmental groups for years, it is far from clear that the Dos Mares and San Miguel cases in the projects are off the table forever.<sup>11</sup>

In 2005, enraged by the environmental costs of overbuilding as well as loss of access to their coasts, a group of residents from Luquillo and Fajardo and environmental NGOs mobilized to lobby for a nature reserve designation for what they began to call the Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC). A nature reserve is a term for an area that has legal protection, typically, for its biodiversity, landscape, or cultural significance. By definition, a nature reserve is a space that is in its natural state

allowing visitors to focus on and appreciate nature without the trappings of urban life. Several levels of protection exist based on The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) categories and designate the types of activities permitted within a protected area. In theory, the level of protection should be determined by scientific experts, but, in fact, designations frequently also depend on the will of politicians.

Adding to the potential significance of the NEC is that it is located near El Yunque, the Caribbean National Forest. El Yunque covers 28,000 acres of tropical rainforest near Río Grande and Luquillo and is largest protected area in Puerto Rico. The NEC, together with El Yunque, has been part of environmentalists' vision of this space as a necessary antidote to this highly-congested part of the island. In fact, the area is not merely congested but according to a report from the Coastal Zone Management Program of Puerto Rico's Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, it is expected that 93% of this area will be urbanized by 2050. Furthermore, since a 2004 study by U.S. Department of Agriculture found that 86% of new urban areas built near El Yunque between 1985-2001 did not meet zoning requirements, environmentalists are adamant in their call for a strong protection regime for the area.<sup>12</sup>

Central to the mobilization to create the Northeast Ecological Corridor have been local scientists, urban planners, ordinary citizens, church groups, and the Fajardo Chamber of Commerce. They were joined in 2005 by the newly-formed Puerto Rico chapter of The Sierra Club.<sup>13</sup> By 2007, the Coalition for the NEC (known by its initials in Spanish, CPCEN) had achieved its goal when former governor, Aníbal Acevedo Vilá (2005-2009) of the pro-autonomy Popular Democratic Party (PDP) declared protected status for approximately 3,200 acres with Executive Order 2007-37. The Governor went further, however, directing the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) to buy roughly 400 acres in the area as a first step to make the conservation order tangible.<sup>14</sup> Not only did the plan receive wide support from citizens in public hearings but also had unusual broad support from legislators from the island's three major political parties (pro-statehood, pro-autonomy, and pro-independence). The Corridor designation was also endorsed by federal and state agencies, especially the federal Forest Service, the agency overseeing protection for El Yunque. In 2008, the Puerto Rico Planning Board adopted Resolution PU-02-2008-24(23) to formalize the nature reserve designation. The 2008 plan stressed a concern for conservation while allowing for some small, eco-friendly projects.

Governor Acevedo Vilá gave the DNER eight months to create a comprehensive management plan for the Corridor. Within that period, however, he lost the 2008 election to pro-statehood (NPP) candidate,

Luis Fortuño; and the newly-elected governor rejected the nature reserve, at least as envisioned by his predecessor. By October 2009, the new governor had his own proposal for the area.

To begin to replace the 2007-08 Corridor proposal with their own, the Fortuño administration claimed that the nature reserve was decreed without adequate scientific study, had received Planning Board approval without public hearings, the government had not notified affected property owners, and lacked an Integrated Management Plan. In his own Executive Order 2009-042, Governor Fortuño renamed the area "The Great Northeast Nature Reserve" and designated it a mixed use "Special Planning Area." The administration claimed it was adding approximately 3,000 extra acres to the previous plan or by tripling the land of the previously designated corridor, because it would now be a land and sea reserve; the protected area would stretch from El Yunque and add a maritime reserve called "Espíritu Santo" connecting the Northeast coast to Culebra, nine nautical miles away.

In fact, according to the Coalition for the NEC, which demanded a return to the 2007-2008 plan, the newly designated Special Planning Area would now remove roughly 500 acres of prime coastline between Luquillo and Fajardo from protected status. Furthermore, in the 2009 Fortuño plan, the Coalition claimed the administration was counting parts of El Yunque rainforest that were already protected by federal law. Most important, the 2009 nature reserve design would allow for several large-scale tourism projects that had been on hold for years, such as the Marriott Dos Mares (renamed Tinglar Bay Resort and Spa), the Four Seasons San Miguel Resort, residential projects and a shopping center. These 500 acres are precisely where the developers have fought to locate these projects for more than a decade.<sup>15</sup>

In fairness to the Fortuño Administration, when the Governor came into office in 2009, the island had already faced a recession that had started in 2006 and had a 16% unemployment rate, significantly higher than anywhere on the U.S. mainland. Thus Governor Fortuño regarded job creation as one of his highest priorities. Still, it is notable that in early discussions of the San Miguel and Dos Mares resort projects in the mid-1990s, Luis Fortuño headed the island's Tourism Company. Norma Burgos, elected in 2009 as an NPP Senator in the mid-1990s was head of the Planning Board, and Governor Fortuño's Secretary of Natural and Environmental Resources, Daniel Galán had previously worked as a consultant for resort developers on the island. Therefore, key political actors in the Fortuño administration's redesign of the Northeast nature preserve have had a long association with large-scale tourism development.

A key concern in political ecology is the concept of environmental



justice, and key tenets of procedural environmental justice are that citizens must have timely and equal access to information, access to participation, and access to the courts in environmental matters (Foti 2008). Given that Governor Fortuño's New Progressive Party has controlled both Chambers of the Legislature (2009-2012), environmental opponents to his plan have turned to the courts for a remedy. Opponents have claimed infringement of their procedural access rights, and the Governor's proposal for a redesigned nature reserve has been in litigation since the plan was first unveiled in October 2009.

Northeast Ecological Corridor supporters have launched several cases, but to date, there has been no clear cut victory for either environmentalists or the government and the developers. Notably by mid-2010, many leading environmental groups such as Greenpeace USA, Environmental Defense, Natural Resources Defense Council, and the National Wildlife Federation, as well as the local Fajardo business association, and the Catholic Diocese of Fajardo and Humacao had lent their support to the Coalition's civil suit against the Governor and his Department of Natural and Environmental Resources. The Coalition for the 2008 Corridor plan claimed the public had not adequately participated in public hearings, and that information on construction projects and municipal master plans Luquillo and Fajardo had not been available to the public in a timely fashion. In June 2010, Fajardo residents, including the local business community, filed a lawsuit against the island's Planning Board for adopting a land use plan different from the one selected by the municipality. In several instances, the environmental coalition claimed that relevant information was not being made available in a timely and convenient matter.

In sum, The Northeast Corridor case remains unresolved but the real hope is that on this small, urbanized, densely populated island, citizens will be able to retain a small, carefully-protected fragment of nature for public enjoyment. Two or three more megaresorts are not going to put the Puerto Rican economy on a more sustainable footing and a nature reserve with megaresorts and little serious focus on conservation would prove to be yet another "paper park," common throughout the Caribbean region (McGregor 2009:205).

### **Other Representative Cases**

The previous two cases of contentious coastal politics are not the only ones that could have been examined in Puerto Rico. The Paseo Caribe development in San Juan and redevelopment efforts at the closed Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Ceiba are two others that have pushed environmentalists and community activists to question the overall tra-



jectory of Puerto Rican development and to ask more pointedly, “who controls the coasts?” Paseo Caribe represented a \$300 million dollar redevelopment project in the working-class Puerta de Tierra section of the capital intended to gentrify the ancient waterfront with a high-rise hotel, plus a condominium, shopping and entertainment complex. Opponents claimed the project restricted access to the seventeenth century San Gerónimo Fort, a national landmark, and that public land was illegally sold to the private developer. Local environmentalists had some success in 2007-2008 in halting construction, but the project recommenced in 2009. Paseo Caribe, now opened, did displace long-time, low-income residents and blocked access to the Fort.

A fourth emblematic case involves redevelopment at the former Roosevelt Roads Naval Station that closed in 2004, in Ceiba in eastern Puerto Rico. Again, drawing on a political ecology framework, the questions are: who participates and ultimately decides on the private use of public lands? Is the development plan sustainable; and who are the likely beneficiaries from the planned economic activities?

The Federal government requires local participation in development planning for the land being returned to communities for civilian use under its Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) legislation. Therefore, in 2004, the Ceiba Development Alliance, a local community group, formed to promote a “green” development plan.<sup>16</sup> Similar to demands in Vieques, local residents supported projects involving small-scale tourism, renewable energy, collective transport systems, and a science research center; and residents thought they had Commonwealth government support for their aims. With a change in administration, however, in June 2009, the Fortuño administration announced its plans for “a Caribbean Riviera,” a high-end” tourism destination, with a 2,500 room hotel, grand casino and entertainment complex.<sup>17</sup> In this proposed megaproject, most local residents see an enormous environmental footprint with few lasting benefits for the community.

## Conclusion

Political ecology provides a useful theoretical lens to help focus on questions of environmental degradation, social injustice and political exclusion. Political ecologists broadly contextualize the human-nature interface going beyond merely identifying the proximate and local forces causing ecological destruction. Analyses in this tradition emphasize issues such as: who controls formal and informal decisionmaking over resource governance, who bears the unequal burdens of environmental degradation, and who frames the discourse around the landscape. In this case, should Puerto Rico’s landscape be portrayed as “a tourist

paradise” devoid of local citizens with livelihood needs apart from the tourism industry?

In part, these cases examine conflicts arising from the privatization of coastal landscapes. Developers gain access to prime beach front real estate that typically displaces poor residents of local communities. In the specific case of Vieques, long-time residents are not only being marginalized from the luxury communities growing up around them but also living with the health consequences of more than sixty years of military toxics.

Cases similar to these in from Puerto Rico are occurring throughout the Caribbean region. Developers propose luxury tourism projects on the coasts or in ecologically-fragile, protected areas; not infrequently, these projects are facilitated by sympathetic officials reluctant to enforce building codes or zoning regulations.<sup>18</sup> Yet, increasingly, local communities and environmental groups fight back. Most residents understand the need to support economic activity involving their natural resources, sun, sand and sea, but want projects of a scale matching their surroundings and ones that do not marginalize ordinary citizens. Amid the inexorable pressures of globalization, the issue for Caribbean residents is controlling their natural resources—in this case, luxurious coastal landscapes.

What can be done? Laws in the United States and increasingly throughout the Caribbean require following the global norms of green governance for procedural environmental justice: access to environmental information, access to participation in land use planning and environmental decisionmaking, more generally, and access to the courts when the previous rights are denied. Such laws, if effectively implemented, represent a deepening of democracy. Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean citizens are not rejecting tourism development through their struggles but are demanding a style of tourism that respects their environment, their culture and understands that scale matters on small islands. By promoting procedures for green governance through access rights, governments in the region can provide a model for meaningful sustainable development.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a historical overview of Puerto Rican environmentalism with a special focus on struggles over coastal resources see Valdés Pizzini (2006).

<sup>2</sup> The Simon Schama (1995) quote was found in Pérez (2002). Other works critically examining the “Caribbean paradise” concept are Patullo (1996), McLaren (1998), and Honey (1999).

- <sup>3</sup> These environmental access rights are the emerging global standard for modern environmental governance. They were first enunciated Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992) and later in the European Union's Aarhus Convention (1998). For a detailed discussion of these rights, see Foti (2008).
- <sup>4</sup> Rust, Jon. 2007. "Island EPA chief: P.R. is not Sustainable." *San Juan Star*, 23 December, 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Both of Puerto Rico's major political parties have pledged to make the island the Caribbean's prime tourism destinations by 2020, and as a result, Puerto Rican opposition to tourist development projects has increased markedly. Between 1990 and 2000, for example, about 100,000 hotel rooms were added in the Caribbean, with 50% in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico's Caribbean coast while only 5% were added in Puerto Rico. See, Roman, Elisabeth. 2005. "Are Extreme Environmentalists Controlling Economy?" *Caribbean Business*, March 24, 1, 16. Also Delgado, José A. 2008. "Puerto Rico define estrategia para atraer turismo." *El Nuevo Día*, 11 de marzo. Retrieved 20, July 2011 <[http://www. Adendi.com](http://www.Adendi.com)>.
- <sup>6</sup> The IUCN has six basic categories of protection. See, <[http://iucn.org/about/work/programmes/pa/pa\\_products/wcpa\\_categories/](http://iucn.org/about/work/programmes/pa/pa_products/wcpa_categories/)>.
- <sup>7</sup> Navarro, Maryssa. 2009. "Navy's Vieques Training May be Tied to Health Risks." *New York Times*, Nov. 14, A14.
- <sup>8</sup> See, <<http://library.fws.gov/refuges/vieques08.pdf>>. Retrieved 7/13/2011. Much of the logic of creating wilderness areas of former military lands on Vieques and throughout the world comes from the practical consideration of the high cost of remediation. Wargo (2009:134) calculated that Vieques is one of approximately 50,000 federal sites with hazardous conditions in need of remediation. A second consideration is that the U.S. military may want the land again for future training purposes. See, The National Defense Authorization Act of October 9, 1997(P.L. 105-57) and its amendments, known informally as the Spense Act.
- <sup>9</sup> Díaz Román, Miguel. 2010. "Vieques: entre lujo y pobreza." *El Nuevo Día*, 21 de marzo, 32-36.
- <sup>10</sup> <[http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/Puerto\\_Rico\\_Task\\_Force\\_Report.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/Puerto_Rico_Task_Force_Report.pdf)> Retrieved 7/13/2011.
- <sup>11</sup> Rust, Jon. 2008. "DNER to Review Costa Serena Land Title." *San Juan Star*, January 13, 4.

- <sup>12</sup> <<http://repeatingislands.com/2010/12/17/disappointment-for-environmentalists-in-puerto-rico/>>. Retrieved July 13, 2011.
- <sup>13</sup> The Puerto Rico Sierra Club has tried to tie the fate of the NEC to the fate of the *tinglar*, the leatherback turtle. On February 2010, for example, the Club petitioned the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to designate the beaches of NEC as a critical habitat for this endangered turtle. The NEC would also be home to fifty other threatened species. See Rivera Arguinzoni, Aurora. 2010. "Solicitan playas del CEN se designen como hábitat crítico para el tinglar." *El Nuevo Día*, 22 de febrero. Retrieved 7/21/11 <<http://www.adendi.com>>.
- <sup>14</sup> Alvarado León, Gerardo E. 2009. "Una década de lucha a favor del corredor." *El Nuevo Día*, 31 de octubre. Retrieved 7/21/11 <<http://www.adendi.com>>.
- <sup>15</sup> The newspaper *Claridad* has carefully followed the case of the NEC designation. See, for example, Cotto, Cándida. 2009. "Sembramos vergüenza o sembramos esperanza en el CEN?" *Claridad*, 18 de diciembre; Cotto, Cándida. 2010. "Rechaza propuesta gobierno sobre Corredor del Noreste," *Claridad*, 21 de diciembre; or Cotto, Cándida. 2011. "Denuncian conflictos de intereses Secretario Recursos Naturales en proyectos de Corredor Ecológico," *Claridad*, 1 de febrero. All retrieved July 13, 2011 <<http://claridadpuertorico.com>>.
- <sup>16</sup> Robles, Frances. 2008. "Puerto Rico's Environmental Movement Stops Some Development." *Miami Herald*, July 28, A1; (AP) "Puerto Rico's Coasts Still Ruled by 1886 Law," <<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2011/07/07/world/americas/>>.
- <sup>17</sup> Marino, John. 2009. "'Riviera' Plan Must Clear Land Title, Gaming Law Hurdles." *Caribbean Business*, 25 June, 31; Ortiz Rivera, Joel. 2010. "A la espera de una propuesta concreta, *El Nuevo Día*, 15 de agosto. Retrieved 7/21/11 <<http://adendi.com>>.
- <sup>18</sup> Bahía de las Águilas in the Dominican Republic, the Misick corruption case in Turks and Caicos, and the Beef Island lawsuit in the British Virgin Islands are three similar, recent cases. On Bahía de las Águilas in Jaragua National Park, see archived material in <[www.DR1.com](http://www.DR1.com)>, and Thorpe, Annabelle. 2009. "Shift Upmarket Makes Dominican Republic Cool." *The Observer* (England), October 11, escape pages, 4. On Turks and Caicos, see Beaumont, Peter. 2009. "Direct Rule Looms for 'Corrupt' Tropical Islands." *The Guardian*,

(London) June 17, 16; and on Beef Island in the British Virgin Islands, see, Verkaik, Robert. 2008. "Branson Backs Bid to Save Virgin Island Mangroves from Tourists." *The Independent* (London), November 28, 26.

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