

Mortal Embrace

Conflicting forces of nature, alongside the ecological intervention of traditional fishermen, helped mitigate the destruction wrought in Puerto Rico by Hurricane María

The impact of the destructive winds of Hurricane María along the northern coasts of Puerto Rico in late September 2017—not long after Hurricane Irma had swept by—was ugly, immense and immediate. Docks, shorelines and boats were destroyed soon after the hurricane made landfall on 20 September with wind speeds reaching 150 km per hour. Even three months after the hurricane subsided, the lack of electricity in 98 per cent of the country has left fisherfolk without ice to preserve the fish they sell. Many fishermen lost their boats, their *nasas* (fishing traps) and other gear. With the municipality authorities proving ineffectual in clearing the debris left behind by the hurricane, fishermen have been unable to fish from shore.

In Villa Pesquera in Catanho, the immediate damages amounted to US\$45,000 to US\$65,000 as losses to the dock and US\$25,000 as lost income for three months suffered by the 25 organized fishermen who were unable to fish.

And yet how did some coastal areas, such as those of the Vega Baja beach to the northwest of the capital city of San Juan, escape from suffering the same impacts despite being less than 25 m from the coastline and having a higher housing density? It almost seemed a miracle that the 150 houses along the Vega Baja shoreline were left standing intact after Hurricane María, even though Hurricane Irma had destroyed the retaining walls in front of many houses.

It was not as if there was no impact on Vega Baja—hundreds of metres of power lines were cut and hundreds of trees and palms uprooted. The shoreline was left so full of debris that reaching the sea was impossible

for weeks. The houses and small businesses of the neighbourhood were also affected behind the seashore. In the neighbourhood of Sandín, former subsistence fishermen and fisherwomen, who had built their houses with zinc or wooden roofs, were left roofless.

But how did the houses by the sea remain intact? One person saw everything that happened the day María struck. From the third floor of a small building of Beach Chalets about 500 m from the sea, Juan witnessed the natural phenomenon during its eight-hour duration over the island.

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He explained how the sustained gusts of fierce winds—never before experienced in the place—ruthlessly tore apart the entire coastal marine territory, whistling a deafening shriek and destroying everything with its whirlpools that turned everything into rubble. “And there, defiant with its controlling power, the air convulsed, converting every minute into an eternity,” said Juan.

Accomplices of survival

He added that at the same time, a few metres from the ruthless fury of the wind, immense waves formed from the deep sea, which, when they hit the coral reef line, rose up to 5 and 6 m in the air, as if basking in their power and speed, with arms outstretched in a single mortal embrace.

*This article is by **María Suárez Toro** (escuelabuceocaribesur@gmail.com), journalist, social communicator, scuba diver and fisherwoman, and also co-founder and co-ordinator of Centro Comunitario de Buceo Embajadores y Embajadoras del Mar, Costa Rica*

Juan explained that before they could reach the shore, the immense waves were repelled by the wind that returned the waves to the depth of the sea. Thus, a never-ending duel between the two forces of nature took place—waves trying to reach the shore to wreak havoc versus the winds that occupied the coastal territory, preventing their opponent from reaching shoreline.

As people returned from their shelters near the city, greetings, hugs, water and food welcomed them. But who should they thank? Definitely not Hurricane María. The answer lies in the depths of the sea—the coral reefs, those silent accomplices of survival, the very reefs that have made the beach of Vega Baja special. During the hurricane, when the waves hit the reefs, they were raised to a point so high that the winds could repel them easily.

Ricardo Laureano, scuba diver, fisherman, surfer and tireless friend of the corals of Vega Baja, has long been responsible for their

protection. Together with his family and hundreds of volunteers from all parts of the island and the world, he has been replanting corals for years. His organization—Vegabajeños Promoting Sustainable Environmental Development (VIDAS)—is a community collective founded in 2006 as a response to the constant threat of privatization of public-domain assets and conservation areas. VIDAS serves as a link between traditionally marginalized coastal communities, academia, agencies and other entities that also provide pro bono services in legal, sociological, scientific and educational matters, and works on ecological rehabilitation projects.

Laureano is a representative of the Vega Baja section of the Surfrider Puerto Rico Foundation. He started reef conservation in 1996 when he noticed the construction of a residential complex that threatened the reef and the public use of the coastal sector.

“We were alarmed and contacted Dr. Edwin Hernández Delgado from

MARÍA SUÁREZ TORO



Fishers Musin Suarez and Fernando Maldonado at Cívico in the town of Vega Baja, northern coast of the Archipiélago of Puerto Rico. The coastal communities are presently assessing the post-María situation and the deteriorated conditions of the fisherfolk and their environment



Shores have become inaccessible at Civico, Puerto Rico. With the municipality authorities proving ineffectual in clearing the debris left behind by the hurricane, fishermen have been unable to fish from shores

the Center for Applied Tropical Ecology and Conservation CATEC/UPRRP. He visited Vega Baja and provided literature to monitor changes in the area. “In May 2006 we were successful in placing two species of acroporids of the Atlantic, abundant in the area under the Endangered Species Act. In collaboration with the academy, we convinced other sectors to act to conserve the Vega Baja coast,” says Laureano.

In 2008, the area was declared a ‘Critical Habitat’ under an Order 4 (d) of the aforementioned Act. A community science project has since been started to allow visitors to merely visit the reef or to collaborate as a project volunteer. Their motivation, says Laureano, a convinced conservationist, is “to give back a little to the planet that has given us shelter and food, to allow our children and future generations to inherit a planet better than the one they’ll get if we don’t do anything”.

The coastal communities of Puerto Rico are presently assessing the post-María situation and the deteriorated conditions of the fisherfolk and their

environment in a holistic manner by also recognizing the necessity of collaborating with nature. That is perhaps the best lesson Hurricane María left in its wake.

Sadly, though, the magnitude of the destruction caused by the hurricane has not yet been fully assessed. Fishermen throughout the island coasts of Salinas, Catanho, Lajas, Mayaguez, Ponce and elsewhere claim that the government policies after the hurricane have centred on agriculture, excluding fisheries.

“Governor Ricardo Rosselló Nevares has not said a thing about us because he thinks the only ones who lost their means of production were the farmers,” said Naguabo fisherman Ángel Gómez Cruz, on behalf of the fishing community, at a meeting with government authorities convened to assess how to support producers of food. But are not fishers producers of food, especially on an island? ❧

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