

Citizen Science: We are all scientists ^[1]

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By: Mónica I. Feliú Mójer El Nuevo Día ^[3] Scientific questions arise from curiosity, an innate quality of all humans. You may think that only scientists can find the answers to scientific questions. Then you should know that with citizen science we can all contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge. Through citizen science, the public can put their curiosity at the service of scientists, by helping them “do” science —collecting or analyzing data— that would be otherwise hard for them to carry out. Recently, three citizen scientists from Germany and the United States discovered a radio pulsar, a type of star that emits electromagnetic radiation. These citizens lent their computers to the Einstein@Home project, which uses the computers of thousands of volunteers to analyze astronomical data. The radio pulsar PSR J2007+2722 was found in data collected at the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico and became the first citizen science discovery to be published in the prestigious scientific magazine *Science*. An example of citizen science in Puerto Rico takes place at the Hacienda La Esperanza, a 2265-acre estate and former sugar cane plantation in northern Puerto Rico, managed by the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust (PRCT).

Through PRCT's Citizen Scientist Program, volunteers explore and observe the flora, fauna, geography and hydrography of the only coastal forest in Northern Puerto Rico. By learning and creating awareness on the importance of this coastal ecosystem, the Citizen Scientist Program helps conservation efforts for this historical place. This kind of community science gives ordinary citizens the opportunity to help scientists around the world, while learning about nature and the importance of science in our everyday life in a fun way. Although citizen science has been around for a long time, the Internet has revolutionized it. Projects like www.ScienceforCitizens.net [4] bring together the millions of citizen scientists in the world; the thousands of potential projects offered by researchers, organizations, and companies; and the resources, products, and services that enable citizens to pursue and enjoy these activities. On this website, avid citizen scientists, such as bird watchers from around the world, can find programs like eBird where they can record the presence of a bird in a particular geographical area. This valuable information is then shared with a network of ecologists, ornithologists and other scientists that study bird migration patterns or work on preserving endangered bird species. Citizen science not only helps scientists, but it can empower communities to contribute to the protection of ecological gems such as the Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC) on Puerto Rico's eastern shoreline. The Northeastern Corridor encompasses 3,200 acres of forests, wetlands, beaches, coral communities and a bioluminescent lagoon. The Corridor's beaches are the third most important nesting sites for the leatherback turtle, the largest marine turtle, currently an endangered species. Aware of their endangered status, local residents and other citizen scientists are always eager to protect leatherback turtle nests' and alert local park rangers when they see a leatherback laying eggs or the little turtles emerging from their nests. Also, the Corridor is home to over 50 endemic and endangered species. Earlier this year, citizen scientists spotted the piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*), a critically endangered bird, in the Corridor's beaches. This kind of information, provided by these citizen scientists is extremely valuable for the development of preservation programs for threatened habitats like the Northeastern Corridor, the Northern Karst and the Caño (channel) Martín Peña, to mention a few. Citizen science is a fun way to learn science by "doing" science. With it, you look at your surroundings from a different perspective while you contribute to the scientific understanding of the world around you. The author is a doctoral student at Harvard University and a member of Ciencia Puerto Rico (www.cienciapr.org [5]).

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