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Environmental Politics in Paradise: Resistance to the Selling of Vieques

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Environmental Politics in Paradise: Resistance to the Selling of Vieques

The most notable instance of a massive and successful social protest in Puerto Rico in recent years has been on the island of [Vieques](http://pr.indymedia.org/features/vieques/) between 1999 and 2003. This was a rare case in which Puerto Ricans were able to overcome their partisan divisions to end the U.S. Navy's 60 years of training on this small, 51-square-mile island off the main island's east coast. Part of the reason for the Vieques victory, including gaining support from some influential U.S. politicians, was that leaders framed the protest in terms of human rights, public health and environmental degradation rather than Yanqui imperialism.

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[Sherrie Baver \(/author/Sherrie Baver\)](#)

Unlike other parts of Latin America where environmental conflicts over natural resources involve mining, forests, or oil and natural gas, Caribbean environmental conflicts typically involve tourism development and control over the coasts and nature reserves. Indeed, [conflicts over controlling Caribbean coasts and nature](http://repeatingislands.com/2009/05/05/ruling-on-beef-island-landmark-environmental-case-expected-in-three-months) have become increasingly common.

For several reasons, some of the most visible recent struggles have taken place in [is far from a pristine paradise](http://www.epa.gov/Region2/cepd/prlink.htm) with its 14 Superfund sites now under remediation, its urban sprawl, polluted reservoirs, a dismal recycling rate, dying coral reefs and declining fisheries.

Starting in the mid-1980s and gaining momentum in the 1990s, as the Commonwealth government reduced its focus on industrialization and moved to tourism development with renewed vigor, new conflicts emerged over control of the environment, especially on the coasts.

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including gaining support from some influential U.S. politicians, was that leaders framed the protest in terms of human rights, public health and environmental degradation rather than Yanqui imperialism.

However, since the 2003 Navy departure, Viequenses, especially the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV), have continued their struggle on several fronts. One front involves the demand for federal compensation for the [negative health effects of exposure](http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_hispanicaaffairs/2009/03/orlando-congressman-cleanup-work-in-vieques-is-flawed.html) (http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_hispanicaaffairs/2009/03/orlando-congressman-cleanup-work-in-vieques-is-flawed.html) to six decades of military toxics, so far without success. A second battle challenges the manner of the [cleanup now underway in eastern Vieques](http://www.epa.gov/Region2/vieques/sitemanagementplan.pdf) (<http://www.epa.gov/Region2/vieques/sitemanagementplan.pdf>), the former Atlantic Flight Weapons Training Area. A third front, and directly related to the topic at hand, involves building a sustainable community by controlling the pace and type of tourism development. Most Viequenses support an approach to tourism that promises to benefit local citizens. They argue they did not struggle to dislodge the Navy to bring in outside developers, speculators, and luxury second-homeowners.

The selling of Vieques by realtors, resort developers, and tour agencies continues even during the present recession. The tourism industry has little sense of irony as it packages the island as a prime ecotourism destination. Advertisements never mention that the former Atlantic Weapons Training Area on eastern Vieques is a Federal Superfund site and that the 17,673-acre Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is full of unexploded ordinance. One of the clearest environmental conflicts in the community is between upscale tourists who are thrilled with the "largest and most ecologically diverse [wildlife refuge](http://www.fws.gov/caribbean/Refuges/Vieques)" (<http://www.fws.gov/caribbean/Refuges/Vieques>) in the Caribbean," and locals who would like at least some of the refuge cleaned up so that land will revert to the municipality, the poorest in Puerto Rico, for multiple uses. The chances, however, of a full remediation of even part of the refuge, now controlled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are remote.

The CRDV has an alternative vision for their island. It points to the Master Plan for Sustainable Development, a multidisciplinary planning document developed over several years by local residents, a group of professionals, and academics from the University of Puerto Rico. The Master Plan, which the Commonwealth government signed on to in 2004, recommends low-impact tourism projects and assistance to locals in setting up cooperative business ventures. Since 2004, residents have established a coop movie theater, a hydroponic farm, and a cultural tourism program highlighting a pre-Colombian archaeological site. Still, the vision articulated in the Master Plan for small inns with an ecotourism focus is being challenged by outside developers as well as wealthy off-island luxury second-home buyers.

Long-term residents feel conflicted given the draw of selling their homes and land and moving away as property values increase, or remaining as strangers in their own community. A spark for developing the 2004 Master Plan was the opening of the exclusive Martineau Bay Resort and Spa first built by Wyndham in 2003. After a disappointing start, the complex has since been sold to the transnational W group with plans to re-open in Fall 2009. The property, with 156 extra grand rooms in 17 buildings, is being advertised as "the first luxurious [W retreat and spa](http://www.starwoodhotels.com/whotels/property/overview/index.html?propertyID=3170)" (<http://www.starwoodhotels.com/whotels/property/overview/index.html?propertyID=3170>) in the Caribbean."

To date, some construction projects on Vieques have been blocked. One proposal, [Dos Palmas](http://viequesenlucha.org/2008/09/) (<http://viequesenlucha.org/2008/09/>), a 64-condo, 180-car parking lot in the sleepy hamlet of Esperanza, was

stopped. Nevertheless, three area plans, Isabel II, Esperanza, and Mosquito, prepared by former mayor Damaso Serrano, approved by the outgoing legislature a week before municipal elections in November 2008, and approved by the local planning board may well lead to several new large-scale developments, essentially burying the Master Plan. The biggest fear for long-term residents is that they will be displaced by outsiders as they recall the cases of Hawaii and nearby St. Croix. As of mid-2009, however, possibly due to the recession, only one small hotel and two or three inn expansions are in process.

The lesson here is that while governments in the Caribbean frequently welcome large-scale tourism projects, local communities and environmental groups often fight back. Most support economic activity involving their natural resources, sun, sand and sea, but they want projects of a scale matching their surroundings and ones that do not marginalize ordinary citizens. Amid the inexorable pressures of globalization, the issue is controlling their natural resources, in this case, luxurious landscapes.

What can be done? Laws in the United States and increasingly throughout the Caribbean see participation in land use planning and environmental decision-making as a part of the deepening of democracy. Still, regional governments seem not to have the will or the capacity to implement adequate participatory schemes. Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean citizens are not rejecting tourism development through their struggles but are saying yes to tourism that respects their environment and culture and understands that scale matters on small islands. Caribbean citizens must have meaningful participation in tourism planning or future projects will not go forward.

Sherrie Baver teaches political science and Latin American studies at City College and The Graduate Center-CUNY.

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