

VIEWPOINT

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Development reaching breakneck pace

After listening to some of the island's most seasoned conservationists recite a litany of projects infringing upon public lands, my spirits drooped.

Too many battlefronts threaten to wear environmental activists thin. Too many battles are sure to wear thin the tempers of public officials, who like to imagine that they alone can choose the fate of our public lands.

The "public lands" belong to the people, a theme reiterated by ecologist Ariel Lugo, Misión Industrial activist Jorge Fernández Porto and environmental scientist Neftalí García during the Wednesday morning press conference organized by the Puerto Rico Conservation Foundation.

They stood in front of a map of Puerto Rico with more than 100 colorful circles identifying projects — all involving public lands — and placing them into one of four categories: tourism/residential, infrastructure, extraction, landfills. A few vicious-looking red streaks represented highway or infrastructure infractions.

These dots, scattered throughout the island but concentrated along the coast, represent the active projects identified in a mere month of investigation, noted Lugo. Already, it would take two years to describe each one separately in a weekly forum such as this Viewpoint column. By next month, there will probably be another dozen or so new ones.

The government strategy seems to be



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Divide and Conquer: get so many fires going that environmentalists won't be able to put them all out.

Environmentalists are responding with their own Divide and Conquer strategy: arm the local people with education so they can skillfully fight local skirmishes. Toward this end, the foundation is giving a free seminar on Nov. 19 at the University of Puerto Rico's Ponce campus to review the island's environmental laws.

It's a bit simplistic, however, to see this as a war game. In actuality, the project trackers explained, a lot of the environmental fallout stems from a government program designed with other goals in mind: the "fast track" permit process as it's being implemented by the Rosselló administration to promote development.

This fast-track program, known in Spanish as *centro de trámites acelerados*,

has lent a speed to development that almost ensures it will move beyond a sustainable pace.

As Fernández puts it, "That fast track thing is going to kill us."

When I spoke with him on Thursday, he was working on a letter condemning a fast-track project to bring 200 low-cost homes to Barrio Caguana in Utuado. He said he was writing to the Environmental Protection Agency to demand that it rescind its endorsement because the developer, Utuado assemblyman Wilson Quintana, has not complied with EPA's stated conditions.

Many of the other 107 projects targeted by activists Wednesday also have moved under the fast-track program, said Lirio Márquez, coordinator of the foundation effort to collect information on proposed development projects. She is still gathering data to determine just how many, and which of these bypassed a requirement to hold public hearings when public land is involved.

In some cases, the government seems motivated to use public lands to save money. For instance, the commonwealth plans to cut P.R. Highway 10 through the Río Abajo state forest to save a few dollars in land acquisition costs, even though an aerial photo displayed Wednesday shows a clearing at the forest edge that would be a more logical place for a road. We'll be counting the cost in trees if officials stay on this ill-advised course.

In other cases, the government seems inspired by sentiments that take precedence over cash. Along these lines, the commonwealth handed over 100 acres of ever-rarer wetlands to hotel developers. Plans distributed Wednesday indicate these Río Grande wetlands will feature a parking lot in their new incarnation.

Fernández said Thursday that the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources had just caught the hotel developer tearing down half the pterocarpus trees found on another portion of wetlands, so who knows what's in store for the precious parcel that once belonged to the public.

It's good to hear that DNER moved to prevent further destruction in this case. Overall, however, the sheer number of projects being waved through indicates the agency is neglecting its duties as guardian of public lands, as Lugo and others suggested.

At least we can be thankful that the Puerto Rico Conservation Foundation and other environmentalists are working to fill in the gap left by commonwealth officials.

It's hard to spar an invisible enemy. And that's what these projects amount to when they are not announced to the public — the true owners of the land under assault.

Anyone who would like a list of the projects compiled so far, or would like to add a project to the list, can call Lirio Márquez at 726-2839.