



# Landowner Incentives for Conservation around El Yunque National Forest

Tania López-Marrero, Marianne Meyn, and L. Annie Hermansen-Báez

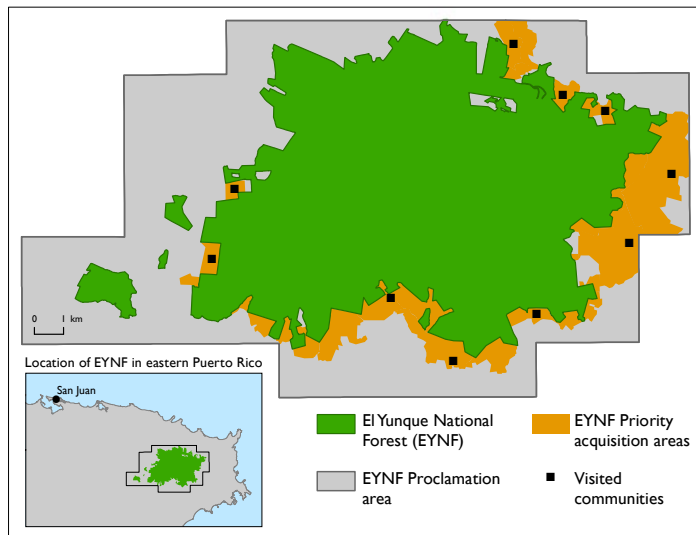


## Introduction

Conservation of privately owned lands is one mechanism for sustaining and increasing forest cover and, in turn, supporting the services provided by forest ecosystems. Around El Yunque National Forest in eastern Puerto Rico, economic and political factors limit land purchases for conservation<sup>1</sup>. Monetary resources for land purchases for conservation have traditionally been funds allocated by the U.S. Congress, and those funds have been reduced nationally. As monetary resources for land acquisition have become scarcer and the pursuit of those funds more competitive, the need to explore alternative initiatives for forest conservation around El Yunque has become imperative. The conservation of privately owned lands—specifically landowner incentives for forest conservation—is one mechanism that El Yunque’s administration has identified as having the potential to maintain and increase forest cover around El Yunque. There is, however, a lack of knowledge about the awareness and attitudes of landowners toward incentive-driven land conservation programs and their willingness to take part in them. Moreover, there might also be a lack of knowledge on the part of agencies promoting incentive-driven conservation programs regarding local situations with owners and their lands that could limit the implementation of such conservation programs.

This fact sheet summarizes the findings obtained from interviews conducted with thirty landowners from ten communities within the U.S. Forest Service’s (USFS) priority acquisition areas in El Yunque’s proclamation area, which is the area outside the administrative boundaries of El Yunque where the USFS has the authority to purchase land to expand its area for forest conservation purposes (Figure 1). The main objective of the interviews was to assess landowners’ knowledge about, and willingness to participate in, three landowner incentive-driven conservation programs of interest to El Yunque: conservation easements,

land donations, and land purchased for conservation. We also gathered information regarding the attributes landowners most appreciate about their land, and the preferred future land cover and ownership that they would like for their properties. With this information, we identified potential opportunities to promote and implement incentive-driven conservation programs, as well as other potential initiatives for the conservation of privately owned forest lands. The information provided in this fact sheet can help forest managers and natural resources specialists to better design, promote, and implement conservation programs around El Yunque, as well as in other state and national forests.



**FIGURE 1.** Location of the study area and communities where participants were interviewed.

## Key Findings

### Knowledge about Land Conservation Programs

- Of the landowners interviewed, 33% were aware of the purchase of private lands for conservation by the USFS, while only 17% knew about the land donation program.
- The conservation easement program was the least known program, with only one landowner being aware of it.

### Willingness to Take Part in Land Conservation Programs

- Most landowners (80%) were not interested in participating in any of these programs.
- Four participants (13%) would consider taking part in the easement or land purchase program.
- None of the landowners was willing to consider donating his or her land for conservation to the USFS.

## Factors Influencing Landowners' Unwillingness to Take Part in Land Conservation Programs

- Lack of trust in governmental programs was the reason most cited by landowners for their unwillingness to take part in any conservation program, followed by landowners not wanting to restrict the ability of their heirs to make decisions regarding their properties (Table 1).
- Land tenure issues and joint inheritances were other factors that potentially could limit the implementation of land conservation programs around El Yunque. Many landowners have inherited their land, and in many cases there are several inheritors, and matters of land tenure are not settled. In such cases, even if landowners were willing to participate in these programs, they would not be able to do so because these programs require ownership of the land.

## Land Attributes, Preferred Land Cover, and Preferred Tenure

- Landowners considered quality of life—including attributes such as tranquility, social relations, and contact with nature—to be the most valuable attribute of living on their land.
- Landowners also perceived cool temperatures, clean air, forested landscapes, scenic value, and access to water and to minor crops as other benefits of their land and of living near El Yunque.

**TABLE 1.** Reasons mentioned by landowners for not being interested in taking part in any conservation program.

REASON	% OF LANDOWNERS*
Do not trust government programs	58
Do not want to encumber their inheritors' properties	50
The land is a joint inheritance	46
Belief that the land is too small for conservation	29
No interest in being involved with government bureaucracy	25

\* Percentage based on 24 of the 30 landowners that responded that they were not interested in any conservation program.

1. Personal communication. 2009. Carolyn Krupp, Special Uses and Lands Program Manager, USFS El Yunque National Forest, HC-01, Box 13490, Rio Grande, PR 00745-9625.

- All the landowners interviewed would like their land and surrounding areas to stay the same in terms of land covers and uses—forest, pasture and shrubs, minor crops, and mixed uses. They would not like the area to become urbanized.
- Some landowners mentioned that they would like to have more trees on their properties.
- Most of the landowners would like their land to remain in their family.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the interviews with landowners, we recommend that the USFS do the following to promote landowner-incentive conservation programs and to develop parallel initiatives for the conservation of forest and other areas around El Yunque:

- provide easy-to-read information about all the landowner-incentive conservation programs available in Puerto Rico, including the three programs discussed in this fact sheet as well as other programs managed by local and federal agencies,
- design mechanisms to facilitate the use of landowner-incentive conservation programs, such as one-to-one meetings, workshops, videos, and promotional materials,
- document the experience of people who have already participated in landowner-incentive programs in order to share success stories with potential participants,
- explore other related activities to increase forest cover on landowners' properties, such as planting trees and reforestation programs, that could be attractive to landowners, and
- provide information to landowners about land and forest management practices that benefit both their properties and forest ecosystem services, reaching even beyond the conservation programs mentioned.

Additional analyses and actions are needed on the part of the USFS to improve the promotion and implementation of landowner conservation programs:

- review program guidelines and consider altering some of the requirements to reflect the characteristics of landowners and landownership around El Yunque, including, for example, allowing successions of heirs to participate in such programs,
- conduct an in-depth analysis of landownership around El Yunque, particularly in the priority areas for acquisition in the EYNF proclamation area identified by the USFS as well as in areas identified as priority areas for conservation elsewhere around El Yunque,

- identify landowners with large parcels of land, and access their knowledge about and willingness to participate in conservation programs,
- identify parcels of land for sale and provide the owners with information about the conservation programs,
- identify surrounding lands or facilities (such as schools or water treatment plants) that might be owned by the Puerto Rican government and explore the possibility of negotiation or agreements for land conservation, and
- develop partnerships with other governmental and nongovernmental organizations to co-promote and implement the conservation of privately owned lands around El Yunque.

## Conclusion

The interviews with landowners revealed potential obstacles to the promotion and implementation of landowner-incentive conservation programs for forest conservation around El Yunque. The lack of knowledge about and the lack of interest in taking part in such programs can limit their implementation. Additional obstacles include unsettled inheritances among multiple heirs and land tenure existing in the area.

During the interview process, we identified opportunities for developing parallel initiatives for the conservation of privately owned forest lands around El Yunque. Landowners recognized and valued forest benefits, and said they would like their lands and surrounding areas to stay as they are (i.e., rural, forested, mixed uses). Some of them would even like to have more trees on their property. This could represent an opportunity for the USFS to develop and promote tree-planting programs among landowners who support El Yunque; fruit trees and trees that can act as natural fertilizers to their lands are two examples. Also, forest-supporting management practices could be promoted among those landowners who are unable (or unwilling) to participate in land conservation programs but who support forested lands.

The findings provided in this fact sheet can help El Yunque's forest managers to better design, promote, and implement conservation programs around El Yunque. It can also bring about other initiatives to promote forest conservation and forest increase in privately owned lands. While the findings of the study are site specific, the results and lessons learned can assist the implementation of landowner-incentive programs in other areas of Puerto Rico and elsewhere.



## References

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## For more information

For more information or if you have questions, contact Annie Hermansen-Báez, 352-376-3271, [ahermansen@fs.fed.us](mailto:ahermansen@fs.fed.us).

