

THE PTEROCARPUS FOREST

AT PALMAS DEL MAR:

By Antonio Maldonado and Roberto Soto

It was the end of the 1990s, after the devastating passage of Hurricane Georges. The 51-acre Pterocarpus Forest within Palmas del Mar had become an abandoned, distressed and blighted woodland. Large numbers of trees had been destroyed and invasive weeds, grasses and damaging vines had overtaken the forest. Within the impenetrable forest were the rotted remnants of a mile-long wooden boardwalk built in the 1980s. The very survival of the unequalled 51-acre forest within Palmas was at stake.

Fast forward to 2016: the Pterocarpus Forest at Palmas celebrates a record numbers of visitors -- in the thousands, spanning new facilities are available to welcome visitors, a close affiliation with Para la Naturaleza, Puerto Rico's most prestigious environmental entity, and scientists and student researchers trolling through the marshy terrain looking for new species of fungi and a greater understanding of an ecosystem that nearly ceased to exist in Puerto Rico.

AN ASTOUNDING TRANSFORMATION

How did this remarkable transformation take place? Through the vision of the executive staff and volunteer leadership of Palmas del Mar residents, in 2010, the Palmas del Mar Homeowners' Association (PHA) acquired the failing woodland and, with technical advice and support from the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust (also known as Para la Naturaleza) and the collaboration of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, created a plan for a dynamic restoration. PHA was soon joined in this effort by a volunteer group, the Friends of the Pterocarpus Forest (officially, PHA Pterocarpus Forest, Inc.), who set out to raise money, at first for the restoration of the Forest, but subsequently for its maintenance, conservation and to insure its availability as a public resource for passive recreation, environmental education and scientific research.

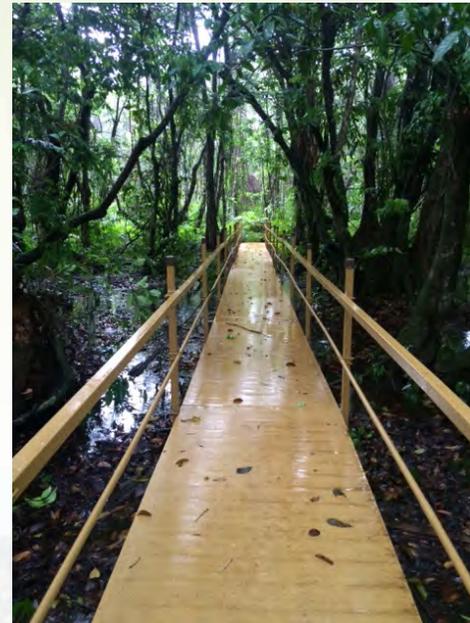
Within months, this collaborative effort had begun to show meaningful, lasting results. The invasive vegetation and suffocating vines were cut down and replaced with hundreds of native, rare and endemic trees such as Ausubo, Tabonuco, Ortegón, Capa Prieto, Guayacán and, of course, Pterocarpus, all planted between March and September 2011. The newly planted trees would play a critical role in the Forest's restoration by creating a canopy of new trees that would guarantee that the growth of invasive species, damaging vines and weeds will be controlled in the long term.

In 2013 the first 500 feet of a new, accessible, elevated, aluminum and fiberglass, 3/4-mile boardwalk that winds its way within the forest was opened to the public. At the same time, access to the site was improved significantly with the creation of a visitor parking area, adjacent to the Forest entrance and construction of a concrete ramp and walkway in March 2013. The ramp allows persons with limited mobility and toddlers in strollers access to the Forest.

By 2014, the Forest as a reserve open to the public for recreation and environmental education began to take shape. The remaining boardwalk was completed in June, allowing visitors to observe closely the flora and fauna, including migratory birds that visit the area, within the beautifully silent, cool Forest interior. Colorful, interpretative signage was installed at the Forest entrance and at nearly 100 points along the boardwalk, within the Forest, to help visitors appreciate and understand their surroundings.

Also, construction of a 40-foot high, wooden bird observation tower and adjacent gazebo got underway. Once completed, the two-story gazebo would serve as the Forest's Visitor Center.

By the end of the year, in November, the Forest was thus officially





Six months later, in February 2015, the impressive tower and Visitors Center were completed. The tower is equipped with a fixed-position, auto-focus binocular on the viewing platform that allows full enjoyment of the Forest's birds and the forest canopy, and on a clear day provides vistas as far as the El Yunque National Rain Forest and Vieques Island. The open-air Visitors Center has ample space for educational talks and meetings as well as social gatherings.

The opening of the facilities was accompanied by the construction and opening of new, accessible sanitary facilities, impressive fresh landscaping and additional informational signs. Aeration pumps for the small lake at the entrance of the Forest were installed to maintain the water's quality and clarity and make it a viable habitat for the turtles, fish, iguanas, birds and other creatures that live in and around the pond.

Since its opening the Pterocarpus Forest has become a major eco-tourism attraction in eastern Puerto Rico. This should not be totally surprising, as the Forest enjoys the distinction of being the only Pterocarpus Forest, of the few that remain in Puerto Rico that is readily accessible to the public and available to all for recreation, environmental education and ecosystem research.

As noted earlier, in 2016, the Forest experienced a record increase in visitors and information requests, numbers that grew steadily over the year. Visitors, individually and in groups, came not only from Palmas, but also from throughout the Island and overseas. They included university students, families, school and church groups, and participants in community-based organizations like the Boys & Girls Clubs, among others. Members of local Boys and Girls Scout Troops frequently conduct activities and camp at the Forest.

Public and private institutions continue to conduct research studies, among them the U.S. Forest Service and the Universidad del Turabo (UT) in nearby Gurabo. The Forest entered a 3-year collaborative agreement with UT in 2016 to foster Forest-related science projects, research involving undergraduate and graduate students, and the creation of new educational materials for on-site and on-line use.

The Forest's presence on the internet increased dramatically starting in 2015, with the introduction of the Forest's webpage www.pterocarpus.org. Subsequently the Forest created its own Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pterocarpusforest/>), as well sites on Trip Advisor and Google Business to let visitors to Puerto Rico know about this precious gift from Mother Nature. Improvements to the website and an expansion of the social media presence to include more educational material is in planning. In all the social media, the Forest receives highly positive reviews, "likes" and recommendations.

In just six short years, the Pterocarpus Forest at Palmas del Mar has become a stellar example of what can be achieved with vision, leadership and public/private collaboration. The Forest has evolved into a unique natural resource, a much, much more healthy, vibrant natural preserve than in 2010. Moreover, the project has moved forward at a striking pace.

Nearly \$650,000 has been invested in the project since its inauguration in January 2010, making this transformation possible. Through the generous financial support of individual residents, corporations, foundations and public agencies, in less than 4 years the Forest has gone from being near-death to a wonderful nature preserve. Hundreds

of Palmas residents have made significant, individual contributions to the project as well and share in this great accomplishment.

Much more remains to be done, however. The Forest Project needs renewed support to insure the achievement of other important objectives consistent with its long-term goal of preserving this wonderful gift from Mother Nature for the enjoyment of current generations and those to come.

AMONG OUR IMMEDIATE PLANS ARE:

CONSTRUCTION of a new, hanging bridge that will connect the passive park portion of the Forest to the small neck of land across the pond, where additional amenities will be installed .

CREATION of a Spanish-language version of the website and maintenance of our other internet presence to ensure that educational information is available to all.

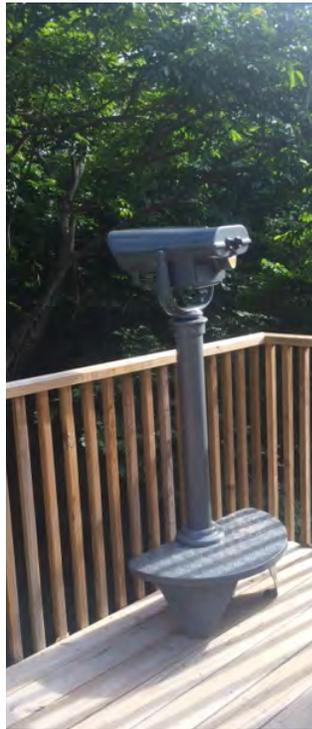
MAKING available new, stimulating educational materials for on-line and on-site use, including self-study guides and materials for teachers of grades K-12, and programming for visitors to the Forest and visitors to our website.

MAINTAINING the Forest boardwalk and rest areas, interpretative signage observation tower, visitors' center and other facilities.

PROVIDING care for the hundreds of Forest trees and provide for the planting of new trees as needed.

FACILITATING access and scientific research within the Forest.

The Pterocarpus Forest project has its roots in the exemplary conservation goals of the Palmas del Mar Homeowners' Association (PHA). The Association has long been an advocate for conservation and maintenance of its more than 200 acres of green areas as well as the preservation of endangered sea turtle habitats, beaches and lakes.



Grandes Melodías de Amor

Orquesta Sinfónica de Puerto Rico
dirigida por el **Maestro Rafael Enrique Irizarry**

POR EL BOSQUE PTEROCARPUS DE PALMAS DEL MAR
FEBRUARY 4, 2017

TICKETS at PHA, at VIP Properties in Palmanova Plaza, at the Performing Arts Center and at all the TicketPop distribution outlets. Ticket prices for seats at the Main Level are \$70, Mezzanine \$54 and Upper Level \$37 including sales tax and service charge. We encourage you pick up your tickets or make your reservations by calling 787 -285-6425 (PHA) or 787-285-5058 (VIP) early before they run out.

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