

Crew With Seeds, Corals Restore Environment in Puerto Rico

Conservationists work to repair coral, forests

By *Danica Coto*
Associated Press

FAJARDO, Puerto Rico — As crews re-string electric lines and clear debris from Hurricane Maria, a small group of conservationists is working on rebuilding natural wonders destroyed by the strongest storm to hit the island in nearly a century.

Environmental groups and volunteers are gathering native seeds to replant forests across the U.S. territory and grafting broken coral back onto shattered reefs to help repair damage in the largest-ever effort of its kind for Puerto Rico.

The Category 4 storm damaged 1.2 billion trees and snapped hundreds of thousands of corals off reefs around the island when it hit on Sept. 20. Despite the widespread destruction, a lack of funding and pressing human needs kept pushing back long-term plans to replant trees and rebuild corals.

Now that Puerto Rico is slowly regaining its footing after the storm and initial funding has been secured, conservationists are fanning out across the island and into its waters to repair and restore what's left of the island's flora.

"The damage is huge," said Nilda Jimenez, marine ecology director for the island's Department of Natural Resources.

Helping nature recover has environmental and economic importance: Puerto Rico's natural beauty is one of its biggest tourist draws. Experts also note that reefs protect coasts from heavy swells and serve as habitat for many species consumed on the island, including red snappers, lobsters and octopi.

Last week, a group of divers assembled on a dock in the northeast coastal town of Fajardo, a popular destination for tourists eager to explore reefs that once boasted bright colors and a multitude of fish. Now, hundreds of broken corals that are still alive lay scattered across the turquoise waters, ranging in size from a grapefruit to a car.

Armed with buckets of cement, divers pick up the broken pieces and swim to reefs that have been identified as healthy despite the battering they received from the storm. The divers brush away any algae that have built up and push the pieces down into the freshly laid cement.

"If you think about what you're seeing, it's broken animals," said Jim Ritterhoff, executive director of Force Blue, a nonprofit organization made up of retired U.S. Special Operations veterans working on coral reef conservation.

The group is partici-

pating in a nearly \$1.5 million project largely funded by the U.S. government with help from the U.S. nonprofit organization Ocean Conservancy to help restore between 100 and 300 corals a day in Puerto Rico for two months.

"The sooner we get out there, the better," said Sean Griffin, coral reef restoration ecologist with the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "There are still tens of thousands of corals out there that are upside down or even just on their side that we can get out there and save."

Similar restoration efforts are taking place on land miles away from the divers.

At a greenhouse run by the nonprofit group Para La Naturaleza in the capital of San Juan, volunteers and workers tend to thousands of budding plants that will grow into trees as they're planted across the island. They have planted nearly 1,900 trees since January, with a goal of 750,000 in the next seven years, said Luisa Rosado, the group's habitat manager.

"This is a project where we really won't see the results," she said. "The results will be from now to 100 years."

It's also a labor-intensive project where crews have to return every three months to the site where the trees are plant-



AP PHOTO/CARLOS GIUSTI

In this March 2, 2018 photo, Manuel Sepulveda, a nursery management coordinator with Para la Naturaleza, a non-profit organization, holds a couple of native oak seedlings, in one of its nurseries in the Rio Piedras Botanical Garden, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Para la Naturaleza has planted nearly 1,900 trees since January, with a goal of 750,000 in the next seven years, said Luisa Rosado, the group's habitat manager.

ed to monitor their progress during the first year, then every four months in the second year. Rosado said more volunteers are needed, especially because the nonprofit is tied up visiting places around the island trying to find seeds for native and endemic species.

Sometimes they get lucky and people call them, saying they uncovered seeds amid hurricane debris. A man from the western mountain town of Lares recently brought in a 4-foot-tall bag filled with branches and leaves but also a tiny black seed known as acetitillo, which is now a rare species.

The find drew a big smile from Manuel Sepulveda, greenhouse managing coordinator for Para La Naturaleza.

"There are very few seed banks in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean," he said. "We need millions of seeds."

The efforts also have a

deeper meaning for Rosado.

"This is a way for us to recuperate together," she said. "To recover the island."

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