

My name is Jose A. Menendez and I represent the Puerto Rico chapter of the Sierra Club.

I would like to open my comments by expressing my thanks, to the secretary of the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment (DRNA) of Puerto Rico Mr. Daniel Galan, for continuing the program of establishing co-management agreements with the communities that border our nature reserves, especially Jobos Bay (JOBNERR) this program has been very successful in providing community involvement in protecting our green areas.

- Covering nearly 3,000 acres in the northeast corner of Puerto Rico (PR), the NEC has been recognized by Commonwealth, Federal and U.S. based conservation organizations as **one of the most valuable natural sites in Puerto Rico.**
- The Corridor contains representations of all of the coastal wetlands types found in PR, including coral communities, sea grass beds, mangroves, *Pterocarpus* swamp forests, marshes, in addition to a primary or **pre-Columbian coastal forest** and a **bioluminescent lagoon** (Laguna Aguas Prietas).
- **Over 50 critical elements, meaning rare, threatened, endangered and endemic species** classified by the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) (some even designated as critically endangered by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), have been documented in the NEC. These include, among others, the federally endangered Puerto Rican ("PR") Plain Pigeon, the Snowy Plover, the Brown Pelican, the PR Boa, the Hawksbill Sea Turtle and the West Indian Manatee.
- The NEC's beaches are considered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as **one of the most important nesting grounds for Leatherback sea turtles** (*Dermochelys coriacea*) in areas under US jurisdiction. In fact, this agency has determined that its 7 km. of continuous beaches without development are the only ones left in Puerto Rico under a natural condition able to sustain a larger leatherback nesting population. The Leatherback sea turtles, which are the largest sea turtles in the world, are also critically endangered.
- The NEC's location within the foothills of El Yunque National Forest (El Yunque Tropical Rain Forest) – a United Nations Biosphere Reserve, adds to its great natural value and uniqueness. The Corridor guarantees the interrelation between the rain mountainous forests found at El Yunque and the dry forests found on its coastal foot hills, through a passageway of just 13 miles in length. Such an occurrence, in a very limited area, **is extremely rare in any location around the world.**

Threats

- Two mega resorts have been proposed for this area, the **Dos Mares Marriott Resort, consisting of 3,450 residential and tourist units, a 18-holes golf course and a 9-holes golf course**, among other related facilities, in and adjacent to the NEC. The other project is known as the **San Miguel Four Seasons Resort, consisting of 1,450 residential and hotel units and two golf courses, 18-holes and 9 holes, each, among other related facilities.** Over 80% of the units proposed by both projects are exclusively residential, which seriously undermine the developers' claim that these are tourism projects.

Impacts

- The Dos Mares Resort and the San Miguel Resort would result in deforestation, land movement (with resulting changes in natural patterns of runoff), filling of wetlands, channelization of rivers, and the clearance of coastal vegetation, **significantly impacting the species and other living resources that depend on the NEC**. Golf course maintenance practices would include the use of toxic substances such as herbicides, which could affect the water quality of surface, underground, and coastal waters. In addition, both projects would **severely limit public access to the NEC's beaches**, public lands and other public natural resources, as would **further deplete the limited water supplies needed by local communities**, affecting the quality of life of thousands of citizens in the eastern region of Puerto Rico.

Conservation Efforts and Current Needs

- In October 2007, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico established as public policy the designation of the NEC as a nature reserve while promoting its sustainable development based on nature tourism and ecotourism activities. This initiative was the result of nearly 10 years of work carried out by a coalition of local community and environmental groups, including some of the most renowned environmental organizations in the US such as the **Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, Environmental Defense, the Surfrider Foundation, Waterkeeper Alliance**, among others. The NEC nature reserve has also been supported by the US Forest Service El Yunque National Forest, the USDA International Institute of Tropical Forestry, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and leaders of the main Christian churches and the Catholic Church in the Island, among other organizations. **Benicio del Toro** and **Edward James Olmos** have also publicly expressed their support for the Corridor's protection.
- The NEC was formally designated as a nature reserve in April 2008. **However, on Friday, October 30th the Governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Fortuño, removed the designation of nature reserve in order to allow for development in the area.** The land use and management plan for the NEC endorsed by dozens of organizations and individuals during public hearings, would have protected the Corridor and clearly establishes which areas of this nature reserve could be developed for ecotourism, in order to reduce most of the impacts that could result from said activity. The coalition has also ceaselessly promoted the development of adjacent communities as economic gateways to the nature reserve, a development alternative to the proposed mega hotel-luxury residence complexes proposed for the Corridor.

We are calling on Governor Fortuño to reverse his decision and approve the Land Use and Management Plan for the NEC as presented in public hearings last year. We are also asking federal agencies, including FWS and NOAA, who have contributed funds to the acquisition of lands within the Corridor to review the implications of the Governor's decision on these use of these funds and the conservation of the acquired lands.

If something is not done to halt the uncontrolled development on our coast, in Puerto Rico, all efforts to save or restore the coral reef in the area will fail.

Thank You