



MELANIE LENART
Eco-Logic

The greening of the island takes root in tree-planting

Puerto Rico has been growing green again over the years, and some of the credit goes to the Department of Natural Resources' tree-planting program.

DNR provides about 12,000 trees a month — free — enough to cover about 500 acres of land a year, said Artemio Otero, director of DNR's rural forestry program. Otero estimates that the island has close to 40 percent forest cover now, (up from a low of about 6 percent in the late 1940s). The department has identified another 450,000 acres of private land that would be ideal for replanting, representing another 20 percent of island area.

About 90 percent of the planting goes on in rural areas, especially on mountainous land no longer needed for agriculture, Otero said. But the department is trying to shift some of its focus to "urban forestry."

"Our goal is to plant as many trees as we can in Puerto Rico — urban as well as rural," explained José E. Rivera, director of the DNR's technical assistance division.

The benefits of trees are well-known: They provide shade, lower pollution levels, look attractive, create a home for animals, break the force of raindrops, absorb water that could otherwise pool into floods, increase property values, and absorb carbon dioxide, the compound most to blame for the projected global warming.

And they make us feel better. For instance, a study by Roger Ulrich, of Texas A & M University, found that patients whose windows faced a stand of trees recuperated from a gall bladder operation more quickly and with fewer drugs than did their counterparts whose window faced a brick wall.

At least, they make most people feel better. But it seems at least some islanders actually find trees offensive. I am reminded of a friend's report of his conversation with a former public works department head, who grumbled, "Trees — they're a traffic hazard."

This kind of thinking must have been behind the design of Old San Juan's Paseo de La Princesa, unveiled during the fanfare of last year's Gran Regatta

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STAR file photo

The Puerto Rican Institute of Culture library display, shown above, displayed some of the institute's reading selections. Here, Loretta Phelps de Córdova gives her

own suggestions for reading materials and experiences that offer a more idiosyncratic approach to learning about island life and history.

Taking a crash course in Puerto Rican Culture

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the first of a two-part series.*

One of the most emotional and complex issues facing Puerto Rico is coming to grips with Culture. It deserves to be capitalized.

In the upcoming plebiscite, the perception of Puerto Rican Culture will be a decisive, yet amorphously defined, factor. Political parties and figures will play an important part, of course. But underlying the obvious politics, always, lies that other, deeper sense of struggling for self-definition. What are its parameters?

The STAR has been giving increasing attention to analyzing the place of Culture in the island's life. That's good. Not enough serious consideration has been allotted it, aside from the commonplace political rhetoric which uses Culture to manipulate and obfuscate thought. Thought is human's high-born activity: an act of will, combining reason, intuition and observation.

All children know it's one of the neatest things around. That is, until adults transform it into a slavish, numbing exercise that instills the herd



LORETTA PHELPS de CORDOVA
Commentary

instinct in so many. But that's another subject . . .

There's nothing like priming out own mind with others' thoughts, before sitting down to work out our own rationality. Of course, we all pre-select to some degree, by what we allow to enter our mental realm. I, for example, have an inordinate fondness for seeking out well-written, realistic-type novels that probe good and evil and angst and meaning in the human condition — Leo Tolstoy, Sigrid Undset, Francois Mauriac, Miguel de Unamuno, Walker Percy, Simone Weil and Thomas Merton — and any well-written

mystery, preferably English.

On the other hand, I can't even concentrate on a page of "Hola" or "People" magazines. Yet people whose intelligence I respect enjoy the *farándula* stuff so I can't pretend to be an arbiter of taste.

In part because of past shabby treatment of Puerto Rican history in the island's schools, many otherwise well-educated people — especially those in their forties and older — have read little of the island's past. Though she was later overruled, Doña Pilar Barbosa, when she was the first black woman on the faculty at the University of Puerto Rico back in the 1930s, insisted that all students study a course in Puerto Rican history.

With that as a backdrop, I'd like to give my own minimal list of writings and sensory exposures that an individual might consider in order to wrestle with the questions of Puerto Rican Culture and Identity.

This selection reflects my own bias, of course. I favor clarity and grace in style, integrity in content, and well-honed language in general — again,

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VIEWPOINT

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Trees

festivities. The architects virtually ignored plants in favor of cement, providing few trees along the half-hour walk to shade the many pale-skinned tourists that arrived for the event.

Having first arrived in Puerto Rico in August of 1989, during the protests that followed the sudden razing of the trees at El Morro in Old San Juan, I quickly received the impression that there was a civilian sentiment favoring trees and an official stance against them.

A recent perusal through the STAR's files on trees heightened this impression. It seems like the same argument has been playing out for at least a quarter of a century, with the government knocking down trees in the name of progress, and the people begging to have them left alone in the name of beauty.

But this interpretation of events is a bit simplistic, as information from Rivera indicates. It's not just island officials who dislike trees.

"Whenever people call here, most of them, they want to cut trees," Rivera said during an interview in his office earlier this month.

For instance, he said, people will complain about flowers "littering" the ground around Puerto Rico's beautiful violet tree, a species natural only to Puerto Rico. Sometimes they're worried about a tree's effect on their water pipes or driveway.

Sometimes they just get overambitious when they move into a new home. This was the case for a Levittown resident who planted about half a dozen fruit trees in her small backyard, only to regret the extent of her zeal decision 20 years later. Between falling leaves and ripening fruit, trees can be a handful.

Many potential problems can be avoided by choosing the right species in the first place, Rivera points out. DNR offers advice, also free, about which species are best for certain situations and environments. The climate and soil varies throughout the island, so the department has specialists in seven different geographical regions to answer questions, on-site in many cases.

The most ambitious undertaking so far was launched in 1984 by Las Casas de La Selva, a 1,000 acre forest reserve just north of Patillas, Otero said. As part of a plan to use the land in a sustainable way, land managers lugged about 25,000 tree seedlings, about two-thirds of them mahogany, for planting around the mountainous slopes typical of the rain forest.

The planting worked in harmony with the existing vegetation, as I was able to see during a walk with about a dozen others last year as part of the group's ecotourism efforts.

Harry W. Scott pointed out some of the mahogany trees, which he and the others planted between 1984 and 1987. The saplings followed east-west lines, Scott's adaptation, in rows about 30 feet apart, as federal guidelines recommend.

The trees ranged between 2 feet tall at the ridge top to up to 30 feet tall in more ideal locations. (Others interested in this type of tour of the reserve can call Las Casas at 721-3148. Scott has taken a break from the land

to pursue graduate studies in forestry at Yale University, but Richard Druitt, who specializes in medicinal plants, remains on guard.)

The mahogany planted at Las Casas, and in most rural areas, takes about 40 years to mature. And the mortality rate is fairly low, with most tree deaths at Las Casas attributed to Hurricane Hugo in September of 1989.

But trees planted in the city tend to have a much shorter life, in both meanings of the phrase.

Urban trees suffer from stunted growth compared to their country cousins, and they tend to live an average of only 13 years, according to a survey of 20 cities reported in "Growing Greener Cities," a tree-planting handbook published by the American Forestry Association as part of its "Global Releaf" campaign. This compares to a natural average of 150 years in rural areas, the handbook states.

Trees are good at removing pollution, but living in polluted conditions is no treat for them.

Also, the handbook notes that city soil tends to be much more compacted — with perhaps 5 percent "porosity," or open space, compared to the typical 50 percent found in good country soils.

Between compaction and general lack of water due to surrounding concrete, a street tree has a rough time getting enough water.

Making sure they get enough water can help prevent their early demise, however. A newly-planted seedling should be watered on a weekly basis, and trees young and old welcome supplemental water during times of low rainfall relative to the area's usual climate.

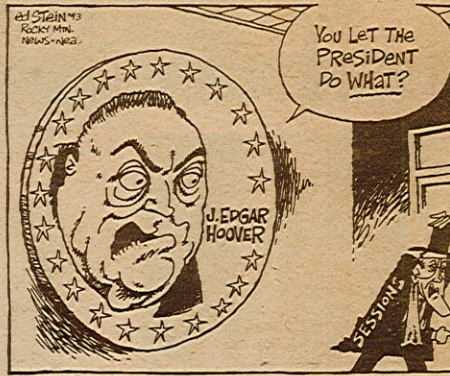
This is especially important in the city, where one survey reported in "Growing Greener Cities" found that trees receiving supplemental water grew about twice as fast as comparable urban trees surviving only on available water.

So plant a tree. To do it with the help of an expert at DNR, call the forestry division at 724-3584.

Individuals may need to pick up seedlings at the department's Arecibo nursery, but the department will usually transport trees to those planting them *en masse*.

Either way, it's a good deal — getting all the benefits of a tree for nothing . . . except a little investment of time and thought.

Melanie Lenart writes a weekly column on environmental issues.



Don't let FBI consume DE

By LEONARD LARSEN
Scripps Howard News Service

Local police officers from chiefs to cops in any American town of any size tell you stories of their brushes with overbearing and often over-rated Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Other law enforcement agencies — state, federal and foreign — can match those tales and tell others of an FBI still driven by the grabbing ghost of J. Edgar Hoover.

Rather than change, the Hoover ethic of the FBI appears intent now on a takeover of the Enforcement Administration, FBI dominating the nation's anti-drug effort and abandoning an era of law enforcement cooperation.

Most frequently other police and law enforcement agencies have found that so-called "cooperation" to be a one-way street. They take it but seldom gives it.

Rather than freeze out local police in drug investigations, it's standard procedure for DEA — and in other federal agencies — cooperative task forces, working for criminal indictments and prosecutions instead of release success stories.

And contrary to hidebound FBI practice, routine that local cops are invited to team up with DEA agents to work on significant drug cases from beginning to end.

The FBI, in its proposal to Attorney General Janet Reno, made no effort to hide its intent, even serving fair warning that in swallowing the DEA, the FBI would discontinue future cooperation with other agencies and individuals in drug arrests and prosecutions.

As though still bound by the Hoover-era culture that insisted other law enforcement agencies would only be tolerated — if the FBI proposal even suggested existing cooperation would be shut down.

An explanatory note in the FBI proposal to Reno said any dependence on non-FBI agencies and personnel "can be problematic in circumstances requiring greater security measures."

That "security" curtain which may now be down a flow of information and aid between DEA, other federal agencies and local police is much the same curtain used in the Hoover era and after to harass Americans and hide their conduct from legitimate public inquiry.

And behind that curtain, as Americans have learned, the FBI would sift and shape in even twisting fact into fiction, whatever necessary to keep the FBI in its own special unshared success.

What's important now, before any FBI proposal of the DEA is ordered, is that Attorney General Reno, President Clinton and every member of Congress just do this: Ask local police and prosecutors anywhere in the country what they think.



This image, which sums up the current state of urban forestry in Puerto Rico, is from a tree-planting guide that the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico provides free for the asking. Those who are interested in a copy of the helpful pamphlet can reach the group at 722-5834.