

# EPA Honors Work of Exceptional Puerto Rico Environmental Leaders <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EPA Honors Work of Exceptional Puerto Rico Environmental Leaders

(New York, N.Y. – April 23, 2014) The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today honored eight individuals and organizations from across Puerto Rico with ***Environmental Quality Awards*** for their achievements in protecting public health and the environment. EPA Regional Administrator Judith A. Enck presented the awards at a ceremony at EPA's

offices in Manhattan. Michelle DePass, former Assistant Administrator of the EPA Office of International and Tribal Affairs and currently Dean of the Milano School of International Affairs, Management and Urban Policy at the New School for Public Engagement in New York City, delivered the keynote address.

“Today we celebrate the exemplary work of people who work tirelessly to protect the environment and give their time and energy to create a cleaner and healthier future for us all,” said EPA Regional Administrator Judith A. Enck. “Their extraordinary contributions serve as an inspiration to all who strive for a more sustainable environmental future.”

The EPA presents Environmental Quality Awards annually during Earth Week to individuals, businesses, government agencies, environmental and community-based organizations and members of the media in EPA Region 2, which covers New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and eight federally-recognized Indian Nations. The awards recognize significant contributions to improving the environment and public health in the previous calendar year. For information about the Environmental Quality Awards in EPA Region 2, visit <http://www.epa.gov/region02/eqa/> [2].

**The Environmental Quality Award winners from Puerto Rico (in alphabetical order) are:**

**Melba Ayala-Nieves**

## **Excursiones ECO**

Excursiones ECO is a tour business owned and operated by one of the Martin Peña Canal community leaders, Melba Ayala-Nieves. The canal is a severely polluted waterway in the heart of the San Juan, Puerto Rico metropolitan area and tourists are encouraged to take an active role in its cleanup. Visitors usually leave the tours feeling a sense of commitment and social responsibility for the caño. Melba serves as a voice of her community in inspiring tourists to think about ways in which they can help protect the environment.

## **Pedro Carrión Huertas**

Pedro Carrion Huertas is the leader of a Catano, Puerto Rico based NGO, Corredor del Yaguazo. For the last two decades, he has helped create environmental stewardship programs geared toward the protection of Las Cucharillas Marsh, which is part of the San Juan Bay Estuary. Pedro helped initiate the reforestation of the marsh. Doctoral candidates from various universities use the marsh as a live laboratory under Pedro's guidance. He has played a vital role in helping to preserve one of the few wetlands in the metropolitan area.

## **The Center for Environmental Education, Conservation and Interpretation**

### **InterAmerican University of Puerto Rico, Metropolitan Campus**

The Center for Environmental Education, Conservation and Interpretation offers community-based education activities and training that promote environmental responsibility among students, technicians, professionals and the community in general. CECIA has developed several projects to increase students' awareness and knowledge about environmental issues through research techniques, problem-solving and critical thinking hands-on experiences. These efforts provided 70 students with research skills to make informed decisions and take responsible actions toward environmental issues as volunteers.

## **The Coalition for the Northeast Ecological Corridor**

Last April, the Coalition for the Northeast Ecological Corridor protected 3,000 acres of coastal ecosystem between the Puerto Rico towns of Luquillo and Fajardo. The area is home to over 900 species and is the second most important Leatherback Turtle nesting beach in the U.S. The area was under threat from development when coalition members began to take action to protect the area 15 years ago. Now the coalition is working to help develop a management plan for the reserve.

## **Estudiantes Dispuestos a la Restauración Ambiental del Caño Martín Peña (EDRA)**

EDRA was founded in 2012 by a group of young leaders active in the group of eight communities surrounding Puerto Rico's Caño Martín Peña and the ENLACE project. EDRA focuses on developing and implementing environmental awareness campaigns and sustainable agricultural development efforts in and around the communities surrounding the Martín Peña Canal. EDRA is also part of the Urban Oasis School Program, which facilitates the use and development of green areas and the creation of programs for solid waste management in schools.

## **Organización Pro Ambiente Sustentable**

The Organization for a Sustainable Environment's mission is to provide communities with the knowledge to promote good environmental practices based on sustainable actions. Since its founding in 2005, OPAS has successfully implemented three programs in Puerto Rico – Eco Schools, Blue Flag and Green Key. OPAS has certified 19 Eco Schools in the Commonwealth. Six hotels and two tourist attractions have been certified under the Green Key program, which requires that they meet a heightened level of environmental criteria. Blue Flag certification has been achieved by eight beaches and two marinas.

## **Municipality of Rincón**

Rincon is a “surfer's” paradise and home to Puerto Rico’s first marine reserve. Working with a team from the 2013 EPA Region 2 Leadership Development Program, Rincon became the first municipality in Puerto Rico to create an ordinance banning plastic bags. The ordinance carries with it a compliance and enforcement and an educational component that extends to schools, businesses and the public. The project has the support of the Puerto Rico Environmental Quality Board, the Solid Waste Management Authority and the Puerto Rico Tourism Board.

## **Sociedad Eco-Ambiental**

## **Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras**

Sociedad Eco-Ambiental is an environmental student organization established at the University of Puerto Rico Rio Piedras campus in 1993. This organization creates environmental educational events, promotes responsible recreation in natural spaces and conducts environmental research. Additionally, this organization has several committees dedicated to various subjects: educating about proper waste disposal on beaches, recycling efforts, garden maintenance and reforestation and the “No More Bottles” committee. The latter is a school-wide effort to encourage students to use reusable bottles, which has grown in popularity each year since its introduction.

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