



# EL YUNQUE SUSTAINABLE RECREATION MANAGEMENT

The August 2024 town hall meetings provide an opportunity to discuss and contribute to the sustainable recreation management of El Yunque National Forest (EYNF). The United States Forest Service (USFS) aims to advance the goals set in El Yunque National Forest Land Management Plan related to maintaining and expanding recreation opportunities. This document offers background information to understand the context of these meetings and their relevance to the desired conditions for El Yunque recreation opportunities. Your input is valuable in shaping the future of our forest.

## WHO MANAGES EL YUNQUE NATIONAL FOREST?

The lands comprising El Yunque are public lands managed by the USFS whose mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands for the benefit of present and future generations in compliance with federal and state regulations. Initially protected by the Spanish Crown and later expanded by the federal government, El Yunque offers vital ecosystem services and various recreational and cultural opportunities.

## WHAT IS EL YUNQUE NATIONAL FOREST LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN?

EYNF Land Management Plan is a strategic document that details the desired conditions, goals, and objectives for the Forest. Developed through a six-year collaborative process with diverse stakeholders, it focuses on enhancing social and economic benefits, creating new recreational opportunities for communities and municipalities, and emphasizing shared stewardship and sustainable management.

## WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT?

Sustainable management balances ecological integrity with social and economic benefits. This includes promoting low-impact recreational activities, enhancing visitor experiences, and supporting local businesses while minimizing negative environmental impacts.

## WHAT IS SHARED STEWARDSHIP?

Shared stewardship is a collaborative approach between the Forest Service and the public, emphasizing:

- **Strategic Engagement:** Active collaboration in forest operations and conservation.
- **Shared Responsibilities:** Collective efforts to achieve the Forest Service's mission.
- **Public Contribution:** Incorporating public input while maintaining decision-making authority.
- **Community-Based Approach:** Partnering with the community on projects aligned with the Forest Plan.

## WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE RECREATION MANAGEMENT?

Sustainable recreation management provides outdoor recreational opportunities that enhance well-being and connect people with their natural and cultural heritage while protecting the environment. Key elements include:

- **Conservation:** Preserving natural and cultural resources.
- **Visitor Experience:** Offering educational and meaningful recreational activities.
- **Community Engagement:** Involving and benefiting local communities through partnerships and job creation.
- **Economic Sustainability:** Generating revenue to support conservation and infrastructure.
- **Infrastructure Management:** Developing and maintaining facilities with minimal environmental impact.
- **Monitoring and Adaptation:** Continuously adjusting strategies to address environmental and visitor impacts..

# RECREATION MANAGEMENT IN EL YUNQUE NATIONAL FOREST

El Yunque is the second most visited destination in Puerto Rico, attracting over a million annual visitors for recreational activities such as hiking, nature observation, birdwatching, waterplay, picnicking, and biking. It also holds significance for spiritual and religious practices. While El Yunque spans 29,000 acres, most of its' visitor infrastructure and demand is situated along PR 191 North, leading to the El Portal Visitor Center and its' primary recreation areas known as the PR 191 North Recreational Corridor. However, the Forest Service grapples with ongoing challenges to maintain and enhance existing infrastructure, ensuring a safe and enjoyable experience for visitors while preserving delicate ecosystems and biodiversity.

The Management Areas accessed through PR 191 North are the following:

- 1. Administrative:** includes El Portal Visitor Center and Las Catalinas administrative offices and information center.
- 2. El Yunque Recreation Zone:** Includes trails, lookout points and towers, various picknick areas, as well as other visitor services and amenities.
- 3. Communication and Recreation:** Includes access to El Yunque Peak and Pico del Oeste and Pico del Este.

## MAIN CHALLENGES RELATED TO RECREATION MANAGEMENT

Currently, the **US Forest Service** faces several challenges managing visitation and recreation within the **191 North Corridor**. These include:

- Reductions in personnel and funding affect the condition of recreation facilities.
- Backlog of trail maintenance needs, which requires working with partners and volunteers.
- Funding reductions, resulting in challenges to the maintenance and operation of developed and dispersed recreation sites.
- High visitation periods cause traffic congestion and crowding at developed recreation sites, negatively impacting the resource and visitor experience.
- Poor road conditions and limits to road access, which challenge the sustainability of recreation management.

## MANAGEMENT GOALS FOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

The goals associated with recreation opportunities in **El Yunque** are the following:

- **Access Strategy Development:** Create a comprehensive forest access strategy and transportation plan that integrates with regional tourism and recreation efforts.
- **Diversification of Access:** Alleviate high usage on specific routes (e.g., PR 191) while ensuring that sensitive resources and protected areas are not negatively impacted.
- **Connectivity:** Establish connections between urban areas and rural communities to scenic attractions, historic sites, and recreational opportunities.
- **Infrastructure Evaluation:** Assess infrastructure investments and program costs, considering available resources such as appropriations, fee revenue, and partnerships to ensure sustainability.
- **Maintenance Goals:** Aim to reduce the maintenance backlog of historic and iconic structures.
- **Traffic Management:** Coordinate traffic control during high visitation periods and establish vehicle capacity limits to minimize impacts on the forest.
- **Facility Standards:** Ensure that public facilities are attractive, safe, well-maintained, and accessible, harmonizing with the natural and cultural environment.