

PILLAR BRIEF

ATTRACTIONS¹



The **Eastern Region² Strategic Vision** is a framework for transformation and a living roadmap for a thriving future rooted in sustainability, resilience and shared prosperity. It unites data, design, and collaboration to ensure that growth benefits the residents while sustainably leveraging its natural and cultural assets. Developed through rigorous research, extensive stakeholder engagement, and alignment with global best practices, it is grounded in enduring principles that give direction and meaning to the region's development. At its core are values of **shared stewardship, inclusive community engagement, collective responsibility and governance**, recognizing that prosperity must be co-created by the people who live, work, and visit here. It calls for **asset-based development** that empowers communities, **sustainable destination management** that promotes economic vitality while safeguarding the ecosystems on which life and livelihoods depend. Above all, it embraces **innovation**, not only through adoption of technology, but through new ways of connecting, collaborating, solving problems, and sustaining the places we cherish.

These principles form the moral and operational compass of the Eastern Region Strategic Vision, expressed through four interdependent pillars: ***Transportation and Mobility, Attractions, Human Capital, and Governance***. These pillars will guide how the region will move visitors and residents, attract and distribute visitation, empower its communities, and provide cohesive, shared governance for regionwide strategic initiatives in the decades ahead. Together, we can elevate regional economic development as a multisectoral model that benefits communities, visitors, and future generations alike. The primary driver of this effort will be the expansion and integration of the region's natural and cultural assets to build the **Eastern Region destination itself as an attraction**, capable of inspiring visitation that lifts the region and its communities.

Vision for Transformational Attractions in Puerto Rico's Eastern Region

The Eastern Region is poised to become a unified and dynamic tourism destination through **strategic clustering, curated thematic itineraries, and enhanced regional connectivity**. At the heart of this transformation are local businesses, cultural leaders, and environmental stewards, key actors in building a vibrant visitor economy that amplifies global appeal while celebrating local identity. This vision transforms shared stewardship into prosperity and fosters a renewed sense of regional pride.

¹ One of the four pillars of FPR's *Eastern Region Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development*.

² The Eastern Region comprises the 15 municipalities of: Canóvanas, Ceiba, Culebra, Fajardo, Juncos, Humacao, Las Piedras, Loíza, Luquillo, Maunabo, Naguabo, Río Grande, San Lorenzo, Vieques, and Yabucoa.



Objective: To convert isolated attractions, whether rainforest, coastline, town plaza, or cultural activity, into an interconnected network that reflects a shared regional identity and supports a vibrant, regenerative tourism economy.

Approach: Advance innovative destination management for the region, invest in infrastructure upgrades, including town centers and tourism assets, and adopt smart tourism practices that safeguard natural resources, elevate cultural heritage, support product development, and ensure that every visitor experience benefits local communities.

Expected Impact: Integration of the region’s cultural offering and natural assets into a cohesive destination will drive local job growth by dispersing visitors, retain more tourism revenues in communities and preserve natural and cultural heritage, while strengthening community pride.

Regional Initiatives for an Integrated Destination

This Attractions strategy outlines a bold yet practical roadmap for creating an integrated destination in the Eastern Region through the following initiatives:

Thematic and Geographic Clustering and Itineraries

Strategy: Establish a network of interconnected attraction clusters that blend flagship destinations with community-based experiences. These clusters will be organized both geographically and thematically through itineraries that promote balanced visitor distribution, economic equity, and a strong regional identity.

Initiative: Support the creation, curation and promotion of thematic and geographic clusters through itineraries such as the Afro-Caribbean Cultural Route, Sugar Heritage Route, Lighthouses & Bays, Living Arts, Forest and Water, and Archipelagic Routes—linking iconic sites with local experiences, culture, and history.

Local models: Naguabo’s town center, El Yunque’s Río Sabana Recreation Area and the Naguabo Malecón; connecting Canóvanas, Loíza and Río Grande town centers with El Toro Peak and other El Yunque assets along PR-186.

Outcomes: Increase visibility and visitation of underutilized sites, strengthen local economies through integrated value chains, and offer immersive experiences that showcase the region’s cultural and ecological diversity.

Integrated Mobility and Trail Networks

Strategy: Develop mobility infrastructure that connects key attractions and communities, enabling seamless movement across the region and supporting sustainable, community-based tourism.

Initiative: Integrate trail systems and mobility networks linking destinations such as Palmer, El Yunque, Playa Fortuna, kioskos, Luquillo’s casco urbano and the Northeast Ecological



Corridor; Río Sabana Recreation Area with Naguabo’s town plaza and Malecón; Canóvanas, Loíza and Río Grande town centers with El Toro Peak and other El Yunque assets.

Local Models: In Palmer, Río Grande, a 2019 conceptual plan developed through a collaboration between the US Forest Service and Para la Naturaleza envisions trail connectivity linking Palmer to the Reserva Natural Corredor Ecológico del Noreste (RNCEN) and Playa Fortuna on the coast. This will extend Palmer’s function beyond El Yunque access, positioning it as a multimodal gateway to the Eastern Region’s natural assets (for more on Palmer’s future role see the Transportation and Mobility chapter).

Outcomes: Enhance accessibility and connectivity for residents and visitors, alleviate congestion at high-traffic sites, and promote active transport, advancing a sustainable tourism model.

Innovative Management and Financing Models

Strategy: Introduce innovative, inclusive, and sustainable models for managing and financing attractions to ensure long-term viability and community benefit.

Initiative: Implement co-management agreements, concessions, biodiversity credits, Tourism Business Improvement Districts, and membership programs to support sustainable operations and reinvestment.

Established Policy Frameworks and Precedents: “Ley de Alianzas Público Privadas” (2009) enable infrastructure investments and efficient management of assets by aligning public resources with private investment and expertise. PPPs can expand capacity toward the creation and maintenance of assets that otherwise would remain underfunded and prevent duplication of efforts by aligning sectors and optimizing resources.

Act 293-2004 established the Permanent Fund for the Environmental Conservation of Culebra (Fondo Permanente para la Preservación Ambiental de Culebra). The fund is supported by a \$2 fee levied on non-resident ferry passengers and, if logistically possible, air travelers. Although enacted in 2004, the supporting fee was only implemented in 2023, underscoring the complexity in activating conservation funding mechanisms.

Local Models: Bayamón’s newly reopened **Parque de las Ciencias**, is now operated by Toroverde (Educational Park Management) through a collaborative agreement with Toro Verde to manage and run operations. The municipality continues to own the park but Toro Verde invested \$12 million to get the attraction running once more. **The Coalition Pro Corredor Ecológico del Noreste** signed a co-management agreement with DNER to help manage and conserve the reserve, while enabling community-based and ecotourism. The US Forest Service has various co-management agreements with NGOs for particular assets within the national



forest, as well as traditional concessions agreements such as the operator of the El Portal Visitor's Center and gift shop.

International Models: The **Wesenburg Museum of Modern Art** implemented a pay-as-you-stay model meant to lead to higher satisfactions and perceived fairer prices for visitors: visitors are charged by the time spent in the museum, instead of a flat entry fee. The **Africa Conservation and Communities Tourism Fund**, established by ThirdWay Partners and The Nature Conservancy, was made to mitigate the pandemic's impact on tourism operators by providing financial support to key tourism businesses in critical ecological areas. **Biodiversity Credits** are a new financing tool that assigns monetary value to ecosystem restoration and preservation, enabling measurable, tradeable conservation outcomes. The Savimbo model exemplifies this innovation by directly compensating Indigenous and local stewards for verified biodiversity gains, creating a fair and transparent market that supports both livelihoods and conservation. Savimbo works ethically and inclusively with indigenous people and subsistence farmers in the Amazon, certifying and selling their own credits internationally to avoid speculation and brokers, passing the fees collected onto local farmers and communities.

Outcomes: Improve financial sustainability of key assets in the region, empower communities through participatory governance and economic inclusion, and reduce economic leakage by retaining a greater share of tourism revenue that can be reinvested in the region.

Smart Data and Monitoring Systems

Strategy: Utilize technology to enable transparency, coordination, and data-driven decision-making in the management of regional attractions in collaboration with Puerto Rico Tourism Company, the municipalities, DRNA, and other key stakeholders.

Initiative: Develop a regional digital platform integrating real-time monitoring, data-sharing, and reservation systems across sites to support efficient destination management and visitor engagement, for oversight and reinvestment of local assets, coordinated through the Eastern Region Economic Development Council (EREDC).

Local Models: Programs such as *Ciudadano Protector*, an app developed by Para la Naturaleza, demonstrates how community participation and mobile technology can enhance conservation efforts in Puerto Rico.

Outcomes: Improved coordination, accountability, and sustainability in attraction management enhances both ecosystem resilience and visitor experience.

Standards of Quality and Excellence

Strategy: Elevate and formalize the quality standards of key attractions through third-party certifications and community-endorsed seals of excellence.



Initiative: Recognize quality and increase third-party certifications to position the region as a provider of excellence while increasing local pride.

International Models: EarthCheck is a global leader in sustainability certification for tourism destinations and businesses. Through rigorous, science-based standards, consulting, and training, it helps organizations measure, manage, and improve their environmental and social performance—building credibility with travelers and advancing sustainable tourism worldwide.

Local Models: Puerto Rico has 18 certified BlueFlag sites and tours. The BlueFlag certification speaks of having met the rigorous standards toward proper environmental management, water quality monitoring, and offers of education, information, and safety services. The Eastern Region already is home to two Blue Flag sites: Marina Puerto del Rey and Palomino Beach, both located in Fajardo, as well as multiple certified boat tours operated by Pure Adventures (Ceiba), Bellaventuras, East Island Adventures, and Caribe Bliss (Fajardo). These certifications serve not only as markers of environmental stewardship but also as powerful marketing tools that attract eco-conscious travelers.

Outcomes: Foster visitor engagement rooted in reciprocity and authenticity.

Socioeconomic and Environmental Benefits

Economic Growth: Visitors will stay longer, engage more deeply with local culture and nature, and contribute to the regional economy through extended stays and diversified spending. Residents will benefit from job creation, upgraded infrastructure, and revitalized public spaces that celebrate heritage and creativity.

Environmental Sustainability: Improved connectivity and strategic clustering will promote balanced visitor dispersion, easing pressure on high-traffic sites while revitalizing underrecognized towns and landscapes. This approach supports conservation and encourages low-impact tourism practices.

Implementation Pathways

Phased Projects: Begin with mapping and assessment of existing assets, readiness levels, and infrastructure gaps. Launch pilot clusters and itineraries in high-readiness areas such as Palmer, Loíza, Yabucoa, and Naguabo. Invest in mobility infrastructure to connect clusters, expand co-management and financing models, and fully deploy digital governance and monitoring systems.

Coordination Across Jurisdictions: Establish governance mechanisms like the Eastern Region Economic Development Council (EREDC) to coordinate multisectoral efforts. Explore innovative models including public-private partnerships, co-management agreements, and digital platforms to ensure long-term viability and stakeholder alignment.



Governance and Funding: Formalize the EREDC as a multisectoral coordinating body. Promote public-private partnerships and co-management agreements. Leverage tourism taxes, biodiversity credits, and membership programs to fund reinvestment. Engage academic institutions and NGOs in research, training, and implementation to build capacity and ensure inclusive development.

Metrics & Monitoring: Track visitor dispersion and length of stay, economic impact by municipality and attraction type, and the number of attractions under sustainable management. Monitor community satisfaction, participation rates, and environmental indicators such as biodiversity, ecosystem health, and waste reduction.

Conclusion: The Path to the Region as a Vibrant, Connected Destination

The Eastern Region's transformation into a cohesive, regenerative tourism destination hinges on strategic clustering, inclusive governance, and sustainable management. By connecting attractions through thematic itineraries and mobility networks, empowering local communities, and leveraging technology for smart governance, the region can unlock its full potential and more visiting spending stays in the region. This vision not only enhances the visitor's experience but also ensures that tourism becomes a catalyst for cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and equitable economic growth.