

Statement  
of  
Hon. José L. Rivera-Guerra  
Chairman  
of the  
Committee on Natural Resources, Conservation and the Environment  
House of Representatives  
of Puerto Rico

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
HEARING ON H.R. 539  
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Chairman Walden, Ranking Member Udall and members of the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health.

My name is José L. Rivera-Guerra. Ever since the beginning of the Fifteenth Legislative Assembly on January 2005, I have had the distinctive honor of being the Chairman of the Committee on Natural Resources, Conservation and the Environment of the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico.

Before I proceed any further, I want to express my gratitude and, that of Speaker José F. Aponte, for the opportunity to testify today before this Subcommittee.

I am here today to express the support of the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico for H.R. 539, the Caribbean National Forest Act, as formally expressed in House Resolution 1773; as well as that of the majority of your fellow citizens who reside in Puerto Rico. Therefore, it is appropriate that I commend Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño for his leadership on this issue.

The Caribbean National Forest, popularly known as “El Yunque”, is located in the Luquillo Mountain Range, approximately 25 miles southeast of San Juan. It is the only tropical forest in the United States National Forest System. Originally, it was set aside as a Crown Reserve in 1876 by King Alfonso XII of Spain; therefore, El Yunque represents the oldest forest reserve in the Western Hemisphere.

A few years later, right after Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States as a result of the Spanish American War, President Theodore Roosevelt designated the Caribbean National Forest as a forest reserve. Nonetheless, the history of this rain forest predates those relatively recent steps.

El Yunque actually gets its name from an Indian spirit, “Yuquiyé”, which means “Forest of Clouds”. As such, it was considered a holy place by the Taíno Indians.

This National Forest is home to over 240 species of trees and plants, more than in any other national forest, including 50 varieties of orchids and over 150 species of ferns. Of those trees and plant species, 26 are found nowhere else; making it the ideal haven for various floral species, as well as for animals that are on the verge of extinction.

El Yunque is also home to rare wildlife, including the Puerto Rican Parrot (*Amazona vitatta*), which is one of the ten most endangered species of birds in the World. At the time that Christopher Columbus set sail for the New World there were approximately one million of these distinctive parrots. As of last month, in the last count undertaken by the Fish and Wildlife Service, there are only 40 parrots in the wild and 60 in captivity.

The Puerto Rican parrot is a small Amazon parrot whose primary habitat is the upper zones of the Rain Forest. These parrots, as well as a good number of other animal species have long benefited from the fact that the Forest is a wildlife refuge where no hunting is allowed.

The climate of this United States National Forest is frost-free and ranges in moisture from semi-desert to rain forest conditions within very short distances. There are strong easterly trade-winds and cool weather is normal at the higher elevations.

El Yunque is the rainiest of all the National Forests receiving up to 240 inches of rainfall per year. More than 100 billion gallons of rainwater fall on the Forest per year. This fresh, clean water, is crucial to Puerto Rico. It provides clean drinking water to

over 800,000 residents and ensures adequate water supplies for our manufacturing and agricultural base.

The rain Forest is a popular recreation spot for families; as the Forest's many streams, natural pools and waterfalls, offer a myriad of opportunities for those interested in hiking, picnicking, birding and swimming. This wide range of attractions explains why over 600,000 visitors come to El Yunque each year, many of them tourists from the mainland.

Even more important, the Forest is a popular destination for many school groups. There, children and people of all ages can learn about our natural resources and the important contribution that a forest, particularly a rain forest, makes to our lives. Therefore, as you may clearly see, the Caribbean National Forest contributes to the quality of life of all Puerto Ricans. The enactment of H.R. 539 is essential in the preservation of this rain forest, not only for our generation, but for our children and future generations of Americans; regardless that they reside in Puerto Rico or not.

Mr. Chairman, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, we are confident that this Congress, our Congress, understands the wisdom and necessity of such an important piece of legislation. The designation of the El Toro wilderness will give the Forest Service the management tools that they need to ensure that this integral part of Puerto Rico is there for our future. I respectfully urge for this Committee to support and recommend the approval of H.R. 539.

Finally, Mr. Chairman I thank you for the opportunity to be here today and I would like to ask that my written testimony be entered into the record.