

2016

Uncle Sam's Jungle: Recreation, Imagination, And The Caribbean National Forest

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UNCLE SAM'S JUNGLE: RECREATION, IMAGINATION, AND THE CARIBBEAN
NATIONAL FOREST

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of North Georgia, 2014

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Public History

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2016

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DEDICATION

For my fiancé, family, and friends.

Graduate school is an adventure. Thank you for helping me along the way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has benefitted from the insight, kindness, and wisdom of many people from many places. I thank my fiancé, Kaci Sims, for the constant patience and encouragement that gave me the strength to climb the mountains of a graduate education. I am grateful to my family – Dean, Clara, and Lauren – for instilling in me the value of chasing dreams, and refusing to settle. I thank my brother, Scott Keener, who is always ready to explore a new wilderness.

My advisors, Tom Lekan and Matt Childs, have been constant guiding lights to my thesis and my time at the University of South Carolina. Tom honed my ability to read people and cultures on a landscape. Matt encouraged me to embark across the Atlantic Ocean in search of deeper connections in history. Robert Weyeneth, Allison Marsh, Tamara Spike, and Victoria Hightower offered unwavering support when waters became choppy. Thank you for being incredible mentors and wonderful friends.

This work took me across the western hemisphere. It relied on the generosity of many. I thank my fellow rangers at Capulin Volcano National Monument and across the National Park Service. They taught the importance of public lands. The Forest History Society and the Atlantic History Reading Group pushed me to conceptualize National Forests in a new perspective. I am grateful to friends met along my travels in the United States and throughout the Caribbean islands. Thank you for the inspiration.

ABSTRACT

The Caribbean National Forest in Puerto Rico offers a unique lens into the environmental relationship between the United States and the Caribbean. Established by the Spanish and taken under possession by the United States, the forest represents an imagined space constructed as a Caribbean paradise. As environmentally inclined travelers reached the edge of the western frontier, their interests turned South to the tropics. Tourism boosters and the U.S. Forest Service fabricated a message of a uniquely American jungle. Tourism and the rise of the Caribbean vacation from the 1930s to the 1970s transformed the rainforest from a working landscape into a dreamscape filled with flawless ecological wonders, restaurants, and trails that made American travelers salivate. The U.S. Forest Service metaphorically tamed the jungle, and tourism promoters opened the eyes of Americans to an Edenic landscape under the safety of Uncle Sam's flag. The Caribbean National Forest became a bargaining chip for control of Puerto Rico. Outdoor recreation became a form of cultural imperialism to sell the imagined forest as a luxurious adventure for mainlanders.

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CHAPTER 1

AN AMERICAN TROPICAL RAINFOREST

Shortly after arriving in Puerto Rico in the summer of 1964, a writer for The New Yorker, Vivante Arturo, grew tired of the hustle and bustle of urban civilization in San Juan where “there were a thousand noises.”¹ Arturo realized that to escape the burdens of the city he must take his family to ascend the famed peak of El Yunque in the Caribbean National Forest. The journalist found a tranquil paradise where “a silent life has asserted itself and taken hold,” and finally he “stood silent amid the silent trees.”² Like generations of travelers before him, Arturo sought a Caribbean paradise as a reprieve from civilization. From approximately 1937 until 1976, travel advertisements sold this paradise as a leisurely adventure to wealthy tourists in the United States. Tourists became like Christopher Columbus nearly 500 years later.³ Tourism boosters enthralled travelers with fantastical accounts that reported, “many of the sights you will see today are the same as those which dazzled the first Spanish explorers more than 450 years ago.”⁴ The flight from urbanity into an ecological sanctuary illuminated the American fascination with an imagined Caribbean paradise. El Yunque was tailored into a landscape of desire.

¹ Vivante Arturo, “Run to the Waterfall,” The New Yorker, Vol. 40 (August 1, 1964), p. 29.

² Ibid.

³ “Puerto Rico – Columbus ‘discovered’ It, And So Can You!” New York Amsterdam News (May 12, 1973).

⁴ Brochure, Rain Forest: Bosque Nacional Del Caribe, Puerto Rico, box 31, Puerto Rico Forests & Forestry, U.S. Forest Service Newspaper Clippings, Forest History Society.

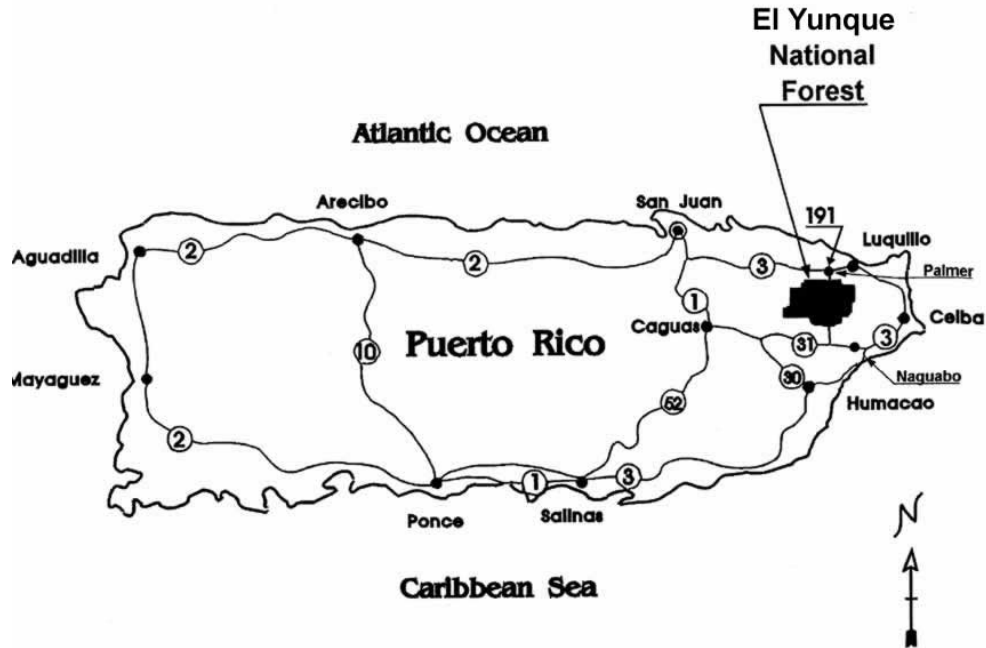


Figure 1.1 El Yunque and Puerto Rico
Map courtesy of El Yunque National Forest, U.S. Forest Service.

Located along the northeast corner of Puerto Rico, the Caribbean National Forest has a deep history of human use. Known today as El Yunque National Forest, it was originally established by Spanish King Alfonso XII as protected crown lands in 1876.⁵ The early Spanish foresters, known as the *Inspección General de Montes*, had only a “slight footprint” on colonial forest management.⁶ There was little to no enforcement, and

⁵ The most recent name change occurred in 2007 after President George W. Bush officially renamed the forest to El Yunque National Forest to create solidarity with the Puerto Rican population. For more information, see Executive Order 13428- Renaming a National Forest in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, April 2, 2007. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the forest as the Caribbean National Forest as the historical actors did between 1935 and 2007. Additionally, Puerto Ricans have referred to the National Forest from its inception as El Yunque after the tallest mountain peak. I will use this word interchangeably with Caribbean National Forest.

⁶ Richard P. Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 359.

the Spanish forest rangers could not prevent the surrounding population from inhabiting the boundaries of the king's forest.⁷ The Puerto Ricans that relied upon El Yunque became dependent on agriculture and hunting. For over 400 years, the mountainous terrain of El Yunque was a colonial working landscape.

The United States wrested territorial control over the island in 1898 after Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the U.S. in the Spanish-American War. Theodore Roosevelt took the Spanish Crown Lands and established the 5,116 acre Luquillo Forest Reserve in 1903, which was renamed the Luquillo National Forest in 1907. In order to better understand the tropical ecology, the U.S. built the Tropical Forest Experiment Station in 1911. This station eventually allowed the U.S. to push their influence over the natural resources of the entire tropical world. The imperial relationship between the United States and the Caribbean found its roots after gaining Caribbean territories. The completion of the Panama Canal in 1914 solidified U.S. influence into the tropics.

After the creation of the United States Forest Service (USFS) in 1905, the Caribbean National Forest held the title of one of the first managed forests and the only tropical rainforest in the Forest Service system. In 1935, the forest had grown so significantly through land grants, donations, and privately purchased parcels that the National Forest received yet another title, the Caribbean National Forest. In the same year, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) began work establishing recreational facilities that encouraged tourism to the tropical forest.⁸

⁷ For more information on Spanish forestry in the Caribbean, see Reinaldo Funes Monzote, From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba: An Environmental History since 1492 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

⁸ For a brief overview of El Yunque National Forest, see <http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/elyunque/learning/history-culture> or Passing the Baton

The rugged individualism that sparked the conservation movement in the American West was reimagined in the Caribbean South.⁹ With Puerto Rico firmly under Uncle Sam’s imperial flag, the United States solidified their decades long quest to establish control in the Caribbean.¹⁰ Several scholars argue that the military frontier moved from the American West to the Caribbean South. Historian Camilla Fojas argues that “after the Mexican-American War, in 1848, the imagined frontier of the United States moved south, challenging the supremacy of its mythic western orientation.”¹¹ The military orientation away from the American West continued into the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. The building of the Panama Canal, and its completion in 1914, shifted the imaginary frontier lines further into the South.¹² Historian Blake Scott claims that “the same men who engaged in the conquest of the American West led the conquest

From the Taínos to Tomorrow, edited by Kathryn Robinson, Jerry Bauer, and Ariel E. Lugo (Washington: USDA Forest Service, 2014).

⁹ The conservation movement and the concept of virgin landscapes that needed to be saved inspired the concept of “rugged individualism” that expressed the need for wilderness as a solution to the softening aspects of civilization. While this concept was largely debated by the 1940s, its influence on the need to preserve and identify valuable natural resources is essential to understanding the American fascination with wildness. For more information, see Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico possessed their own version of rugged individualism and national character in the charismatic *Jibaro*. This identity was personified by the “native peasant.” For more information, see Francisco A. Scarano, “The Jíbaro Masquerade and the Subaltern Politics of Creole Identity Formation in Puerto Rico, 1745-1823,” The American Historical Review, Vol. 101, No. 5 (December 1996), pp. 1398 – 1431.

¹¹ Camilla Fojas, Island Empires: Pop-Culture and U.S. Power (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), pp. 4-5.

¹² Blake Scott, “From Disease to Desire: Panama and the Rise of the Caribbean Vacation” (PhD Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2016), p. 64.

of the American tropics.”¹³ The ecological tourism that grew out of the mid-twentieth century endeavored upon the same routes as the military conquest.

As American conservation conquered the western frontier, conservationists and tourists moved southward following military conquest into the tropics. Areas such as the newly found Caribbean National Forest was ripe for tourism. These conquering visitors sought new places to consume just as the U.S. military sought new frontiers several decades earlier.¹⁴ With the Panama Canal’s completion, the metaphorical gateway to the tropics was fully open for travelers.¹⁵ The creation of an imagined tropical paradise fueled the touristic notions of leisure, and the American infatuation with wild spaces. The American journalists and travel booster used this National Forest to turn one of the last remaining forests in Puerto Rico into a desired destination. They perpetuated the myth of the virgin forest narrative, which proliferated in the American West. Once the American public believed that the American frontier had closed, consumers of nature turned South towards the newly gained territories such as Puerto Rico. Travelers, tourists, and outdoor enthusiasts from the United States imagined the Caribbean National Forest as a uniquely American jungle. Leisure travel inevitably reshaped the history of U.S.-Caribbean relationships.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The analytical concept of “consuming” nature is well documented within environmental history. One example, by historian Paul Sutter, discusses the idea of “windshield wilderness.” This wilderness was consumed by American travelers from the comfort of their automobiles. For more information, see Paul S. Sutter, Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Scott, “From Disease to Desire: Panama and the Rise of the Caribbean Vacation,” p. 13.

El Yunque exemplifies the U.S.-Caribbean relationship of a "promise of tropical pleasure and adventure."¹⁶ The National Forest became a location in the broader Caribbean where "one could escape the reality of home in search of a mythical past" and the visitor gets to "play history."¹⁷ In the case of El Yunque, this history was that of the colonial Spanish explorer. However, the American public did not instinctively perceive of the tropical rainforest that was now under their possession as a paradise. As Scott emphasizes about the American public, "someone told them stories, someone guided them, someone cut the trail, someone profited, and someone likely suffered." This study analyzes how El Yunque was transformed by those advertisements that tourism promoters and the Forest Service crafted.¹⁸

The chronology of the Caribbean National Forest during the 1930s to the 1960s reveals a constructed idea of comfortable leisure. Building the infrastructure for recreation on the island began in the early 1930s, when Franklin D. Roosevelt sent the newly established Civilian Conservation Corps to the island to build roads, trails, and picnic shelters. Timber was dethroned as the forest's primary use when two hurricanes in 1928 and 1932 and the Great Depression demanded emergency action. Around the time that World War II ended in 1945, tourism boosters in the form of newspaper journalists, travel companies, and outfitters capitalized on the economic boom of postwar America. They worked in tandem with the U.S. Forest Service to create a desired landscape sold as a comfortable exotic vacation. The Forest Service used recreation as a means to promote the forest and their influence on the island. In the 1950s and 1960s, federal agencies such

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

as the Forest Service enjoyed respect and influence as professionals, and their recommendations concerning the environment were typically followed by the American public.¹⁹ Wealthy white travelers consumed the picturesque National Forest as a territory belonging to the United States. Recreation provided the medium for cultural imperialism on El Yunque and the larger Caribbean.

By the end of the 1970s, the Forest Service shattered the dreamscape of El Yunque in favor of logging's economic benefit to both Puerto Rico and the United States. The Forest Management Act of 1976 distorted the American view of an untouched tropical paradise. The act advocated for increased timbering, ramped up grazing activities, and "new roads into virgin areas."²⁰ Environmental groups created backlash for Terry Tenold, a Forest Service planner, who argued that the "wood was needed for the Puerto Rican economy."²¹ The Forest Service's call for a 45 year timbering plan of over one-fifth of the Caribbean National Forest reoriented El Yunque's purpose back to timber with a mix of recreation into the present.

Travel literature, newspapers, and government documents reveal a complex history of fabricating wilderness on a human landscape. How did the National Forest encourage tourism? How did the wealthy class of Americans imagine El Yunque? This paper argues that tourism promoters and the U.S. Forest Service transformed the

¹⁹ Historian Adam Rome argues that there is a common misconception that "big government" has always been distrusted. Rather, they reflected powerful influence over to the opinions of the American public. For more information, see Adam Rome, The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 10-11.

²⁰ Phillip Shabecoff, "Cutting Into National Forests," The New York Times (September 28, 1986), p. 5.

²¹ Ibid.

Caribbean National Forest into an imagined landscape based on exotic ideas of adventure, leisure, and recreation. American tourists flocked to explore a perceived tropical paradise under United States sovereignty. Advertisers sold an imagined Puerto Rico as a verdant sanctuary ripe for exploitation by the wealthy American consumer.

Environmental and Caribbean historians still have much to learn about El Yunque.²² Since the centennial of the Forest Service in 2005, Harold K. Steen, James G. Lewis, Char Miller, and Samuel P. Hays have written comprehensive histories of the USFS. Within their monographs, they discuss the cultural importance of recreation to the American people. Hays is the first to include how the American public's opinion shaped the agency. However, Hays notes about recreation, "historians have not taken much interest, and consequently only bare outlines can be described at this point of historical inquiry."²³ El Yunque complements the robust history of the U.S. Forest Service. The Caribbean National Forest provides deeper understanding to the role of recreation and tourism in the continental United States and their tropical territories. El Yunque pivots

²² Dennis Merrill briefly mentions that "natural beauties" informed travelers to Puerto Rico in the early twentieth century, but he quickly moves away from the role of the environment in structuring the tourist imagination. El Yunque briefly is mentioned as the "rain forest and waterfalls at the foot of lofty El Yunque," but this portion consists of a single paragraph and the role of the United States Forest Service is never mentioned. For more information, see Dennis Merrill, Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Richard Tucker briefly discusses the role of timbering and logging in El Yunque, but he primarily examines the larger ecological implications of international forestry; see, Richard Tucker, Insatiable Appetites: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 359-360 and pp. 408-409.

²³ Samuel P. Hays, The American People & The National Forests: The First Century of the U.S. Forest Service (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), p. 69.

the focus of Forest Service historiography by forcing an examination of cultural imperialism through the selling of an imagined paradise.

The Caribbean National Forest adds the dimension of public land management to tropicality studies. Tropicality transformed the Caribbean into a landscape to be desired rather than despised. Historian Catherine Cocks argues that “to understand the successful development of the Southland [the American tropics] as a tourist region, we must understand how the tropics ceased to represent nature at her most dangerous and came to represent her at her most loving.”²⁴ Tropicality was employed at the convenience of the user.²⁵ In the mid twentieth century, tropicality envisioned a dense forest filled with adventurous vacation. Scott notes that the greatest call to the American traveler was the exotic getaway inspired by the same tropical environment that once was seen as deadly. This defining shift from disease to destination came from American influence as tourism promoters depicted the U.S. as conquering disease and taming the tropics.²⁶ Megan Raby claims that the Caribbean jungle islands “also became a routine part of popular imaginings of the tropics through books...and appearances in a slew of magazines and

²⁴ Catherine Cocks, Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 4.

²⁵ Tropicality and the notion of shaping the image of the environment for nation building has an extensive literature. For more information, see Nancy Leys Stepan, Picturing Tropical Nature (Reaktion Books, 2006), Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Puritan Conquistadors (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, How To Write A History of the New World (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), Claude Levi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), Candace Slater, Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Richard H. Grove, Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Scott, “From Disease to Desire,” p. 273.

educational films.”²⁷ El Yunque played an important role in the U.S.-Caribbean imperial relationships as the U.S. claimed direct possession over Puerto Rico. This personal connection redirects the scholarship to consider how El Yunque’s representation changes over the course of the twentieth century.

El Yunque provides an avenue to analyze U.S. environmental exploitation territorial holdings. Puerto Rico’s liminal status as neither official colony or sanctioned state challenges U.S. imperialism in the Greater Caribbean. Raby and Scott discuss U.S. imperialism, which created the infrastructure in the Panama Canal that inevitably promoted tourism to the region.²⁸ Scott argues that Panama marked one of the first U.S. footholds in the Caribbean. However, the U.S. began extracting timber from El Yunque in 1898, almost two decades before the Panama Canal was completed. The Caribbean National Forest reframes environmental tropicality into a territorial lens.

Recreation Borne from Disaster

El Yunque’s original purpose was timber from its establishment as a Spanish Crown Land in 1876 until post U.S. control in the late 1920s. Prior to World War II, The United States’ focus on El Yunque was educating foresters in tropical forestry to control the territory. Historian Samuel P. Hays argues that the politics of the conservation

²⁷ Raby, “The Jungle at Our Door,” p. 261.

²⁸ For more information about U.S. military infrastructure literally paving the road to Caribbean tourism and ecological imagination, see Megan Raby, “The Jungle at Our Door’: Panama and the American Ecological Imagination in the Twentieth Century,” Environmental History, Vol. 21, No. 2 (April 2016) and Blake Scott, “From Disease to Desire: The Rise of Tourism at the Panama Canal,” Environmental History, Vol. 21, No. 2 (April 2016).

movement in this period was efficiency through applied science.²⁹ The U.S. Tropical Forest Experiment Station (TFES), opened in 1911, served to inform U.S. foresters about the ecology of their first tropical rainforest. The TFES also became the hub for educating Latin American foresters, which allowed the U.S. to extend its influence over the entire tropical world. Timbering for valuable lumber such as mahogany and dyewoods occupied the Forest Service's interest, and little attention was paid to recreation or tourism.³⁰ The U.S. focus of exploiting Puerto Rico for natural resources falls in line with U.S. policy in areas such as Mexico, Brazil, and Central America. American markets demanded luxury timber such as mahogany, dyewoods, and conifer species, but they wrestled with sustainability.³¹ However, the emphasis on timber came to an end with the advent of the Great Depression. The timber industry's market declined by 25 percent between 1929 and 1934.³² The diminishing market forced the Forest Service to reimagine El Yunque from a working landscape into a recreational dreamscape.

Before the U.S. Forest Service could accomplish greater imperial control in the region, they had to address control of the local Puerto Rican population. El Yunque posed a unique case of conservation. With Puerto Rico's large population and limited geographical landmass, the Forest Service was forced to make a compromise between

²⁹ Samuel P. Hays, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), p. 3.

³⁰ There is an extensive history of colonial European resource extraction that served as a precedence for the United States. Luxury demanded top quality materials, and the Caribbean typically became the primary source. For more information on timber extraction in Early America, see Jennifer L. Anderson, Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³¹ Tucker, Insatiable Appetite, p. 346.

³² Mason Carter, Robert C. Kellison, and R. Scott Wallinger, Forestry in the U.S. South: A History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), p. 53.

conservation and Puerto Rican habitation. The Forest Service initiated the *parcelero* project, which allowed local Puerto Ricans to remain on federal lands under the condition that they intersperse native tree species along their crops.³³ This sustained over 250 families within the National Forest, and reinforced the notion of a working landscape.³⁴

In 1928, hurricane San Felipe swept through the island destroying many Forest Service pursuits and agricultural ventures of Puerto Ricans around the designated forest. Before the island recovered, hurricane San Ciprian continued the devastation in 1932. These two hurricanes coupled with the Great Depression left Puerto Rico looking for a solution to the economic disaster. In 1933, Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt to promote ownership of forest lands as a form of economic relief.³⁵ At Pinchot's recommendation, FDR sent the CCC to all territories within the same year including Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Virgin Islands, and Alaska.³⁶ The Caribbean National Forest used this opportunity to purchase lands adjacent to the forest and expand the National Forest land area. The solution to revitalizing the forest came in the form of recreation at the hands of the Emergency Relief Campaign.³⁷

³³ Kathryn Robinson, Jerry Bauer, and Ariel E. Lugo, eds., Passing the Baton: From Taínos to Tomorrow: Forest Conservation in Puerto Rico (Washington, D.C.: USDA Forest Service, 2014), p. 88.

³⁴ The Puerto Ricans that remained on the landscape have a similar story to the indigenous Americans in western National Forests. However, these local Puerto Ricans were not seen as “environmental bandits” that illegally inhabited the landscape. The *parcelero* system created a compromise between conservation and the limited geography of an island. For more information on environmental banditry, see Karl Jacoby, Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁵ Carter, Kellison, and Wallinger, Forestry in the U.S. South, p. 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁷ The United States was not the only nation promoting recreation for its increasingly urbanized population. Mexico, among other examples, boomed with National Parks in the early twentieth century. For more information, see Emily Wakild, Revolutionary Parks:

The emergency relief needed in Puerto Rico was amplified given the natural and economic disasters. In May of 1933, approximately 2,400 CCC men landed on the island to revitalize the National Forest.³⁸ The CCC literally built the foundation for recreation in the forest. In an insular report from 1943, a decade after the CCC started work in El Yunque, the Forest Service acknowledged that “it was not until the beginning of the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933 that any material development work was done.”³⁹ The legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt extended into American territories, and emphasized outdoor recreation as a dual solution of economic recovery and tourism. E.W. Hadley, the General Superintendent of Forests, claimed that \$8,000,000 was used “extensively in the development of the Caribbean National Forest.”⁴⁰ Hadley reported that “the Civilian Conservation Corps work beginning in 1933, has made it possible to greatly enlarge the road and trails system and to provide many improvements and facilities for the rapidly increasing demand for recreational use.”⁴¹ The American leisure class came from a tradition of recreation established with the National Park Service in 1916. Outdoor recreation became canonized as a legitimate form of preservation. The Organic Act of 1916, which established the National Park Service, forced the U.S. Forest Service to rethink management of National Forests. The wealthy American traveler forced the Forest Service to recognize that that their space had become a different kind of

Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico’s National Parks, 1910-1940 (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011).

³⁸ U.S. Forest Service, Caribbean National Forest of Puerto Rico, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1940), p. 19.

³⁹ Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee of Territories and Insular Affairs, Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico, 78th Congress., 1943, p. 334.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ English Summary of Annual Report, Insular Forest Service, p. 2, File F11.2, Caribbean National Forest, U.S. Forest Service History Collection, Forest History Society.

resource.⁴² The CCC work in response to increasing recreational demand marks the beginnings of ecological imagination, but before tourists flooded the island, the facilities for their enjoyment had to be built.⁴³

Forest management relied heavily on New Deal programs. A 1944 insular report stated that “closely allied with expenditures for unemployment relief are those outlays undertaken in connection with the conservation of natural resources. Foremost among such projects must be listed the Civilian Conservation Corps.”⁴⁴ The explicit mentioning of the CCC in relation to natural resource conservation underscores the importance of the CCC in environmental management. The CCC and Works Progress Administration (WPA) were fundamental in rehabilitating the island; these acts uplifted the economy.⁴⁵ The report corroborates the concept of the Forest Service’s active role in healing the island’s financial situation. “The first emergency expenditures made by the Federal Government in Puerto Rico within recent times antedated the economic depression of the 1930s and sprang directly from a natural disaster overtaking the island in the summer of

⁴² Paul S. Sutter, “A Blank Spot on the Map”: Aldo Leopold, Wilderness, and the U.S. Forest Service Recreational Policy, 1909 – 1924,” Western Historical Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 189-192.

⁴³ Historians have discussed the contributions of the CCC in great depth, but their contributions to the Caribbean National Forest remain largely untreated. For a great treatment of the CCC and their role in environmentalism, see Neil M. Maher, Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ Compiled for the subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Investigations of Political, Economic, and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico: Federal Agencies Operating in Puerto Rico, 78th Congress, 2nd session, 1944, p. 1913.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.1916.

1928. In that year a hurricane struck the island with extreme force.”⁴⁶ The insular report listed the economic damage at “some \$85,000,000.”⁴⁷

The Forest Service benefitted greatly from these emergency relief campaigns on the island as Puerto Ricans and Americans alike were put to work creating the recreational facilities. The CCC mission was to create any “beneficial purpose contributing to the general welfare, public hygiene, and comfort of the people of Puerto Rico.”⁴⁸ El Yunque’s Emergency Relief Campaign is unique in that it employed both mainlanders and islanders. This National Forest became a space where Puerto Ricans found work, and American’s employed by the CCC experienced their tropical territory. Almost serving as an introduction for the American public, the 1930s opened Puerto Rico to the American tourist. Through disaster relief, the Caribbean National Forest became the answer for general welfare and comfort of the Puerto Rican people. For the American, the National Forest became the answer for comfortable adventure.

The facilities built, which include a restaurant, cabins, an overlook tower, and roads, became a public space for both Puerto Ricans and Americans. The facilities rivaled those of any built in the Caribbean according to Richard J. Costley, the Acting Director of the Division of Recreation and Land Uses. Costley argued that the restaurant was “one of the most outstanding, if not the most outstanding, visitor attraction of the Caribbean.”⁴⁹ Henry M. Jackson, Chairman of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, reiterated

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 1915.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 1783.

⁴⁹ Correspondence and Reports, Administering the Recreation Resources of the Caribbean National Forest, April 20, 1965, File F11.2, National Forests: Inspection Reports – General, U.S. National Forest History Collection, Forest History Society.

that “there are outstanding recreation areas in Puerto Rico.”⁵⁰ The Recreation Imperative report asserted that “visitors to the island fare better in recreation opportunities than the residents do, since many of the resources they enjoy are privately owned. Recreation opportunities for the Puerto Ricans are neither prevalent nor plentiful.”⁵¹ The private tourism opportunities on the beaches of Puerto Ricans fashioned themselves for the American traveler. However, the Caribbean National Forest remained a public space with recreation open to Puerto Ricans and Americans alike, but the imagined green utopia became an ideal only shared by tourists to the island. Through the *parcelero* system, Puerto Ricans had long understood that El Yunque had an extensive history of human use from early indigenous Taínos to their own agricultural ventures in the forest.

Using the work completed by the CCC, high-powered tourism boosters in Washington and New York drew attention away from the congested streets of San Juan to spread influence across the island. In 1952, Puerto Rico expanded its representative government to an elected governorship after ratifying their own constitution. The *Estado Libre Asociado* complicated the territorial status. This action placed Puerto Rico in a limbo between enhanced commonwealth, independent nation, and federated state.⁵² The altered power dynamics between Puerto Rico and the United States continued the uncertain status of the island, but the U.S. government wanted to maintain control. In an effort to educate the American tourist, American newspapers used the new recreation

⁵⁰ Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, The Recreation Imperative: A Draft of the Nationwide Outdoor Recreation Plan, report prepared by Henry M. Jackson and the Department of the Interior, 1974, p. 97.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ramón E. Sotó-Crespo, Mainland Passage: The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. xiii.

opportunities in the forest to draw tourists out of the big city, off of the crowded coasts, and into their jungle resource.

As U.S.-Caribbean relations moved into the mid-twentieth century, the United States transformed its territory into a vacation destination for the wealthy mainland tourist. While Puerto Rican laborers migrated to United States for work in the 1940s and 1950s, mainlanders headed South to recreate. Tourism promoters infused a fantastical image of wildness with the Caribbean National Forest. “See El Yunque, the tropical rain forest. Walk under giant ferns and wild orchids,” exclaimed a newspaper in 1970.⁵³ The advertisement continues to use the forest as a selling point to claim that “there’s more to do in Puerto Rico than the rest of the Caribbean put together.”⁵⁴ Almost a decade later in 1982, the forest was still being used to economically revitalize the island. For example, the newspaper claimed that “you don’t have to drive far to go out on the island. El Yunque, a mountainous rain forest, lies only 25 miles east of Puerto Rico’s capital.”⁵⁵ The writer, Jay Clarke, used the natural resources to emphasize Puerto Rico’s more natural attractions. He wrote that El Yunque was “the only tropical forest in the U.S. National Forest system, it is home to 500 species of trees and plants, 100 of them unique to the island. You can see giant tree ferns, huge stands of bamboo, the “two-faced” yagrumo trees and the sierra palms, found only above 2,400 feet...”⁵⁶ The concept of bigness used to describe the forest with words such as “huge” and “giant” were repeated

⁵³ “San Juan. There is something to do when you get off the beach,” The Washington Post, 1970, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Jay Clarke, “Out on the Island in Puerto Rico,” The Washington Post, February 7, 1982, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

consistently for over four decades from the 1940s to the 1970s. The work of the CCC built the path to exaggerated features that ran wild through the minds of Americans imagining sunny Puerto Rico.

The New Tropical Frontier

The wild character placed upon the Caribbean National Forest starting in the 1940s and 1950s came primarily from the hands of travel writers returning from the island. Puerto Rico was a new resource free from foreign complications in places like Cuba or Mexico. Socialist and radical communist movements had begun in Latin America by the middle twentieth century. For example, Fidel Castro was planning his revolution in Mexico City while Che Guevara rode his motorcycle across South America. These two figures reshaped the power dynamics of the Caribbean forever through the Cuban Revolution in 1959. These political shifts made the American controlled island of Puerto Rico more attractive than the island's battle torn counterparts.

American business found a new frontier in the Caribbean National Forest as the U.S. now controlled an ecologically legitimate tropical rainforest. The Puerto Rican rainforest became an "American" jungle through notions of tropicality. The irony of creating a "National" forest in an unincorporated territory relates directly to imperial control. Language continually dictated the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, and language defined the island's landscape. Catherine Cocks argues that tourism promoters in the Caribbean "often had to work hard to design itineraries and landscapes that highlighted the tropical features that North American visitors expected to see in seasons or locations."⁵⁷ The tourism promoters of the Caribbean National Forest

⁵⁷ Cocks, *Tropical Whites*, p. 4.

and Puerto Rico echoed these ideas as they constructed a narrative of an Edenic paradise waiting for the American tourist.

The American imagination that formed from the pages of advertisements relied on El Yunque's wildness, tropicality, and lush green spaces. Beginning in the 1930s, the narrative of a green paradise fiercely overtook the forest after the CCC had symbolically transformed the working landscape into a vacation dreamscape. "Every hundred feet there appears a brilliant and colorful picture...you enter a genuine jungle where orchids grow wild. Wander around the footpaths which have been laid out through the jungle." claimed a Washington Post article in 1939.⁵⁸ The article's name is telling: "colorful tropical scenery *beckons* tourists to Puerto Rico."⁵⁹ The romanticized visions of the forest "beckoning" tourists which portrayed a seductive and desired landscape. The concept of a *genuine* jungle is emphasized under the American flag as if the forest was simply waiting for the American traveler. Regardless of the inherent human imprint on a National Forest, the American tourist saw a space of wild vegetation and grandiose views that tourism promoters sold as explicitly *natural*. The irony of viewing these features on a developed trail and the ravaging effects of two hurricanes never detracted from the wildness of the space.

In 1950, a reporter for The New York Times, William A. Krauss, reviewed the Caribbean National Forest after traveling to the island. His article titled "Touring an American-Owned Jungle In The Heart of Puerto Rico's Caribbean National Forest" proclaimed that:

⁵⁸ "Colorful Tropical Scenery Beckons Tourist to Puerto Rico," The Washington Post, July 16, 1939, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

a tropical rain forest is a jungle grown up to full size, the kind of jungle you associate with the Amazon River and the Orinoco basin, with Java and New Guinea. Few American, no matter how widely traveled, would admit to being part owners – as United States citizens – of a full-fledged rain forest, yet high in the mountains of Puerto Rico, an American possession now coming deeper into the tourists' orbit, stands the Caribbean National Forest, a Federal forest service preserve and one of the finest of its kind in all the world. And one of the easiest for the pleasure traveler to visit.⁶⁰

The comparison between the Caribbean National Forest and the forest resources of places such as the Amazon demonstrates how travel writers exoticized the National Forest.

Michael Santin, another writer for The New York Times, echoed the call of Krauss in 1964. He wrote that the Caribbean National Forest is “still proving a major tourist objective, with its vast, dense wilderness tracts of giant ferns, exotic tropical hardwoods and wild-growing orchids, all of it bedecked with veils of sparkling waterfalls.”⁶¹ Santin continued by stating that “The United States Forest Service has developed the area so that visiting continentals can explore a real tropical rain forest.”⁶² The excerpt demonstrates how the Caribbean National Forest was perceived as an exotic American frontier waiting for the mainland explorer.⁶³

⁶⁰ William A. Krauss, “Touring an American-Owned Jungle in the Heart of Puerto Rico’s Caribbean National Forest,” The New York Times, Sunday, April 16, 1950, p. 5.

⁶¹ Michael Santin, “Mainland Amenities in Puerto Rico’s Tropics,” The New York Times, Sunday October 26, 1952, p. 11.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The American tourist traveled to the Caribbean by either steamship or airline. Steamships offered package tours throughout the Caribbean, and Pan Am Airways landed its flying boats in places such as Puerto Rico, Cuba, Chile, Bahamas, and Mexico. The proliferation of these package vacations made tourism much more accessible. For more information on leisure transportation in the Caribbean, see Blake Scott, “From Disease to Desire: Panama and the Rise of the Caribbean Vacation” (PhD Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2016).

The fantastical travelers accounts of the Caribbean National Forest informed the ecological imaginings of Puerto Rico. Hamilton M. Wright, Jr. of The Washington Post called the National Forest a “Small Island Paradise.”⁶⁴ Wright represented the perfect example of imagination building:

I’ve just seen one of the most amazing forests in my life! I’ve come from nature’s own “air-conditioning” plant in the 4,000 feet high mountains of the Loquillo forest known as El Yunque. I’ve seen “icicles” on palm trees. I’ve walked through clouds a mile above sea level... Puerto Rico is a new country for the tourist. It’s virgin sightseeing... Puerto Rico is a veritable Utopia.⁶⁵

Wright exemplifies the American need for a new virgin frontier. However, this time it comes from the hands of the tourist. He designated the Caribbean National Forest as “an unspoiled paradise for the American tourist.”⁶⁶ Wright depicts the forest as a green sanctuary found through a recreational playground. This brand of writing persuaded the American public into romanticized notions of tropicity in Puerto Rico. American tourists came to Puerto Rico ready to consume this natural space.

The natural resources consistently pointed out by travelers and tourist entrepreneurs illuminate the American ecological imagination. Much in the tradition of travel narratives, what writers emphasized in their articles demonstrates what they considered important or fantastical to the American traveler.⁶⁷ The aquatic features such as rivers, pools, and waterfalls were “pure enough to catch and drink in cupped

⁶⁴ Hamilton M. Wright, Jr., “Puerto Rico Holds Treats for Tourists,” The Washington Post, October 10, 1937, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ For more information on the influence of travel writing and influencing cultures, see Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 1992).

hands...”⁶⁸ The ferns and greenery often take a prominent role in romanticized language. “Vines and giant tree ferns spread their thickly tangled shade up and down the mountainsides, and stands of bamboo creak and snap in the sultry wind.”⁶⁹ Tourism agents from across America tapped into the exotic natural resources of this National Forest. Fred W. Avendorph of *The Chicago Defender* described El Yunque with “dense giant ferns, exotic tropical hardwoods, and tropical flowers which grow in profusion.”⁷⁰ The wildness of these resources resided “not far from San Juan” where the American tourist could find a “green sanctuary.”⁷¹

The Tamed Forest

Ironically, this green sanctuary and tropical frontier in Puerto Rico that was represented by the Caribbean National Forest came with a relaxing image. The tropical forest was indeed billed as an exotic space by tourism promoters across the U.S. However, the wildness and exoticized forest was transformed as vacationers and travelers endeavored to create a safer wild space for tourists of any caliber. The rugged individualism set forth by the conservation movement moved South with the addition of a leisurely character. In effect, the United States tamed the wild jungle. The relaxing recreational component of the forest was a product of U.S. imperialism onto the island, and continental tourists enjoyed the subdued wildness once America’s metaphorical flag was safely planted atop El Yunque’s peak.

⁶⁸ “Europe on the Beach in Puerto Rico,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Saturday, June 9, 1973, p. 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Fred W. Avendorph, “Puerto Rican Travel Offers Wide Variety,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1958, p. 12.

⁷¹ “Into Puerto Rico’s Rain Forest,” *Sunset*, Volume 137, 1966, p. 55.

The perception of a tamed forest filled with wildness ultimately created a new form of wilderness sold as leisurely adventure. The rainforest filled the imaginations of the American public with relaxation, leisure, and all the exoticism of a foreign country, but with the safety of being American soil. Indeed, the simple presence of the El Yunque peak set the stage for wilderness adventure. El Yunque defined the wild landscape in places such as a 1963 yachting magazine for the privileged Caribbean traveler. While discussing new yachting techniques that emphasized relaxation, a sharp contrast of wildness is presented as “the magnificent bulk of El Yunque, the peak known as ‘The Rainmaker’ on the eastern end of Puerto Rico” towered over the sea, which provided “a brooding backdrop to sun-flecked seas.”⁷² El Yunque produced “curtains of rain” across “the brilliant green” of the mountain slopes.⁷³ However, as wild as El Yunque was depicted, the author ultimately argued that “the climate is perfect for being afloat day after day.”⁷⁴ The writer, William Wheeler Robinson, described the peculiar site as “half wild” while goats that roamed his resort.⁷⁵ The American influence and cultural imperialism that transformed the messages of a wild mountain into a half wild landscape occur all under the gaze of El Yunque. When ordering food after his day yachting, Robinson “persuaded them [Puerto Ricans] to rustle up a lunch of rum-on-the-rocks and hamburgers. It was typical of the odd mixture of native and American influences that is

⁷² William Wheeler Robinson, “Under El Yunque,” Yachting, Volume 114, October 1963, p. 49.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 101-102.

so evident in all parts of Puerto Rico.”⁷⁶ The American tourist, who brought with them U.S. culture and wealth, tamed the National Forest through recreation.

Often within the same newspaper article, a contradictory tension is revealed between exotic adventure and relaxing vacations. The wild character of El Yunque is softened. One New York Times author, William A. Krauss, claimed that the Caribbean National Forest was an “American-Owned Jungle” arguing that “you can drive comfortably to the top of forest peaks, have lunch in a mountainside, rustic dining hall and, if you are lucky, rent one of twenty-one stout family size cabins...nearby, though somewhat concealed by giant ferns and thick growths of trees, are two swimming pools, Baño Grande and Baño de Oro, both fed by lively, cold mountain streams.”⁷⁷ The lucid language used by Krauss is an attempt to keep the wildness within the forest regardless of the humanized landscape evidenced by restaurants and lodging built by the CCC. He claims that “if this sounds too civilized for a real mountain rain forest, have no fear. This is the real thing, meaning four or five layers of forest, one growing under the other intertwined, intermingled, yet each with a sturdy independence,” and the Caribbean National Forest sits under an “almost impenetrable green roof.”⁷⁸ Krauss continues his fantastical description by claiming that “vines of all kinds twine the tree trunks, many of them a hundred feet long and strong enough to support a real live Tarzan. It sounds fantastic, and it is.”⁷⁹ The contrast between exotic landscapes and a tamed recreational playground defines the attitude and imagination held by many American tourist of this

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

⁷⁷ Krauss, “Touring an American-Owned Jungle,” p. 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

tropical rain forest. It reveals how Puerto Rico's image was that of paradise awaiting the U.S. tourist, and one of mountainous adventure waiting to be had by tourist-driven pioneers. Krauss' admittance of an idealistic, fantastical rain forest underscores the imagined American space. The exotic feel of being like Tarzan under the impenetrable green roof offers an escape for those seeking this virgin forest that is depicted as a pristine landscape now owned by the United States. In the Caribbean National Forest, the tourist imagined themselves becoming Tarzan.

The story of a tamed forest continued throughout the mid-twentieth century by advertising the greatness of El Yunque, but tempered with the comforts of civilized infrastructure. A 1973 New Amsterdam News article stated that "the traveler comes on El Yunque, America's only tropical National Forest. Jungle Vegetation tumbles over itself in the lower reaches, surrendering half-way up the mountain slopes to large palms. An unusual forest of dwarf trees, reachable only on foot, thrives on the 3,496 foot peak of El Yunque," which "most visitors are content to contemplate from the comforts of the pleasant, sprawling restaurant below."⁸⁰ Overtaking the island through cultural imperialism, the verdant greenery and island sanctuary is infused with American luxuries. Neal Ashby from The New York Times claimed in 1964 that for visitors not wanting to stray too far from the comforts of a "gleaming hotel after a day's adventuring" the "steaming rain forest" was the perfect solution.⁸¹ The National Forest, according to Ashby, was "only a quick trip back to San Juan."⁸² However, though Ashby's

⁸⁰ "Puerto Rico – Columbus "discovered It, And So Can You!," New York Amsterdam News, 1973.

⁸¹ Neal Ashby, "Exploring Puerto Rico's Rain Forest," The New York Times, Sunday, March 15, 1964, p. 25.

⁸² Ibid.

advertisement pointed out the close amenities, he claimed that the swimming pools were “refreshingly different from the concrete swimming pools of the continental United States,” and he focused on Baño Grande’s features as “constructed of stone in the midst of the lush growth on the mountainside.”⁸³ The exotic comparison between swimming pools underscores the desired exotic ecological imagination of the American tourist.

Hamilton M. Wright Jr., who emphasized the unspoiled and Edenic character of the forest reinforces Ashby’s perception when he claims that the forest “is a veritable paradise for the motorist or the traveler enthusiast...from the air, Puerto Rico looks exactly what is is – a real Utopia.”⁸⁴ The Edenic paradise narrative that the Caribbean National Forest became in the American imagination fueled the cultural influence that proliferated in Puerto Rico. This paradise transformed wilderness notions from the American West into a tourist’s dream of a tamed jungle under Uncle Sam’s flag. The Forest Service became the centerpiece in the selling point of tropicality in the American Caribbean.

The Agency Up North

The tourism promoters in America were not alone in creating the new type of subdued wilderness character. The Forest Service shared in the romanticized ideals of tropicality. The agency corroborated these notions of a grandiose green paradise in order to promote recreation. The American public typically do not want to realize a cut forest, so the Forest Service supported the tourism boosters. Their mission in the Caribbean was complemented by the overall agency’s push for greater recreation in National Forests by

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Wright, Jr., “Puerto Rico Holds Treats for Tourists,” p. 6.

the 1930s. In the middle of the twentieth century, Americans began discovering their forest resources as outdoor recreation became a legitimate form of preservation. The Forest Service in 1960 claimed that “in 1959 over 81 million recreation visits were made to the 151 national forest,” and that a “19-percent increase in recreation use of national forests” occurred since 1959.⁸⁵ The Forest Service claimed that recreation in National Forests had climbed vigorously over the last 15 years.⁸⁶ By 1987, recreational visits to the island topped two million visitors annually.⁸⁷

Reemphasizing the importance of recreation since the 1940s, the Caribbean National Forest from the perspective of the agency represented what Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace defined as an escape from urban civilization. He wrote that “I sometimes think we need more than ever, now, to refresh our spirits and renew our aims in the solitude of beautiful natural places.”⁸⁸ Wallace continues his sublime narrative when he suggested that “there is a natural completeness about outdoor occupations which we who have been forced indoors and penned in cities lack and miss. A man in a desk chair with his feet on a rug and his eye on a wall or ceiling all day long is a man in some part cut off from real life and the eternal sources of renewal. There is something strangely restoring about work or play that is done with an eye to the sky and with foot to earth.”⁸⁹ From Wallace’s letter it is clear that the Forest Service in the mid

⁸⁵ U.S. Forest Service, National Forest Vacations, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1960), p. 24.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Institute of Tropical Forestry and the Caribbean National Forest, Forest Recreation in the Caribbean islands: Proceedings from the Third Annual Meeting of Caribbean Foresters, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1987), p. 32.

⁸⁸ U.S. Forest Service, Forest Outings, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1940), p. vii.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

twentieth century avidly sought out new wild spaces. The Caribbean National Forest became this new tropical frontier, but one with paved roads and restaurants for the urban population to safely experience the El Yunque wilderness.

USFS agency publication emphasized the idea of a tropical frontier. *Forest Outings*, a publication by the Forest Service, dedicated an entire chapter to “Old Land: Puerto Rico.”⁹⁰ According to the Forest Service, the Caribbean National Forest was one of the, if not the most, visited National Forest in the system. They claimed that “ten times more people in proportion to the population visit national forests in the states.”⁹¹ The lucid agency metaphor for the tropicality of the forest’s natural bounty noted that “it is like a pretty peasant girl with the carriage of a queen and the raiment of a dirty child. It is a land of contrasts.”⁹² The agency shared in the American imagination that forest recreation in this virgin forest was a mission of social uplift.⁹³ In other words, the Puerto Rican people needed the Forest Service to administer the nation’s new jungle. The *parcelero* system, which allowed Puerto Ricans to inhabit the fringes of El Yunque, became a form of environmental control over the commons.⁹⁴ In another Forest Service

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. xii.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 242.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ The history of conservation in the U.S. South National Forests is one of submarginal crop lands such as Sumter National Forest in South Carolina and Oconee National Forest in Georgia. While El Yunque was used for agriculture, the croplands only claimed the fringes of the National Forest as the mountainous terrain spared the higher elevations. For this reason, the Caribbean National Forest was often given the moniker of pristine and untouched. For more information on southern National Forests, see Paul S. Sutter, “What Gullies Mean: Georgia’s “Little Grand Canyon” and Southern Environmental History,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (August 2010), pp. 579-616.

⁹⁴ Environmental historians argue that dispossessing public lands became an imperial form of controlling the commons. The U.S. has a long pedigree of indigenous removal for the sake of conservation. The control over the *parceleros* bestowed upon the Forest Service an imperial role with the mission of cultural and economic influence. For more

publication dating from 1940, the book argued that “the combination of mountain and coastal scenery has the customary charm of the unusual” in “Uncle Sam’s only tropical forest.”⁹⁵ The agency issued document stating that “Puerto Rico has as much to offer American travelers as any of the foreign possessions that lie in the Caribbean Sea, with the added interest that it flew the American flag.”⁹⁶ The emphasis of American ownership affirms the tumultuous political state of the Caribbean. The struggle between military dictatorships, socialist, and communist revolutions in Latin America during the twentieth century underscored the strategic importance of having a U.S. territory in the Caribbean basin. The Caribbean National Forest and outdoor recreation was an effective means of advertising the benefits of having Puerto Rico as a territory.

The USFS is incorporated into the notions of U.S. imperialism by using tropicality to their advantage. Literally planting a flag and advertising that “catering to travelers is an important part of the industrial life of the island, and the expansion and development of the national forest will play an increasingly important role in the future of Puerto Rico” demonstrated the motivations of creating an Edenic ecological imagination.⁹⁷ The Forest Service summarizes their motivation best by claiming that “in Puerto Rico the visitor from the United States is in his own home and the people of the island stand ready to extend a sincere welcome.”⁹⁸ The tamed wildness of the Caribbean National Forest informed the American imagination at the hands of both the USFS and

information, see Mark David Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁹⁵ U.S. Forest Service, Caribbean National Forest, p. 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

tourism promoters. Working in tandem, they created an Edenic playground fully equipped with the amenities desired by the American traveler in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

The Forest Service and tourism entrepreneurs advertised the Caribbean National Forest as a new commodifiable nature and vacation frontier. Following the militaristic routes of imperialism into the Greater Caribbean, the U.S. used the Caribbean vacation to spread its cultural influence through the same channels. The beginning of the CCC in El Yunque after the disasters of the Great Depression and two hurricanes came from a supposed benevolent idea of emergency relief through promoting recreation as an economic uplift to the island. However, this recreation became a tool to forge a new identity borne from desired Edenic characteristics within American tropical territories.

The liminal status of Puerto Rico's place in the larger governmental structure separated the island's ecological imagination from other Caribbean tourist destinations such as Cuba or Mexico. The territorial status of the island turned the tropical rainforest in Puerto Rico into an American-owned jungle ripe for the mainland traveler. The perpetuation of a verdant sanctuary in the Caribbean National Forest persisted until the 1970s when the National Forest Management Act of 1976 began to dismiss the notion of an untouched landscape.

The proposed logging of virgin areas set environmental groups into an uproar and gave the American traveler the growing sense that Puerto Rico's natural resources became "too American, too populated, and maybe even too close."⁹⁹ This feeling of

⁹⁹ Barbara Crossette, "To Puerto Rico on Short Notice," The New York Times, 1980, p. 1. While several environmental groups protested the logging of the Caribbean National

disillusionment with the island correlates with the political turmoil experienced between Puerto Rico and the U.S. The liminal status of Puerto Rico brought tensions between the statehood party and nationalists on the island. Between 1975 and 1982, Puerto Rican terrorists set over 200 bombs off in Puerto Rico and 140 in the United States mainland.¹⁰⁰ However, the political rebellion did not prevent Americans from valuing the island's natural resources. This sentiment of American imperial cynicism only represented a minority movement as a 1987 report in the New York Times claimed that "The Luquillo Mountains represented one of the few virgin forests left in the Caribbean," which offered a "magnificent recreational area for Puerto Ricans and thousands of visitors."¹⁰¹ The Forest Service's proposed logging permanently imprinted upon the land the concept of a used forest. The American public still defended the Caribbean National Forest as a valued recreational site as environmental movement in the 1970s flourished. This response is indicative of the greater environmental movement in the U.S. as preservationists avidly sought out pristine areas for biodiversity purposes.¹⁰² Even while under the threat of timbering the "virgin" forest, the deep rooted imagination of a green sanctuary for the mainland American fought to preserve their American jungle.

Forest, the New York Botanical Garden's Ghilleen T. Prance and Scott A. Mori were among two of the most prominent voices.

¹⁰⁰ For more information about the political turmoil between the United States and Puerto Rico, see José Trías Monge, Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹⁰¹ "Federal Plan Threatens National Rain Forest in Puerto Rico," The New York Times, January 27, 1987, p. 24.

¹⁰² Ecologically speaking, El Yunque National Forest today is arguably most famous for the Puerto Rican parrot and coquí frog. These creatures are endemic and they are favorites of all visitors to the island. For more information, see Chapter 12 in Kathryn Robinson, Where Dwarfs Reign: A Tropical Rain Forest in Puerto Rico (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1997).

The legacy of the U.S. imperialism on forest management cemented the role of U.S. operation of El Yunque. By 1987, the fate of the Caribbean National Forest was questioned in an insular report when a Mr. Mansur asked “has the Forest Service decided to relinquish management of the El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico?”¹⁰³ In reference to passing management and control of the valuable forest to the Puerto Rican local government, the Forest Service responded that they use a complex set of scientific and administrative skills that manage “one of the island’s main sources of outdoor recreation.”¹⁰⁴ Mansur issued that “it would be difficult to sustain this level of service” without continued administration by the USFS.¹⁰⁵ This claim was supported by the Secretary of the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources, Justo Mendez, who agreed that Puerto Rico did not have adequate resources alone to manage the Caribbean National Forest.¹⁰⁶ The Forest Service issued statement is a critical point as it illustrates the value, economically, recreationally, and socially, of the continued management at the hands of the Forest Service.¹⁰⁷ Using recreation as a justification, the Forest Service

¹⁰³ Subcommittee on Insular and International Affairs of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs House of Representative, Oversight Hearings, 100th Congress, 1st Session, 1987, p. 218.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ El Yunque was not isolated in this debate over natural resources and their touristic, military, and economic value to the United States. The island just offshore, Vieques, remains a topic of social justice and political ecology related to the environment. The island is used as a lens to examine how the privatization of beaches displaces local communities, and the increasingly marginalized locals are forced to cope with decades of military toxins as a result of the U.S. naval bombing range. For more information, see Sherrie Bayer, “Environmental Struggles in Paradise: Puerto Rican Cases, Caribbean Lessons,” Caribbean Studies, Vol. 40, No. 1 (January-June 2012), pp. 15-35 and Amílcar Antonio Barreto, “Vieques and the Politics of Democratic Resistance,” The New Centennial Review, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 135-154.

effectively consolidated their position in Puerto Rico for future generations. The influence of the National Forest reinforced the value of El Yunque as a recreational space waiting for the American outdoor enthusiast.

El Yunque's transformation from a working landscape into a dreamscape defined Puerto Rico's territorial status in the present. The United States continually debates the role of Puerto Rico, and whether or not they should welcome the island into statehood or release the island from its nickname as the world's oldest colony. The debate has left Puerto Rico in an "indefinite imperial limbo."¹⁰⁸ The role of the National Forest holds an important bargaining chip in the discussion of statehood. If Puerto Rico gained its independence, would the United States lose the Caribbean National Forest, and by default the Institute of Tropical Forestry? Who would become the world's leader in tropical forestry research? Associate Chief George Leonard argued for the extensive reach of El Yunque, "Part of the Forest Service's mission is to transfer its forestry knowledge and assistance to other countries of the world. Nowhere are we doing that more effectively than in the Caribbean National Forest."¹⁰⁹ This raises the question of what role El Yunque plays in disseminating U.S. environmental policies cross the tropics. These questions become issues with cultural and economic implications that all return to how the American imagines its tropical territory.

The examination of the Caribbean National Forest under the lens of recreation and ecological imagination raises new direction for scholarship. Realizing that tourism

¹⁰⁸ Fojas, *Island Empires*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁹ "This National Forest is Special," Remarks by Associate Chief George Leonard at the Dedication of El Yunque Ranger Station in Puerto Rico, March 23, 1988, U.S. Forest Service History Collection.

entrepreneurs did not work alone in creation notions of tropicality promotes the conversations historians must have between the U.S. Forest Service and Caribbean tourism more broadly. The critical position that El Yunque holds in the National Forest system provides an opportunity to look at how public land management shaped public perspectives of territories, and how these territories are controlled through recreation and travel culture. In the twentieth century, the Caribbean National Forest represented the American desire to create a commodity of nature, which forged from the jungle a new ecological perspective. Tourism boosters and the U.S. Forest Service manipulated El Yunque to promote cultural imperialism into the tropics. The U.S. influence over the tropical world finds roots in the imperial legacy of the Caribbean National Forest.

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