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## NYC Parks Deployment to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria

March 20, 2018 by [Michelle Sutton](#)



A Puerto Rican flag painted on the roots of an uprooted tree in Old San Juan.  
Photos Courtesy NYC Parks

*In this post, NYC Parks Arborists Jessica Einhorn and Brooke Costanza answer questions about their deployment to San Juan, Puerto Rico from October 29-November 13, 2017. They were the first two NYC Parks arborists to be deployed to Puerto Rico following the devastation of Hurricane Maria, which made landfall on September 20, 2017 with sustained winds of 155 mph.*

*In addition to causing widespread human misery, Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc on the Island's trees. A total of eight teams of New York City employees traveled to Puerto Rico to help out; each group was assembled based on what San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz's staff identified as a priority. Einhorn and Costanza performed forestry inspections with other NYC Parks staff and the NYC Office of Emergency Management.*

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NYC Parks Arborists and story authors Brooke Costanza (left) and Jessica Einhorn (right)

### Were your assessments guiding the work of arborists coming right behind you?

**Jessica Einhorn and Brooke Costanza:** Absolutely they were. When we first arrived, it was apparent that the local government resources were stretched very thin, so we were tasked with creating our own plan of action on the spot. We started surveying the largest parks and created reports with recommendations for necessary tree work. After speaking with local Parks staff, we sent for additional NYC Parks' arborists, climbers and pruners to help carry out this recommended work, as there were not adequate resources and expertise on the Island. At the end of our deployment, the arborists who took over continued inspecting trees throughout the City of San Juan.



A large *Ficus benjamina* in Old San Juan that was uprooted during Hurricane Maria. Mayor Yulín Cruz had a special affinity for this tree, which was eventually removed by the last team of NYC Parks tree crews.

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### What areas of the Island did you focus on?

**JE and BC:** We worked exclusively within the jurisdiction of the City of San Juan. We were brought down to the Island as part of a sister city partnership. Mayor Cruz's office instructed us to focus on two of the largest public parks in the city, Parque Luis Muñoz Marín and Parque Central, and also to assist in making recommendations for historical trees located in Old San Juan. When we finished surveying the larger parks, we moved on to smaller parks and public spaces.



NYC Parks Arborists with staff from Luis Muñoz Marín Park, following a tutorial on proper debris removal, tree pruning, and an overview of Level 1 tree assessments.

### What other arborists were involved?

**JE and BC:** We used the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) as a resource to search for arborists in the Miami area who could provide recommendations on the tropical trees in San Juan. We were grateful for the timely response of many. In particular, Miami-based consulting arborist Jeff Shimonski was extremely generous with his time and knowledge.

### What was a “typical” day like in terms of what you did and what the conditions were?

**JE and BC:** We worked pretty much every daylight hour during our deployment. We would start in the morning by convening with the rest of our team—comprised mainly of employees from the NYC Office of Emergency Management—for a daily briefing and rundown of goals. From there, we would drive to the various parks that needed surveying. Driving around San Juan was challenging due to the power outages, which caused traffic mayhem due to the nonfunctioning streetlights.

Upon arrival at the parks, we would meet with local park staff, who were some of the most wonderful people we met on our journey. We surveyed the entirety of both large parks, performing level 2 inspections on every tree, based off of ISA methodology. From our observations, we very quickly came to realize that almost every tree needed attention of some sort: either pruning or removal. Most of the trees we encountered were heavily damaged by the Hurricane.

As we worked, we had to recalibrate the decisions and assessments we were accustomed to making in NYC. Being foresters working in a temperate urban environment, we are keenly aware of our aging tree population, and how it responds to different weather events. We quickly identified that, although the trees were heavily damaged by the Hurricane Maria, many could remain due to the tropical climate that allows the trees to regenerate foliage and respond at a faster rate than in a temperate climate. Similar damage to trees in New York City might require removal.

We would sweat it out in hot and humid conditions, and take a break for lunch, which wasn't always the easiest to figure out. Due to the extensive power outages, only a select number of restaurants were able to



May 3, 2018

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serve food with the help of generators. In the afternoon, we would return to the parks to continue our inspections.



San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz (center) with “Team 6” of New York City Employees, who were deployed to Puerto Rico to assist with recovery following Hurricane Maria. Team 6 was comprised of Employees from NYC Emergency Management, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and NYC Parks and Recreation.

We were working in the parks while they were still closed to the public due to the safety hazards of downed and hanging limbs and immense amounts of debris covering practically every square inch of the park. The population of iguanas seemed to take advantage of the peace and quiet, and we had to take care not to surprise the reptiles while sounding the trees. We definitely gave a few quite a fright, as they did us. We would work until dusk, when we would rejoin the rest of our team, who were stationed at a local sports arena, the Roberto Clemente Coliseum, for an end-of-day briefing. We would then return to our hotel, seek out some dinner, and crash hard!

#### **How did you manage the mental stress of seeing so much devastation?**

**JE and BC:** Being around local Puerto Ricans and seeing how high their spirits were, even after their island was devastated by a hurricane, was the biggest morale lift for us. It was certainly difficult to see all of the destruction and hardships that the locals were dealing with, but their positive attitudes made us hopeful that the Island will recover. We have nothing but the highest regard for the Puerto Rican people and their unbelievable resiliency. As for the trees, they seemed to be almost as resilient as their human neighbors. After being completely defoliated during the storm, most every tree had a relatively full canopy by the time we arrived, one month later.

#### **Did you know all of the species going on, or did you have to learn them on the fly?**

**JE and BC:** Although we received little notice before deploying for the Island, we were able to acquire a few resources to help us identify and assess tropical trees. When we first arrived, we were paired with Benji, a local agronomist who worked at Parque Luis Muñoz Marín, to get us associated with the tree species in San Juan. We were familiar with a few, but none of the trees we encountered in Puerto Rico were species or even genera we work with in the temperate Northeast. However, towards the second half of our 15-day tour, we felt vastly more comfortable providing recommendations for tree care in the San Juan parks.



Another large *Ficus benjamina* just beyond the walls of Old San Juan that was topped, righted, and cabled after the storm took it down.

#### **What were the patterns you observed in damage by species?**

**JE and BC:** There were a few species that seemed to sustain the most damage. *Ficus benjamina* tends to grow shallow roots and has a tremendous sail effect due to the large canopy and presence of aerial roots. Many were uprooted or mangled and required removal. The population of *Ceiba* trees were the slowest to regenerate foliage, but they seemed to have comparatively little structural damage. There were many *Erythrina poeppigiana* that seemed to be suffering before the hurricane hit and were mostly destroyed by the time we arrived to inspect them. We recommended that only one cluster of that species should remain, but on the condition that they were isolated with landscape fencing of some sort to eliminate any potential human targets. We observed that the genus *Calophyllum* had, amazingly, little to no damage and was one of the few tree species that held its foliage throughout the storm.

#### **What was a highlight, and what was a challenge?**

**JE and BC:** Again, we were astounded by the resiliency of both the people and the trees on the island of Puerto Rico. We found the emergency response experience to be rewarding, despite many hours of hard work. For both of us, the people we encountered were by far the highlight of our trip. Even despite some language barriers, we forged special relationships with the incredible local parks staff, many of whom had been working without a day off since the hurricane hit.

Our biggest challenges were due to the lack of available resources. Acquiring a bucket truck and chainsaws for our crews of climber/pruners was a struggle, so our crews improvised and made good use of their ropes and harnesses and were able to boost production when NYC Parks shipped down several chainsaws.



NYC Parks Arborist Brooke Costanza, sounding a tree in Luis Muñoz Marín Park.

### Have you been back?

**JE and BC:** No, but we both would love to get back and visit the parks now that they have reopened to the public.

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