

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 10/29/2014 12:00:00 AM

First name: Javier

Last name: Ruiz P.E.

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Comments to the Management Plan of El Yunque National Forest:

The Forest Service (FS) is in the review process of the management plan of the Caribbean National Forest (El Yunque). As a member of the community, I would like to submit the following comments:

1)The Forest Service intends to get more involvement from the surrounding community and encourage sustainable businesses. I totally support that.

2)Registered tour guides and interpreters shall be able to provide small/private rain forest tours to customers and tourists, without having to provide ground transportation for them. A lot of tourists prefer to use their own cars. See Attachment # 1 for more details.

3)There have been complains about vehicles getting vandalized in some areas of the forest. Safety issues shall be addressed.

4)There are several forests and natural reserves on the surrounding areas. We shall look for ways to connect the different ecosystems.

5)It is always hard to find funding for maintenance. Donation boxes could be placed next to the trailheads, and encourage people to cooperate. With ~1.2 million visitors you shall be able to collect significant amounts of money.

6)New roads and trails are being planned near the North-East boundary of El Yunque (PR-186). I'll be happy to (informally) support the FS during the planning and design phases of that project. I am a civil engineer who worked for almost 8 years at the PR Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (Recursos Naturales). Feel free to contact me any time.

Javier Ruiz, PE

Attachment # 1:

Private Walking Tours shall be allowed (without requiring ground transportation):

The Forest Service (FS) does not allow to provide tours of the Rain Forest without providing ground transportation to the visitors. That makes small-scale private tours very expensive, and inaccessible to most people. The FS shall allow registered tour guides and/or interpreters to make small private walking tours of the rain forest, without forcing them to provide ground transportation.

Local community:

Most of the Puerto Ricans who visit the rain forest prefer to use their own car. They are discouraged from booking private tours because they are forced to get on large-scale commercial trips designed (and priced) for foreign tourists. They need to be picked up at hotels and ports instead of driving to the forest. The FS shall reach out to Puerto Ricans and encourage them to get familiarized with the natural beauties of our island. If they know the forest, they would be more willing to protect it.

A significant percentage of the foreign tourists prefer to rent cars in order to get into the rain forest (for logistical

reasons). They shall also be able to enjoy interpretative tours of El Yunque.

Ground Transportation:

In order to provide ground transportation, the tour companies need a special permit (sticker) from the FS. In order to get that permit (sticker) they need to have a taxi, a van or a mini-bus licensed by the Puerto Rico Tourism Company. They need to go through a complicated/expensive/bureaucratic procedure that discourages the responsible professionals from getting into the business, and increase the price that the visitors have to pay. It is virtually impossible to get a tour vehicle (ET) with less than 9 seats (that makes small scales tours unfeasible because of the unnecessary waste of gas).

If guides/interpreters are allowed to provide walking tours without providing ground transportation, more people would be able to enjoy and learn out of the forest in a healthy and sustainable way.

Existing tour companies:

Private tours would not compete with the big mass-tourism companies. They both reach different markets and use different marketing strategies. The big companies get their clients through contracts with hotels and cruise ship companies, while the private companies get their clients through reference and recommendations.

Eastern National tours:

Eastern National (EN) provides short/inexpensive tours to visitors out of Palo Colorado Information Center. Those tours shall not get affected if private tours are allowed because they also reach a different market. EN serves people who spontaneously look for information, while private tour guides support the people who take their time to look for a specific product. EN tours are short and concentrate in a small area.

Revenue for the FS:

Approximately 80% of the people who visit El Yunque do not go into El Portal Visitor Center, and therefore don't pay the entrance fee. One possibility is to make El Portal the meeting place for private tours. Since the visitors are going with their own cars, they will pay the full entrance fee (more than the people going in busses).

Safety:

It is safer for the visitors to go into the forest with a private tour guide / interpreter than to go by themselves (or in a big group). The guides will look after their guests and will make sure the safety rules are followed. They are aware of the dangers of the forest, know how to prevent them. They shall be prepared to respond in case of an emergency. The FS can provide training in emergency response.

Regular cars are safer than busses and vans because they are lighter and have a lower center of gravity (vans and busses need long stopping distances and tip over easily). Therefore, it is safer for visitors to drive with their own cars than to come in a bus.

Special needs:

Small private tours are more appropriate for people with special needs. The guides can work directly with the persons, and make sure their needs are met.

Specific interests

Every guest can have specific interests like bird watching, waterfalls, amphibians, panoramic views, etc. Small private can facilitate everyone to concentrate on their own interest.

Everybody benefits if the small private tours are allowed within the forest, and if the restriction to provide ground transportation with every tour (along with the permit process that goes with it) gets eliminated.