
Owning and Contesting El Yunque: Forest Resources, Politics, and Culture in Puerto Rico

Author(s): Marta María Maldonado, Manuel Valdés-Pizzini and Alfonso R. Latoni

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 1999-2000, Vol. 44 (1999-2000), pp. 82-100

Published by: Regents of the University of California

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41035547>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*

JSTOR

Owning and Contesting El Yunque: Forest Resources, Politics, and Culture in Puerto Rico

Marta María Maldonado

Manuel Valdés-Pizzini

Alfonso R. Latoni

Abstract:

Historically, communities have developed strong material and symbolic bonds with forest areas. Not only have forests provided for the material subsistence of local peoples, but they have also embodied a broad array of social and cultural meanings. Nevertheless, the formal process of forest management has failed to incorporate these popular meanings, often giving rise to an adversarial milieu of decision-making. Moreover, the decisions that affect local communities—relationship with forest resources are often made at the national and international levels, without regard for local values and needs. The mandate of the U.S. Forest Service, for instance, has been to “manage the forest for the people of the nation,” to place national interests before local interests. This paper seeks to gain insight on these issues by examining the case of the Caribbean National Forest (CNF) - El Yunque, of Puerto Rico. Ethnographic and survey data are used to develop an understanding of Puerto Ricans—perceptions of forest resources. Through analysis and deconstruction of local discourse, we seek to uncover the social and cultural meanings accorded to the CNF, and how the forest has been appropriated both concretely and symbolically by various social actors.

Introduction

Anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, and other social analysts have claimed that the concepts of “space” and “place” capture distinct understandings of the relations between geographies, people, and time (e.g., LeFebvre 1991; Harvey 1996, 1993; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Clifford and King 1993; Massey 1994). Space is thought to denote a neutral medium, a generic collection of geographic features, a “tabula rasa” still to be inscribed with the specificities of culture and history. Place, on the other hand, refers to space that is located and understood in its historical and cultural contexts. The notion of place reminds us that geographies do not exist in a socio-political vacuum. Instead, they are used by, transformed, thought of, appropriated and contested by people in the pursuit of historically and culturally specific goals (Harvey 1996; Casey 1996; Brown

1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Weiner 1991; Myers 1991).¹ In modern, increasingly globalized society, the decisions that affect places (and local peoples) are often being made by faraway entities that are unaware of and disengaged from local histories, struggles, concerns, and needs. Or as Giddens states,

In premodern societies, space and place largely coincided, since the spatial dimensions of social life are, for most of the population... dominated by 'presence'—by localised activity... Modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between 'absent' others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity... locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. (Giddens 1990: 18)

Following Macnaghten and Urry (1998), we argue that general (or generic) conceptions of space pervade the discourse, ideology, and practices of those who administer and “govern” nature, in particular, forest areas. These generic conceptions neglect the contextual specificities of forests as contested places imbued with historical and cultural meanings. In the process, a view of humans as separate from nature is perpetuated, and the values associated with the rational, scientific, and hegemonic view of the state are privileged. Various social groups contest the view of the state through material and symbolic appropriation of forest areas.

We examine these issues in the case of the Caribbean National Forest of Puerto Rico (CNF). Ethnographic and survey data are used to develop an understanding of Puerto Ricans' perceptions of forest resources. Through analysis and deconstruction of local discourse, we seek to uncover the social and cultural meanings accorded to the CNF. We then examine how the forest has been appropriated both concretely and symbolically by various social actors.

¹ Let us consider the specific example of forests. To think of a *forest as a space* one only needs to invoke some generic characteristics or natural attributes of forest areas (e.g., soil, streams, trees, fauna, climate). Understood as a generic space, then, a forest is a collection of these natural resources and features, and all forests (that have similar physical features) can be treated (understood and managed) the same. To think of a *forest as a place*, on the other hand, one not only needs to know its generic attributes (soil, streams, trees, etc), but it is also imperative to know where the forest is located, how it has been used historically and by who, and how it is perceived and experienced by various groups of people.

The Caribbean National Forest

The Caribbean National Forest, or Luquillo Experimental Station, as it is known among Forest Service personnel, or “El Yunque,” as it is known by the local population, is a subtropical rain forest of 27,846 acres situated in the northeastern coast of Puerto Rico, an island or “territory” under the jurisdiction of the United States Congress. It was originally part of the Spanish Crown agency named “La Inspección de Montes.” Located in the Sierra de Luquillo mountain range, it has peaks ranging from 3,000 to 3,500 feet. Since 1898, the Forest Service has increased the total amount of acres left by the “Inspección de Montes” from 12,384 acres to the present day 27,846 acres, distributed throughout seven municipalities in the northeastern part of Puerto Rico. Growth of forestlands has been accomplished through the systematic purchase of land from local owners. Eventually, the area has grown to be a property that, in line with the United States policy for natural areas and parks, *excludes resident peoples*. At present, only a handful of private properties remain in El Yunque.

In the 1940s, the forest was actively used in timber and agricultural production through the subletting of land to local farmers. This practice ended in 1960. At the present time there are no agricultural activities in the forest. According to data from the United States Agriculture Census, the trend is that land and effort devoted to commercial (sugarcane, coffee and tobacco) and subsistence crops are declining. However, this trend is consistent with the economic history of Puerto Rico.

In the 1950s the island became engaged in “Operation Bootstrap,” a rapid and imported process of modernization and industrialization that transformed its agrarian economy into an industrial and service economy with a poor agricultural base. One direct consequence of the industrialization process was the increasing urbanization of the island. According to the Proposed Land and Resources Management Plan, El Yunque is located 25 miles east of the city of San Juan, a misleading statement in terms of the forest’s positioning in the urban context. Similar to the pattern of growth of United States cities, and radically different from the pattern of growth of Latin American cities, urban areas in Puerto Rico developed as a suburban belt expanding in all possible directions. San Juan, the capital city, is part of the San Juan-Caguas Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area, the fringes of which are one municipality away from the periphery of the forest. Further east, El Yunque shares territory with Fajardo, a municipality of rapid population and economic growth. Fajardo is home to many marinas,

condominiums, and small businesses; and development of coastal leisure infrastructure is larger there than anywhere in the island (Valdés-Pizzini, Gutiérrez and Chaparro 1992). Movement of people to those non-metropolitan areas is also becoming an important demographic trend. As such, those municipalities surrounding El Yunque are showing a larger increase in population than the metropolitan areas. Thus, El Yunque remains a relatively untouched natural area, archetypal of a primeval Puerto Rico in the middle of industrial and leisure development and urban growth.

El Yunque: A Critical Destination in Puerto Rican Culture

After the “celebration” of the Quincentennial of the Discovery of the Island, (or the Encounter, or Genocide), and the celebration of two referenda on the political status of the Island and its future relationship with the United States, the Puerto Rican nation (an imagined community or not) is still divided when it comes to the “political status issue.” Meanwhile, everyone (from diverse political persuasions) in one way or another continues to celebrate Puerto Rican culture and its most outstanding signs.

In July of 1989, the Southeastern Forest Experiment Station Group in Athens, Georgia, the Center for Applied Social Research (CISA) of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, and the CNF administration jointly embarked in CUSTOMER, a survey project that was to yield a socioeconomic profile of visitors to the forest. We became involved in CUSTOMER as members of the CISA research team. Soon enough, CUSTOMER became a sociological and anthropological journey into the hazy boundaries of Puerto Rican culture and politics, as these were reflected (perhaps as a mirage) in El Yunque and its visitors.

CUSTOMER showed that El Yunque is a critical destination for Puerto Ricans from all parts of the Island, but mainly from the metropolitan areas. It is also a crucial destination for those who go back to the island after having lived in the United States for generations. A number of Puerto Ricans who visit El Yunque are from those families who migrated into the United States, especially since the 1940s, when migration to the United States was considered by local authorities an escape valve to the insular economic problems. An estimated three million individuals of Puerto Rican origin live in the continental U.S., although some returned to the Island in large numbers in the seventies, as part of the aftermath of the fiscal crisis in the urban areas, and economic problems brought by the oil crisis. Some of them, in a better socioeconomic position, return every few years to visit relatives and to see the Island. And they come with a camera in hand, ready for an almost religious journey into the essence of being Puerto Rican. Masked under the response of “coming for the family” we found that most

interviewees came to El Yunque to bring relatives and friends. They came and mingled with the other Puerto Ricans, those who stayed, and keep returning to this special site over and over. For them, El Yunque has profound meanings that range from health to national culture, evoking John Muir's transcendental sentiments toward wilderness (Table 1).

Table 1: Most Frequent Themes

importance of need for resource conservation
forest as source of health/therapy
patrimony
urban-wilderness distinction
resource management issues
global environmental issues
mysteries
spirituality

Behind the clear-cut Likert scales on satisfaction and a diversity of questions on different aspects of resource utilization for recreation, there is a forest of symbols and meanings that awaits visitors and researchers as well. We believe that El Yunque is that vital (although "empty") place in which Puerto Ricans, in their exercise of recreation and leisure, away from the mall, the office and the 936 factories, escape from the urban stress and problems in search of therapy; only to find themselves in a natural world that evokes a deep and ill-understood history. A natural area that serves as a metaphor of our complex predicament (and perhaps more accurately, an archetype), where the ambivalence of what we are is mirrored in a forest, property of the U.S. government, and managed and studied by Puerto Ricans.

Methods

The CUSTOMER survey consisted of a battery of closed questions elaborated and tested to fit the particular cultural context of Puerto Ricans. Questions in CUSTOMER were aimed at eliciting quantitative data, and scales and satisfaction indexes used were tested for validity and reliability. We obtained a wealth of statistical data (unfortunately, mostly frequencies) that allowed us to take a peek at the universe of forest visitors and their reported activities.

Like most surveys, CUSTOMER was limited in the sense that it imposed on interviewees our views as researchers, and our sociological biases and ideas of how social data ought to be structured. The use of interviews, though, provided the research team with an opportunity to listen to the visitors' discourses. For this particular project, we had the opportunity to gather information on visitors' opinions and feelings, as well as on the meanings they attach to the forest. We were also able to observe their behavior, in both structured and unstructured ways.

At the end of the CUSTOMER project, and concomitantly with it, CISA collaborated with the Forest Service in a Front-End Evaluation for the El Portal Project. The purpose of this evaluation was to provide information on the visitors' existing knowledge, cultural themes, and information needs which could be relevant for the development of El Portal visitor center. The CISA team, of which we were part (trained students and specialists in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and resource management), spent eight days at El Yunque making intense field observations and interviewing local and international visitors,² Forest Service employees, and tour guides. Jointly with personnel from the CNF, the CISA team developed a series of short open-ended interviews for the target groups. The questions in the interview schedule were followed by requests for comments or probing questions to elicit more information on different aspects of the interface between visitors and the forest, or employees and visitors. Four different instruments were constructed: (1) Local Visitors, (2) International Visitors (visitors from areas other than Puerto Rico, including the United States), (3) Employees, and (4) A Guide for Children. For this project, visitors were considered experts in our field of inquiry.

To ensure an appropriate and representative selection of visitors, interviews were conducted at 10 different "stations," which were also the main interview sites for the CUSTOMER project: Angelito, Puente Roto, La Coca Falls, Yocahú Tower, Juan Diego Creek, La Mina-Big Tree, Palo Colorado (Visitor Center and Recreational Area), Sierra Palm Visitor Center, Caimitillo (trail and recreational area), Mt. Britton and El Yunque Peak Trail. These sites cover the wide range of forest users, visitors, and activities found at El Yunque. Interviewers were instructed to select people or accept volunteers in groups. Group participation in the interview process was encouraged. Comments provided by other visitors in the group were recorded in the notes, and properly identified as belonging to a person other than the interviewee. Interviewers were asked to select informants

² Any person who did not reside in Puerto Rico was considered an international visitor. Visitors from the continental U.S. were also considered international, because although Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, it remains a separate nation, with different language, culture, and identity.

representing different ages and genders. Response rate was an estimated 90%. Field work yielded the following number of interviews: 114 Local Visitors, 78 International Visitors, 12 employees and 9 children.

The results of our analyses of the quantitative information gathered from the guests have been reported elsewhere (Valdés-Pizzini, Latoni, Rodriguez and Silva 1992; Valdés-Pizzini, Latoni and Rodríguez 1993). For this paper, we will focus mostly on the visitors' perceptions of their experience at El Yunque. Their sayings were recorded verbatim, and as such are presented here. These data are shown as supplementary, and are intended to help the reader understand, from the voices of the visitors, the statements derived from the statistical analysis that CUSTOMER enveloped.

The CNF or El Yunque?

A critical issue at hand is the analysis and understanding of El Yunque as a place, following David Harvey's cogent discussion on this ambiguous topic (see Harvey 1993: 17). The key concern is that places are formed by the "dialectical interplay between experience, perception and imagination," a process configured by history, memory, rituals, encounters and complex interactions. Harvey reminds us that these defining processes are also configured by the "relations between distinctions (presence/absence and spatial scale), appropriation, domination and production of places" (1993: 17). In his recent book, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Harvey delineates his theoretical framework for dialectics, and a new form of historical and geographical materialism priming the role of space and place (Harvey 1996). Harvey introduces Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope* to underscore place as the locus of collective memory. Places are spaces with definite coordinates and temporal settings, defined in relation to the situatedness and otherness of subjects, and their valuation of time and space (1996: 270). In his analysis following Keith Basso's research on the Western Apache, societies tend to view and perceive the landscape as a repository of cultural wisdom, cultural symbols, and the enduring character of its people (1996: 265). This unique perception and construction of place involve a dialectical interplay of different categories of time and action:

The preservation or construction of a sense of place is then an active moment in the passage from memory to hope, from past to future. And the reconstruction of places can reveal hidden memories that hold out the prospects for different futures. (Harvey 1996: 306)

This interplay is formed in the imagination (and the imaginary), as well as in the materialities of everyday life. Harvey takes "place," as a concept, through the rugged topography of meanings and values. Interestingly, he

seems to argue, following Kirkpatrick Sale's invocations for the "resacralization of place," that [certain] places also exist in coordinates different to those of the topography of capital accumulation, places configured by myths, collective memories, national identities, and represented places of worship and shrines. Harvey does not include landscapes, but from his discussion of the *genius loci* (the spirit giving meaning and life to "people and places," providing the context for contestation, affirmation and appropriations related to places) it follows that he is also referring to the environment and the landscape (1996: 306-310). These relations between memory, national identity, culture and landscape are the targets of recent intellectual efforts in history (Schama 1995), geography (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988) and the anthropology of landscape (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995). Landscape, as historian Simon Schama contends, is a construct that expresses the "virtues of a political community"; it is the topography where the national identity is often mapped (1995: 15). Forests (a specific form of landscape) are spaces of contention, and places where civil society defies the control of the state. In that context, we follow the "legend" that provides the information for the interpretation of the relationship between landscape and memory (space, culture and identity) at El Yunque, a tropical rainforest managed by the U.S. Forest Service. El Yunque is a symbol of resistance, and of cultural identity among Puerto Ricans. In the popular imaginary, it is the place where the original heroes came from, and a space where the national myths and sagas have sprung. Forestry, and forest management policies are also designed to ease social confrontation in the forests, through the control of the rural populations living at the borderlands, at the margin of the forest. U.S. forest managers, aware of the deep meanings of El Yunque, developed, instituted and carried social and forestry programs to obliterate such meanings.

Institutions, according to David Harvey, are produced spaces formed through the process of territorialization. Following Harvey's discussion, it is possible to argue that the history of the U.S. Forest Service in Puerto Rico is the history of the formation of territories of surveillance (excluding the local population from trespassing and use), of jurisdictions (Federal vs. Commonwealth in forest management), of the organization of symbolic spaces through the transformation of the 'architecture' of the forest, and the restructuring of a semiotic system to support institutional practices (Harvey 1996: 112; see Valdés Pizzini 1998, 1999). We argue that the Forest Service's historical process of institutional territorialization shows ambiguities and conscious and unconscious tendencies to eradicate the *genius loci* of El Yunque, and its meanings as a place representative of the Puerto Rican culture, the nation's collective memory, national identity and emblematic of being a Puerto Rican. Facing such processes, Puerto Ricans continue to construct myths, perceptions, and values around El Yunque as a place, instead of the generic space of "a tropical rainforest" that the Forest

Service ambiguously portrays. What follows is an outline of those historical moments and processes in which institutional territorialization of the Forest Service obliterated the *genius loci* of El Yunque:

- In texts written for the general public, agriculture specialists, farmers and foresters, the Forest Service represented itself as the institution that initiated the rational process of forest management in the territory, scarcely mentioning and even trivializing the deeds of the Spanish institutional counterpart, *La Inspección de Montes*, which incidentally had a longer forestry tradition than the U.S. Forest Service (Valdés Pizzini 1998; see also Casals Costa 1996; Domínguez Cristobal 1995).
- Despite the privileged place of El Yunque in the imaginary and especially in the nineteenth century, the Forest Service had serious difficulties handling those depictions of the landscape since they offered narrations of the origins of the nation, the original heroes, the formative myths (of the Aboriginal peoples, and the geography of the archipelago), the collective memory, and the profound bond between the Puerto Ricans and the forest, and their [our] absolute otherness linked to El Yunque's landscape (Valdés Pizzini 1999).
- Early this century Forest Service officials recognized in an almost ethnographic manner that the communities surrounding El Yunque had a wealth of "legends" and mythic narratives related to the importance of El Yunque in their imaginary, to the extent of expressing that such cultural values and perceptions made the general public prone to protect and conserve the forest (Brunner 1919). Indeed, the Forest Service has used this information to interpolate the public in favor of the conservation of the forest, and its institutional practices, but omitting its nationalist, cultural and mythological referents. In 1935 the name of the Forest was changed from the Luquillo National Forest to the Caribbean National Forest, deleting a culturally significant name (that of an aboriginal chief, and the toponymic for the region: Sierra de Luquillo) for a cosmopolitan (despite its regional connection) name, for the purpose of being more attractive to U.S. tourists (Valdés Pizzini 1999).
- The peasants, who lived inside the forest as sharecroppers and rural workers in the *haciendas*, were relocated to the outskirts of the reserve when the Forest Service bought tracts of land from the landholders to add them to the federal property. The net outcome of this process consisted in the extirpation of communities, and the loss of folk knowledge regarding the forest, which was replaced with "rational" forestry practices. Review of documents lead us to believe that the process also served to leave the forest in the hands of the U.S. government, eliminating almost all local (Puerto Rican) linkages with the forest. The Puerto Ricans became laborers for the

institution, or trespassers in a land indicated as federal in English, a condition that still remains a source of amazement and discontent (Latoni, Valdés Pizzini, and Rodríguez 1992).

- The Forest Service changed the landscape of El Yunque by planting exotic species of trees, and changing the viewable area (close to the roads and trails) with a culturally foreign landscape's architecture. Lianas, tubers, coffee trees, fruits and other local plants were eradicated to transform the forest in a clean-cut version of the tropical forest, not the cultural pastiche it usually is (see García 1991).
- The Forest Service served, perhaps unconsciously, in the process of Americanization by recruiting the local population in forest conservation projects, especially with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933. The CCC served as a mechanism for the introduction of cultural elements of the American culture into the peasant population, and trained them for the workings of Fordism and Taylorism (the structure of the assembly line, and work discipline in capitalism, respectively), insertion in the cash economy, and the values of the American society, including the military culture and the language (Valdés Pizzini 1999). Valdés Pizzini argues that the CCC also served as a program for the co-optation of rural contestation and labor unrest during the Depression, under the sign of the New Deal.

It would be unfair to say that the Forest Service does not have any historical or cultural appreciation for the meanings of El Yunque's landscape. However, as an institution it has been very selective in choosing and disseminating cultural information, and very careful in the handling of the *genius loci* of the forest. When the agency decided to construct a visitor center, anthropologists warned forest officials about the importance of the name, and the cultural meanings that El Yunque evoked in the Puerto Rican population. Gus Pantel, then a consultant for the agency, expressed his expert opinion in the following manner:

A visitor center in Puerto Rico needs to target its constituency. The Caribbean National Forest is part of the Sierra del [sic] Luquillo range of mountains. Although administratively the borders of the national forest are respected legal boundaries, culturally and conceptually one looks at "EL YUNQUE." The whole mountain is a major part of the island of Puerto Rico. It is visible from the metropolitan San Juan area, it is seen from the airport, it is a major landmark in Puerto Rico. Although administratively we have legal obligations to administer the Forest we cannot lose sight of the fact that to hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans the rain forest is part of their island. (Pantel 1988: 6-7)

Perhaps in response to Pantel's recommendation, planners from the CNF began with the process of planning and development of what was

called in all official documents: *El Portal de El Yunque*. Our work offered the CNF staff assurance that in order to handle information about El Yunque, the agency needed to fully engage in handling cultural patrimony, and thus became, perhaps unwillingly, the executor of sensitive historical, cultural and political information in a territory dangerously divided by those issues (Valdés Pizzini, Latoni, and Rodríguez 1993). El Portal Visitor Center was inaugurated in 1996, and although the exhibits and the information fully engage in the cultural meanings of El Yunque, the museographic representation is still very careful, and understandably so, with the wealth of values and meanings that the landscape evokes. Interestingly, the name of the visitor center changed, and on its inauguration day, it was opened with the name of *El Portal Tropical Research Center*, which leads us to believe that the Forest Service is still ambiguous in handling the toponym, and prefers to refer to El Yunque as a space rather than a place with its own *genius loci*: a safer political choice.

It is fascinating that until 1997 there was a complete absence of a written volume dealing with the history, culture, ecology, topography, forestry endeavors, hydrography and fauna of the Sierra de Luquillo, one of the most studied and researched sites in Puerto Rico. In 1997 Kathryn Robinson published the only volume on the topic, *Where Dwarfs Reign: A Tropical Rain Forest in Puerto Rico*, a journalist's holistic view of nature and research in the area, written for the general public, and more specifically for English-speaking readers. Although a welcome addition to the published works on the subject, and perhaps the most complete and accessible, it remains as a monument to the Forest Service, and the ambiguity in dealing with El Yunque. The title underscores the agency's oblivion to the place and its meanings, and although the forest is consistently referred to as El Yunque throughout the text, the title and the chapters seem to highlight the absence of the name. Despite its recognizable attributes, *Where Dwarfs Reign* remains, in our own view, as an apology of the Forest Service, priming the voices (and texts) and names of the American foresters and staff who worked and managed the forest, and lacks a critical view of the Forest Service and its policies in the last hundred years, and its interface with the Puerto Rican's society and culture. A critical reading of Robinson's book reveals that she makes a strong effort to dismiss the cultural elements of El Yunque as part of the fertile (although she does not use this adjective) imagination of the local people, using the voice of a Puerto Rican forest manager as a shield (1997: 213-215). In this textual version of El Yunque there are no fundamental myths, perceptions and values, literary constructions, nationhood (imagined or not), *genius loci*, nor place; only the space of a tropical forest where Celtic dwarfs reign.

Cultural Appropriation of El Yunque: Contesting Place

Through our research endeavors in the CNF we “discovered,” as Victor Turner did a long time ago, that a forest is more than an enclosure of trees, plants and animal life; it is also a forest of symbols (Turner 1967). For the indigenous people who inhabit a forest, deeply entrenched meanings are alive in it, as has been documented by many anthropologists and researchers in almost all the forests of the world. Although, as mentioned above there are no resident peoples at El Yunque, those who lived there in the past were transfixed by the forest, as they transformed the pristine environment into a complex cultural landscape of material culture, symbols, and historical endeavors. Each succession and interface of dwellers left a critical mass of histories and stories that became woven in a real and imaginary tapestry of culture over the last millennium; one which we hardly understand, but nevertheless attempt to appraise here. Those who wove the thread of meanings, settlements, trails, pictographs, wood and palm leaf shacks, stone and cement buildings, military and communication technology, came from varied cultural contexts: Aboriginal peoples speaking Arawak, carving the stones in the rivers, creating a powerful mythology that still haunts us; the Mediterraneans who came to conquer others and nature and remained at the footsteps of the mountains creating their agricultural enclave with introduced species and exporting precious timber; Africans who were enslaved and resorted to maroonage as a form of resistance under the dense canopy of *tabonucos*, (*Dacryodes excelsa, gommier*); Puerto Rican peasants using slash and burn to clear the forest and find subsistence and protection from the overwhelming and oppressive plantation system; Spanish and Creole (*criollos*) planters searching for the confines of the tropical primeval forests to grow coffee; Spanish foresters, educated in the best German tradition of *foretmeisters*, measuring and establishing the physical boundaries of crown lands in a forest whose cultural boundaries remain unfathomed; American foresters and their view (not far from the same German tradition of their enemies in the 1898 war) of the forest as a productive plantation for timber, and a source of income for local people suffering the economic repercussions of war and depression, and who later use the forest for recreation and resource protection; and the Puerto Rican workers of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Forest Service who entered and lived in the boundaries of the forest and contributed to build the infrastructure for future generations (Robinson 1997; Domínguez Cristobal 1995, 1996; Valdés-Pizzini 1998).

All these peoples contributed by marking the forest with deep cultural, historical and symbolic meanings that served to prepare the road for the conscious and unconscious construction of the present cultural configurations and explanations. Somehow such constructs (complete or in

fragments) persisted in the collective representations and totem of the Puerto Ricans.

Today El Yunque is appropriated by Puerto Ricans in both concrete and symbolic ways, through the authorized and unauthorized use of its resources, and through its incorporation to the national imaginary in myth and symbol. In Puerto Ricans' voices, as captured in our interviews, El Yunque contains the fingerprints of their history and is an integral part of who they are today. It is a familiar place, one that helps them think about what it means to be human, a Puerto Rican human.

The symbolic appropriation of El Yunque by Puerto Ricans is a complex process that has taken multiple and varied forms. For instance, when the Forest Service closed El Yunque on July 25, 1991 (national Puerto Rican holiday, celebration of the Commonwealth) due to "heavy traffic and exceeded carrying capacity," dozens of families demanded to be allowed to enter. They claimed that "*¡El Yunque es nuestro!*" (El Yunque is ours!), and that "the feds" had no business restricting access to a place that was not "theirs." On that day (as recorded in various ethnographic accounts by CISA researchers), the Puerto Rican public resorted to a gamut of strategies, from attempted bribery to threats of violence, to gain access to the forest premises. Some statements by local visitors in reaction to the Forest Service's decision to close the forest were:

[Talking to the Puerto Rican employee of the Forest Service] I will not shoot you because you are a Puerto Rican... But if you had been one of those Yankee imperialists who work in there, I would have killed you... Dammit, I have traveled from Coamo. [It's approximately a three-hour drive from Coamo to the forest.]

If I pay you ten or fifteen dollars, will you let me enter?

Those are the damn things that happen in this country, dammit! Let's go to Luquillo Beach!

Why will they not let us pass? Someone is doing strange things in there... Someone is experimenting. They are taking El Yunque away from us... Now one cannot even visit EL Yunque, dammit!

Who the hell is in charge here? Who does this place belong to? The Americans or us? Who decided to close the forest on a holiday? What a nerve!

Tell those people from the American government that El Yunque is ours! I don't care if they are Puerto Ricans working with the 'federales'... This forest belongs to us!

I was told that they are only letting people from the ships [tourists from the cruise ships] come in...Is that true? Well, listen, I am from here, from San

Lorenzo, and I support statehood for Puerto Rico, but El Yunque is ours, it belongs to us Puerto Ricans!

Our observations suggest that Puerto Ricans' perceptions of and feelings of attachment to El Yunque are saturated with patriotic and nationalistic meanings, which, as discussed in the previous section, are often concealed and disregarded in the Forest Service's discourse and management practices. In the views of most local interviewees, for instance, El Yunque exemplifies their own political and historical predicament as Puerto Ricans. It is a beautiful, sacred historical place, unique in the world and emblematic of all things Puerto Rican, but reflecting also the contradictions of the ambiguous political status of the Island (a U.S. island territory with a different culture and national identity; a Puerto Rican forest, managed by Americans). Thus, in a sense, El Yunque provides Puerto Ricans with raw material for the creation of symbolic boundaries between them, as a cultural and national group, and "others," particularly Americans.

[El Yunque is]...Puerto Rico in all its splendor

[El Yunque is] national heritage, Puerto Rico, this country, sacred.

This [El Yunque] is something completely Puerto Rican, from here, is a pride to be able to visit it.

[El Yunque is] Puerto Rico, what is from here, ours, all that we have.

This [alluding to the beauty of the forest] was not made by the Americans.

[El Yunque] is not controlled by Puerto Rico, they [alluding to North Americans] took what's mine.

Why are the feds here? They are the ones that want to destroy El Yunque.

Puerto Ricans also appropriate El Yunque through their use of forest resources for the reconstruction of their history; their shared past as Puerto Rican people, and their particular histories as individuals.

I truly believe in what the Indians [referring to the Island's native dwellers] said that it [El Yunque] is the mountain of the gods, I believe it has to do with God because it protected us from the storms [alluding to the hurricanes that have hit the Island].

[El Yunque evokes] memories of my childhood and adolescence.

The shared past of Puerto Ricans is thus trapped in El Yunque like in a living snapshot, myth and "truth" readily available for older generations to recall and for new generations to learn and cherish. Many local visitors spoke about the importance of being able to share El Yunque with their children. In this way, El Yunque enables Puerto Ricans to engage in one of

the most vital process of culture, the transfer across generations of their understanding of a unique Puerto Rican experience:

[One of the values of El Yunque is that] I can show my children something that is ours.

Similarly, El Yunque enables Puerto Ricans to create and cement bonds with friends, family, and other important social groups. Not only does the forest embody their shared past, it also enables the celebration of rituals and the construction of memories for the future.

When Maria and I got married, we stole the flowers [from El Yunque] to make our garden.

In addition to appropriating El Yunque through discourse and use, Puerto Ricans have often contested the hegemony of the Forest Service, and the meanings and uses accorded to El Yunque by that agency, within the arena of public involvement in management decisions. For instance, in 1986, the Forest Service recommended logging in El Yunque. In response to this decision, a variety of environmental, political, and community organizations mobilized throughout the Island. These groups formed alliances with environmental organizations in the United States to attack the Forest Service's practices in a variety of fora. An *Environmental Coalition* was established. In November of that year, members of the Coalition organized a massive march into El Yunque together with student groups, labor union representatives, *Caminantes por la Paz* (an anti-military-warfare organization whose constituency included Puerto Ricans with diverse religious and political persuasions) and members of the general public, and were able to deflect the Forest Service's decision to exploit the forest's timber commercially. An emotional call for the "rescue" of the forest was published by the leftist newspaper *Claridad*.³ The brunt of the argument alluded to Puerto Ricans' emotional ties with El Yunque.

Puerto Ricans love El Yunque. Each one of us feels as its owner, and each feels the forest belongs to him, it is our national patrimony. (Palau, 1987)

Several years later, in 1991, the *Environmental Coalition* again successfully mobilized island-wide support in opposition to a project, endorsed by the Forest Service that would re-open Road 191 through El Yunque.

³Palau, Awilda. "¡Que nos talan el Yunque!" *Claridad*. P. 31, October 24-30, 1986. Through CUSTOMER, we learned that Puerto Ricans view El Yunque as national heritage, the most important natural resource that needs to be protected.

Concluding Remarks

The particularities of the natural area that Puerto Ricans call El Yunque have been blurred and often lost amidst a set of management practices (by the Forest Service) that appear to be cemented on a “rational” view of the forest. This view has been shaped afar from the everyday realities of Puerto Ricans, and has involved a process of homogenization of value. The CNF is understood and managed as a generic space, as a sum of interchangeable attributes (resources) which need to be allocated “rationally” with the intent of maximizing ecological and economic utility and efficiency. Other values lack legitimacy and validity in the face of the managers’ discourse and practices. The CNF, like other national parks, is to be managed not for local peoples, but for the people “of the nation.” In the case of El Yunque this mandate appears especially problematic, and the question becomes: “For the people of what nation?” Not only is locality neglected in the official discourse and practice of the CNF, but the unique identity of Puerto Ricans as a national group and their connections with the geography of El Yunque are glossed over and treated as, at most, tangentially relevant for the management of the forest.

The fact that El Yunque, a place eagerly claimed and experienced by Puerto Ricans as “theirs,” is managed and controlled by the United States Forest Service, captures the ambiguity of Puerto Rican national identity and politics. Using Harvey’s (1996: 185) terms, El Yunque is the manifestation in nature of Puerto Ricans’ social relations: rich and complex. Nevertheless, El Yunque is a place whose meaning and value are constantly contested by Puerto Ricans. It is governed by “others” (North Americans) but it is appropriated through discourse and use by those whose history, culture, and identity are invested and embodied in the sights, smells, and sounds of El Yunque.

References

- Brown, Beverly A. 1995. *In Timber Country: Working People’s Stories of Environmental Conflict and Urban Flight*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bruner, E. Murray. 1919. “El Bosque Nacional de Luquillo.” *Revista de Agricultura de Puerto Rico* 2.
- Casals Costa, Vicente. 1996. *Los Ingenieros de Montes en la España contemporánea, 1848-1936*. Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal.

- Casey, Edward S. 1996. "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena." In *Senses of Place*, eds. S. Feld and K. H. Basso. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Clifford, S. and A. King, eds. 1993. *Local Distinctiveness: Place, Particularity, and Identity*. London: Common Ground.
- Cosgrove, Denis and Stephen Daniels, eds. 1988. *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Domínguez Cristóbal, Carlos M. 1995. *Efectos de los Cambios Poblacionales y la Reorientación de la Economía en la Situación Forestal de Puerto Rico Durante el Siglo XIX*. Paper presented at the Third Annual Meeting of the Asociación Puertorriqueña de Historiadores, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.
- _____. 1996. *El Bosque Nacional de Luquillo*. Paper presented at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Asociación Puertorriqueña de Historiadores, Inter American University of Puerto Rico, Ponce.
- García Montiel, Diana. 1991. *The Effect of Human Activity on the Structure and Composition of a Tropical Forest in Puerto Rico*. Masters Thesis, Department of Biology, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. 1992. "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology* 7: 6-23.
- Harvey, David. 1993. "From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity." In *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson, and L. Tickner, eds. New York: Routledge.
- _____. 1996. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

- Hirsh, Eric and Michael O'Hanlon, eds. 1999. *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Latoni, Alfonso, Manuel Valdés-Pizzini, and Virgilio Rodríguez. 1992. *El Yunque es Nuestro (The CNF Is Ours): an Ethnography of Mysteries, Appropriations and Management in a Tropical Rainforest*. Paper presented at the Forth Symposium on Society and Resource Management, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- LeFebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Macnaghten, P. and J. Urry. 1998. *Contested Natures*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Myers, Fred R. 1991. *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics Among Western Desert Aborigines*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pantel, Agamemnon Gus. 1988. *Adapting Cultural Perspectives into Tropical Forestry Projects*. Paper presented at the USDA Forest Service Regional Management Meeting, San Juan, Puerto Rico, March 22.
- Robinson, Kathryn. 1997. *Where the Dwarfs Reign: A Tropical Rain Forest in Puerto Rico*. Río Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico.
- Schama, Simon. 1995. *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Valdés Pizzini, Manuel. 1999. "Paisaje y Memoria en El Yunque: la Construcción del Imaginario Nacional en los Montes de Puerto Rico." *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

- _____. 1998. "Desmontando Discursos: el Nuevo Orden Forestal en el Imaginario Colonial, 1898-1925." In *Los arcos de la memoria, el 98 de los pueblos puertorriqueños*, S. A. Curbelo, M. F. Gallart, y C. I. Raffuci, eds. San Juan: Oficina del Presidente de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Comité del Centenario de 1898, Asociación Puertorriqueña de Historiadores y Postdata.
- Valdés Pizzini, Manuel, Alfonso Latoni, and Virgilio Rodríguez. 1993. "El Yunque or the Caribbean National Forest? Meaning, Management and Culture in the Urban-Tropical Interface." In Alan W. Ewart, Deborah J. Chavez, and Arthur W. Magill (eds.), *Culture, Conflict, and Communication in the Wildland-Urban Interface*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Weiner, James. 1991. *The Empty Place: Poetry, Space, and Being Among the Foli of Papua New Guinea*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.