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Eco-Logic

On the road to nowhere: The other side of Route 191

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"

There's a catch to taking the road less traveled. It's rarely as convenient as the main road. This holds true for the portion of Route 191 that runs through the southern portion of the Caribbean National Forest, known popularly as El Yunque. While the northern end of Route 191 boasts numerous trails and tourist attractions, soon to include a \$30 million-dollar visitor center, the southern end lies dormant.

Most of the road here was closed off about 23 years ago after a series of landslides left it covered with thousands of tons of soil from the surrounding mountains. This has left the people on the south side somewhat bereft of the benefits that the rain forest brings to its northern neighbors.

Not surprisingly, then, some of them are clamoring for attention. And some of these people, particularly in Naguabo, imagine that reforging Route 191 would put them on the road to riches . . . or at least make it more likely for tourists and their spending to journey southward.

But there's more than one way to earn an honest dollar, and there are indications that plowing through the landslides that closed the road in 1970 to make way for vehicle traffic would backfire. There are gentler ways to improve economic conditions on the forest's south end.

Forest officials are considering various alternatives, to be presented in a forest management plan some time this spring, said Pablo Cruz, supervisor of the Caribbean National Forest. Cruz says he welcomes the Department of Highways and Public Works plan to conduct an environmental impact statement on the possibility of reopening Route 191, as long as it considers alternatives as well.

It was the lack of an environmental impact statement that tipped the scales in favor of keeping the road closed during legal maneuvers last year. U.S. District Chief Judge Gilberto Gierbolini ruled in



When teachers strike, as they did in 1989, above, and as they're threatening to do now, many people suffer. In addition to the children missing out on school, there are probably a million par form or another, by a María Padilla points c

How a school strike another group of 'ex

Parents factor into the economic disruption caused by school closures



MARÍA PADILLA Commentary

One fact of life educators and the administration must face in the debate over school reform is that everybody is an expert on the subject.

Unlike earlier in the century, when only an elite few attended school, now nearly everyone does.

Whether a student graduates makes little difference. A person who has sat in a classroom for any length of time knows something about the process of formal education.

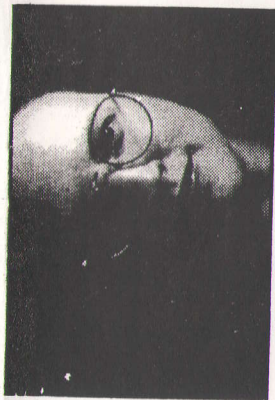
Because schools have become the means of socialization in our society, the experience is now universal. Even those parents who never

attended school know what it's about through their children, and through direct contact with teachers and other school personnel.

Similarly, those parents who haven't been to school in a long while are brought up to date through their children.

Whether educators like it or not, everybody is an expert. But some, like

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STAR file photo
of foot trails winding
the one above in the
National Forest, the
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From Page 31

El Yunque

April 1992 that the road could not be rebuilt without an impact statement.

Perhaps Cruz's acceptance of the highways department's plan stems from a confidence that an impact statement would point to the dangers of reopening the road.

These troubles are spelled out in several documents prepared by the U.S. Geological Survey. USGS found that more than three-fifths of the 173 landslides mapped in El Yunque were associated with highway construction. Also, nearly two-thirds of those charted were in the southern half of the forest.

The field work for the study was conducted just before the September 1989 arrival of Hurricane Hugo, which caused another 200 landslides, although generally smaller ones, according to USGS open file report 89-257.

The forest itself isn't the only thing at risk during a landslide; at least 127 people died from a landslide in Ponce during October 1985, as pointed out in another USGS study by Matthew C. Larsen and Angel J. Torres-Sanchez. The study found that even heavy rains of short duration pose landslide risks for the soil type common in El Yunque.

Walking along an approximately two-mile stretch of the southern portion of Route 191 on Labor Day, it was easy to picture more landslides in the making. Beyond the barrier that prevents traffic from passing, there are places in the road where the mountainside has begun to erode underneath the asphalt. It's only a matter of time before the ground gives way, and the vibrations from passing traffic would surely speed up this process.

Cruz has other types of traffic in mind for this road — bicycle and pedestrian. He envisions allowing people to drive in to picnic area along the route that would take in one of the many beautiful views, with a couple of short footpaths for hikers to enjoy. Behind this would be a smaller version of Route 191 for cyclists to cruise and walkers to amble.

Those who think of barren hills of dirt when the word "landslide" comes to mind may have trouble imagining a pleasant visit to this site. I admit that I expected to be confronted by an indomitable wall of soil when I started down the road.

But the trail was a testament to nature's ability to recuperate, and to ignore human undertakings.

The walk offers a chance witness the re-invasion of plant life in progress. On the side closest to the upward slope, where soil carried down by rain

sometimes comes to a rest, life begin its colonization. Moss grows in spots, sometimes accompanied by grasses. There are patches of mud that have come to rest in the road, many of them covered with a layer of bamboo leaves.

Leaves make a great compost, so the areas where they fall regularly and stay tend to become home to other plants. Purple-tinted coleus (*coître*) and wandering jew (*verguenza*) line the route in many places, with their presence often determining the width of the passage.

So the road goes on, sometimes wider, sometimes thinner, over the river and through the palm forest, until it abruptly tapers off into a foot trail. This is the first major landslide, now a hill in its own right. And it is beautiful, a thriving ecosystem that in some ways resembled the prairie of my native Illinois.

Those Midwestern prairies — the few that are left — often stretch on for miles. But here in El Yunque, the grasses fade away into forest again within a few meters of the trail. The road was nowhere to be seen after an initial glimpse, and I had the impression that it was at least several feet underground.

My companion and I followed the path, pausing to watch butterflies or check out a panoramic view. After a mile or so, the throat-clearing rumblings of the clouds behind us convinced us to head back. But the landslide map gives every reason to believe that this goes on for many miles, with perhaps an occasional peek at the road between verdant hills.

The rain forest clearly is healing itself from this road scar. To renew the ripping and tearing process again by forging a road, especially when conditions guarantee it can only be temporary, seems counterproductive.

Cruz seems to be thinking the same thing. And he goes one better — he and the team preparing the forest management plan are mulling over the possibility of closing off a portion of Route 191 on the north side. The area already receives about a million visitors a year, and it can only get more congested once the visitor center is completed across from the Catalina field office on the far north end.

Cruz, who cautioned he was thinking aloud, said Route 191 could be closed off where it meets Route 9966, with some type of public transportation system waiting to bring visitors the rest of the way to the recreation area.

This idea is worth exploring, as are plans to try to lure visitors to the south without re-constructing Route 191. It's certainly headed in a better direction than suggestions to again cleave the forest in two with a thoroughfare.

When it comes to traffic on both ends of this road, the less traveled, the better.