### ESSAY TWO

INTERVIEWS WITH Bob Lee and Fernando Lloveras San Miguel

# Partnering for Quality CONSERVATION

**I** wo land trusts 1,500 miles apart have formed a partnership that is enabling them to learn about each other's best practices, and is forging great friendships in the process. Fernando Lloveras San Miguel, executive director of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, and Bob Lee, executive director of Virginia Outdoors Foundation, explain how this partnership is evolving, and how it is benefitting both groups.

### **SL**: How did the partnership between the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico (the Trust) and Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) come about?

Fernando: In February, I contacted VOF to coordinate a potential visit to Virginia to get a better insight on VOF's easement program. They responded immediately and both organizations started coordinating a working meeting.

Although VOF has been in existence for nearly five decades, more than 75% of the current acreage protected by VOF easements has been achieved since 2000. We wanted to learn how VOF's easement program was designed and what factors led to such an exponential increase in the last 10 years.

The donation of conservation easements by private landowners is fairly new to Puerto Rico, as the Puerto Rico Conservation Easement Law was formalized in 2001. Many proprietors are not aware of its private land conservation potential or its attractive tax incentives. The Trust currently holds five conservation easements that extend throughout 600 acres.

Our mission is to secure functional and healthy ecological systems of the islands of Puerto Rico, and to inspire its people to be stewards of nature and together realize our shared social, economic and qualityof-life goals. The Trust has carried out this mission since 1970 through the acquisition and donation of lands of great ecological, aesthetic, historic and cultural

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In our 2011-2016 Strategic Plan, the Trust established the goal of protecting approximately 15,000 acres of land through conservation easements over the next 10 years. To accomplish this, the Trust aims to support a policy environment that favors easements, conduct outreach and marketing to property owners and utilize a stringent acceptance process for easement opportunities, including Land Trust Standards and Practices.

With such an ambitious goal, the Trust conducted research to identify land trusts that could provide guidance on strategies to expand the number of conservation easements within a 10-year timeframe. We were highly impressed by Virginia Outdoors Foundation's successes.

**Bob:** The more we learned about the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, the more we realized this partnership could benefit us both. The Trust manages numerous natural reserves for educational and ecological purposes, which is something that we have less experience with because our focus has been easements on private land. We also discovered that our organizations have much in common. We have both been conserving land for more than 40 years, we both enjoy strong government support, and we are both the largest land conservation organizations in our respective commonwealths.

#### SL: What steps are you taking to learn about each others' programs?

Fernando: In April, three members of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, including myself, the Director of Acquisitions, Easements and Donations Division, and one of the Division's officers, travelled to Northern Virginia to meet with VOF during a two-day visit. The first day



included a meeting with VOF senior staff and trustees, representatives from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and Doug Domenech, who is Virginia's Secretary of Natural Resources and our former advisory board member. This meeting provided a general overview of VOF's easement program, mapping technologies, acquisition strategies, stewardship initiatives and the state's management and preservation of historic resources. The second day included a number of site visits to VOF's regional offices and easement properties.

**Bob:** As we explained our easement and stewardship programs in great detail we provided copies of policies, guidelines and templates. We then took our guests on a driving tour of easements in the area, as well as on a hike in the Bull Run Mountains, our largest owned property that is managed as a preserve and is a favorite destination of hikers. We hiked to the top of the mountains, to a spot known as White Rocks, and from there our friends could see one of our most expansive and dense concentrations of easements, protecting tens of thousands of acres of open space less than a one-hour drive from our nation's capital.

The next phase is for a Trust staff member, Maryolis Cruz-Pabón, to return to Virginia later this year and spend a few weeks delving into VOF's policies, practices, procedures and programs. We anticipate Maryolis spending time in each of VOF's regional offices so that



she can see how diverse Virginia's culture is across the state and how this affects our approach to both acquisition and stewardship of easements. VOF holds about 3,300 easements, and over the almost 50 years since we were created by the state legislature we have gained a great deal of experience working with different kinds of landowners. Like the Trust, we have both conservation easements and fee-owned properties. A number of properties owned by the Commonwealth of Virginia were acquired by VOF and later transferred to other state entities. Most current VOF-owned properties have some level of public use.

# **Partnering** *for* **Quality** CONSERVATION

The Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico has a more expansive role in stewardship of public natural and historic sites than VOF, and we want to introduce them to other state agencies and private partner organizations. In Virginia, we are fortunate to have many different governmental and private groups working in land conservation, each with its own special focus. By maintaining close working relationships with them, we are able to augment our own limited resources and expertise to accomplish the most effective and efficient conservation possible.

# **SL**: How are you using what you've learned about each other to improve the quality of your programs?

**Fernando:** The Trust learned about VOF's educational campaigns, landowner outreach strategies, delineation of Special Project Areas, easement evaluation and conveyance process, easement stewardship program and regional office integration.

We are currently designing a detailed strategy to augment the number of conservation easements in Puerto Rico focused on the strengthening of its easement program's workflow through the integration of its regional offices, the design of a landowner outreach and marketing campaign and the implementation of various demonstration projects at three priority conservation areas. VOF's extraordinary experience in easement expansion provides a blueprint for the design, implementation and evaluation of this strategy.

The Trust is also interested in learning about VOF's integration and management of volunteers in its easements' stewardship and field evaluations, as the Trust is currently expanding its active participation opportunities in all of its conservation work in Puerto Rico.

Bob: Just having to prepare for the visit gave us a good opportunity to better understand our own programs and processes! Our preparation allowed us to step back and see the big picture of our work, which is not easy to do when we're averaging more than 200 easements a year. One of the aspects of our work that we are trying to improve now is better integration of our landowners and GIS databases. We have been exploring new database options that will allow our staff to better track stewardship activity on both easements and owned lands, and we look forward to sharing what we learn with the Trust.

## **SL**: Where do you see this partnership going in the future?

**Fernando:** Our two days together resulted in the establishment of a long-term working relationship through the





delineation of future collaborative initiatives. In addition to Maryolis's visit, the Trust, VOF and Virginia's Secretary of Natural Resources will also conduct an exchange between guides and interpreters. The Trust's interpreters will visit Virginia to provide feedback on how to integrate Hispanic communities in the state's outreach and educational efforts, and VOF interpreters will travel to Puerto

Rico to learn about the Trust's interpretation and citizen

science programs.

Bob: After Maryolis's visit, I would like us to reciprocate by sending VOF staff to Puerto Rico to gain insight into the Trust's work and the challenges and opportunities that it faces, especially with regard to the lands that it owns and manages for public use. There is potential for VOF to be a stronger vehicle for public land acquisition in Virginia, but we must have the capacity and expertise to manage those lands. We learn a great deal from collaborations such as the partnership with the Trust. For example, in recent years VOF and the Maryland Environmental Trust, which is another governmental land trust, have had a partnership in which we have shared information about our stewardship and volunteer programs. VOF has a great stewardship staff but needs volunteers to help us meet the

protected by a VOF easement in 2002. It is part of a block of 12 adjoining VOF easements that protect nearly 3,000 contiguous acres of open space.

> growing needs for easement monitoring. Both MET and the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico can teach us a lot about working with volunteers, and we hope that we can provide models for them to expand their staffing.

### SL: What advice would you give to other land trusts looking to form similar partnerships?

**Fernando:** Don't reinvent the wheel. There are so many easement programs that can serve as guidance and inspiration. Partnerships are key components in the implementation of effective land conservation strategies. The land trust community has so much insight and knowledge to share in order to solve our common challenges ahead.

Puerto Rico only protects 8% of its land for conservation purposes, the majority within publicly owned lands. The Trust knows that it can only expand the amount of protected lands in Puerto Rico if it integrates private landowners in the conservation equation. That is why our organization is taking a deep look at successful examples in private land conservation throughout the United States, such as VOF's easement program.

**Bob:** Look for commonalities. I think that programs of vastly different scale and scope with completely different organizational structures would not find the same mutual benefits as organizations that have much in common, such as is the case with VOF and the Trust. We both operate on a statewide/territory-wide scale, we are both very dependent on governmental support, we both have highly competent professional staff, we both have owned lands and easement programs, and we both have coherent strategic plans. Both organizations serve citizens who revere their natural and cultural heritage and are concerned about pressure for conversion to other uses.

Virginia has been conserving some of its most valuable open spaces for many years and we have some of the strongest incentives in the nation, which has allowed conservation to keep pace with development. We hope that the model we've developed in Virginia can be adapted in Puerto Rico with similar success.

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