

Sustainable Tropical Forestry, Puerto Rico

Overview: A long-term endeavor to demonstrate the value of tropical secondary forests through enrichment line-planting of valuable hardwoods. The aim is to demonstrate a sustainable way of utilizing tropical forests and reviving a wood industry in Puerto Rico; providing a model for other tropical forests.

The Institute of Ecotechnics (US, UK) seeks to pioneer new approaches to solving environmental problems while contributing to people's livelihoods and well-being. One of our consultancies is Tropic Ventures Research and Educational Foundation in Patillas, Puerto Rico. There on around 1000 acres of mountainous secondary tropical forest, on a site called Las Casas de la Selva, between 1985-1990 we planted around 40,000 valuable hardwood tree seedlings to enrich the forest without clearing it for short-lived agriculture or one-time timber. Using a technique called line-planting, the project is demonstrating alternatives to the destruction of primary rainforests vital to preservation of biodiversity and maintenance of our climate and water cycles.

The longer-term goal is to revitalize a now lost wood consciousness and industry on Puerto Rico, which despite a large recent increase in forests still imports virtually all its timber from the US and Canada. The area of our project has high unemployment and utilizing in a regenerative/sustainable way, the island's natural resources will help provide employment and improve the local and island economy. In the decades we have worked there, the project has spurred new thinking in government, university and amongst the public.

Hurricane Maria passed directly over Las Casas and while damage was severe at the homestead, many of the line-planted trees at lower elevations escaped damage, protected as they were by the surrounding forest we'd left intact to protect highly erodible soils and maintain a forest environment for the trees, which have grown very rapidly. In response to the disaster, TVREF formed a spin-off company, Puerto Rico Hardwoods which has managed to salvage thousands of beautiful hurricane-felled tropical trees. It is demonstrating the value of Puerto Rico's trees by turning them into beautiful wood products and lumber, providing local employment and along with a few other wood businesses, trying to jump start the long dormant wood industries of the island.

TVREF has worked closely with Earthwatch Institute to research these innovative approaches and hosts many volunteers, local and international school and colleges by providing hands-on experience in tropical forests and ecology. Las Casas is in the midst of fund-raising to complete the restoration of our homestead and facilities, working with architects to make hurricane-proof structures.