

**TICATOVE**



*TICATOVE, INC.*

**Grupo de Conservación**

*P.O. Box 1527 - Vieques, PR 00765*

GRUPO DE CONSERVACION

May 9, 2016

Speaker Paul Ryan and Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy  
United States House of Representatives  
H-232 Capitol Building  
H-107 Capitol Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Ryan and Majority Leader McCarthy:

As the Board Members of TICATOVE, Inc. representing this local conservation community group; we are severely concerned about the protection and the natural resource legacy in our island of Vieques. We respectfully request that you reject any legislation that allows the Secretary of the Interior to convey any portions of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (Vieques NWR) to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

*Who are we?*

TICATOVE, Inc. is a non-profit professional and community based organization, registered and established in Vieques, Puerto Rico. Our primary mission is to protect and conserve the natural treasures of Vieques, through the promotion and development of conservation actions that teach how humanity and nature are and must be compatible.

*Our objectives:*

Our primary objectives are focused on environmental education, scientific research and technical assistance to government, private and community organizations. We provide visitors to Vieques with information about the flora & fauna of our beautiful island. In addition we work to educate and prepare the youth of Vieques to actively participate in conservation efforts. We train our members in the field of biology, environmental interpretation and other aspects of land management. These educational opportunities are meant to assist in developing future Eco-Tourism programs on the island. Because, nature based tourism and wildlife dependent activities

are the bread and butter of the Viequense economy. People come to visit Vieques because of our beautiful natural areas, in particular those managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Vieques NWR is the biggest economic engine for our local business and our community.

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### *The importance of Vieques in the conservation of the natural resources*

For a relatively small area (approximately 100 miles long by 35 miles wide), Puerto Rico is an Island with a great biodiversity and natural richness. Our Island also has a high density of human beings and large scale urban development. In turn this has a big and negative impact on Puerto Rico's natural resources. We are running out of natural areas in an effort to create more hotel resorts, golf courses and various other development projects, which cover wide areas of the main inland. Puerto Rico only has 8.71% of its lands legally designed for traditional conservation purposes; compared with 33% in Jamaica, an island similar in size to Puerto Rico. In fact, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER), the USFWS and various NGOs have documented, recognized and declared that Vieques is extremely important for conservation efforts in the Archipelago of Puerto Rico. Vieques is an essential component to conservation lands in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, since the entire Caribbean only has 13%, of its lands set aside for conservation.

Of all the conservation areas in Puerto Rico, the National Forest of El Yunque is the best known and visited protected area by people from Puerto Rico and abroad. With approximately 29,000 acres, it is also the largest conservation area in all of Puerto Rico and the U.S, Virgin Islands. The second largest conservation area is the Vieques NWR with approximately 18,000 acres. This is followed by the Puerto Rico DNER Natural Reserve of Mona, with approximately 14,000 acres.

Many people do not think of Vieques as an important area for conservation or a place that contains a great number of biological resources; but they are wrong. At the time of Columbus, Vieques was described as a tropical paradise with vast natural resources. Vieques continues to be very significant for the conservation of biological resources and is a small treasure of natural riches; in fact, a recent report produced by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, listed Vieques as one of the “Wholly Irreplaceable Sites in the Caribbean Islands Hotspot”.

Among a number of reasons: the island is a “bridge” between the Greater and Lesser Antilles; with representative flora and fauna from both geographic areas. The subtropical moist forest located on the western tract of the Vieques NWR is the only Neotropical forest of its kind in the USFWS National Wildlife Refuge System. The island contains over 21 lagoons; the majority of these are protected within the areas of the Vieques NWR. As less natural areas become available (due to human development) for the migration of bird species travelling across the Caribbean, to and from South and North America, their rest and feeding stops become more important in these lagoons that host a great number of coastal, aquatic, raptor and other bird species. In the Puerto Rico Archipelago, the largest colony of brown pelicans is found in Vieques. The same is true for the most important green sea turtle nesting beaches. The largest population of the endangered *Goetzia elegans* tree was recently discovered in Vieques. In addition, 95% of the mangrove forests in Vieques are within the DNER and USFWS protected areas. For such a small island, Vieques contains nine of the thirteen bat species that exist in all of Puerto Rico; the majority of

the habitats for these species are within the Vieques NWR, in particular the area of Monte Pirata. “Puerto Mosquito” also known as the bioluminescent bay, located on the south of Vieques, is considered the healthiest and the brightest of its kind in all of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. It is protected and surrounded by the DNER and USFWS conservation areas.

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In summary, our goal is to protect and conserve the natural treasures of Vieques, taking into consideration a sustainable and compatible nature based activities, which will continue to attract visitors to our beautiful island, maintain the local economy and protect the Vieques NWR. We understand that this is possible through the promotion and development of conservation actions that show how humans and nature are and must be compatible. Vieques is an attraction and travel worthy destination for people from all over the world, due to its’ natural and protected areas. Giving these lands away will not be the solution to the economic crisis in Puerto Rico.

If we allow development to follow in the footsteps of other areas in the Caribbean, we will not able to compete in such a market and our economy will take a turn for the worse. The long term economic future of our island is tied to the protection and good stewardship of the natural areas of Vieques; who better to carry out this work that the USFWS. As stewards of these areas, the Vieques NWR has become a part of the community and despite what many might say, they are the only ones who have made a difference and have the means to continue this work. Thus if Congress continues to fund and allow the USFWS to carry on with their mission, we will continue to prosper economically and retain natural areas; which are becoming a very rare commodity in the rest of Puerto Rico and in the Caribbean.

Beforehand we want to thank you for your time and consideration. We ask you to consider your position and we urge you to reject any legislation that would result in giving away of selling any portion of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge.

Respectfully,

Cristina Salvesen

David Maldonado

Debi May

Gladys Aleman

John Hines

John Stoklosa

Kathi Rodrigues

Lloyd Merrill

Pauline Migneault

Rosie Dempsey