

Fact Sheet – El Toro Wilderness



Caribbean National Forest

Background

In December, 2005, President Bush signed into law legislation introduced by Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño (R- PR), designating 10,000 acres of Puerto Rico's Caribbean National Forest/Luquillo Experimental Forest as a unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The designation was recommended in the original Management Plan for the Caribbean National Forest as well as in the 1997 plan revision.

Facts and Figures of the El Toro Wilderness Area

Approximately 10,000 acres of the Caribbean National Forest (37% of the forest's 28,000 acres) have been designated as the El Toro Wilderness area. El Toro, named after the highest peak (3,524 feet) in the forest, is the only tropical wilderness in the U.S. National Forest System. Located 25 miles east of San Juan on the western side of the Luquillo Mountain Range, the area is also the most accessible tropical wilderness in the world.

The El Toro Wilderness is the first designated wilderness on the Caribbean National Forest and the first designated tropical wilderness in the U. S. National Forest System (NFS) which contributes to the national goal of a more diverse wilderness preservation system. The forest is also a Biosphere Reserve, an internationally designated protected area managed to demonstrate the values of conservation.

The Caribbean National Forest is well recognized as a unique location. The forest features the largest number of species of native trees (240) in the NFS, and contains 50 varieties of orchids and more than 150 species of ferns. The forest also provides a valuable water source for thousands of Puerto Rican residents. The area is also rich in wildlife with more than 100 species of vertebrates, including the endangered Puerto Rican Parrot.

The area's spectacular scenery and the grandeur of the tropical vegetation can be appreciated from peaks both within and outside the area.

El Toro can be seen from many vistas around the island and by sailors traveling the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea as well as inhabitants of neighboring islands. The area features dense vegetation with a mixed evergreen forest ranging from three meters in height on the peaks to 30 meters at lower elevations. There are potential cultural or historical features within the area possibly containing artifacts and Taino petroglyphs.

About 850,000 visitors enjoy the Caribbean National Forest each year. Recreation opportunities in the wilderness area include swimming, birdwatching, primitive camping and hiking activities offering trails and treks to peak tops.

The environment provides visitors with opportunities for a feeling of solitude and serenity, a spirit of challenge, adventure and a sense of self reliance.

Ecological and Biological assets

The Caribbean National Forest, known in Puerto Rico as 'El Yunque' (derived from the Taino word "Yuké" which translates as "...mountain covered by clouds") is one of the smallest national forests (28,000 acres) but it contains a wealth of ecological and biological assets. The forest is home to the Puerto Rican Parrot. In addition, 240 native tree species, more than any other national forest, are located there.

The area is occupied by 42-year round species of birds and is of great importance to at least 35 neotropical migratory bird species which include the Peregrine Falcon, Merlin and the Black-throated Blue Warbler which has been designated as a management indicator species.

Several species of bats are common along with numerous lizards and tree frog species. A rich variety of aquatic life is also found in the area's many streams.

Research to benefit tropical forests worldwide

Also designated as the Luquillo Experimental Forest, this illustrates the important research role of the forest. The research environment offers valuable opportunities for global, long-term research related to tropical forests located throughout the world.

The forest is also home to the agency's International Institute of Tropical Forestry (IITF). Located at the University of Puerto Rico, Agricultural Experimental Station, the Institute is committed to research in tropical forestry and technology transfer.

Many research activities are focused on hydrology, meteorology, climatology and atmospheric data collection. These long-term ecological studies are of great significance for managing and protecting tropical rainforests around the globe.

Endangered Species List - Puerto Rican Parrot

The Puerto Rican Parrot is the only native parrot on the island and was placed on the Federal Endangered Species list in 1968. One of the 10 most endangered birds in the world, the Puerto Rican Parrot once was abundant throughout the island but now only approximately 21 wild birds remain deep within the forest. A parrot aviary was established in 1972 in the Caribbean National Forest where parrot eggs are hatched and fledged in captivity. From this population birds are selected and then prepared for the wild and subsequently released. Three release events have occurred to date with the first in 2000 with 10 birds, in 2001 with 16 birds, and 2002 with 9 birds. The survival rate is about 45 to 50 percent.

The El Toro Wilderness provides habitat for the endangered Elfin Woods Warbler, the Puerto Rican Boa, the Desmarest's fig eating bat, five species of Coquis (*tree frogs*) and eight federally listed endangered plants and 30 sensitive plant species.

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