April 28, 2010

Hon. Gary Locke
Secretary of Commerce
Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue Northwest
Washington, DC 20230-0002

Hon. Ken Salazar
Secretary of the Interior
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W., Room 7229
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Locke and Secretary Salazar:

We are writing today to ask you to protect the Northeast Ecological Corridor of Puerto Rico by designating it as critical habitat for the leatherback sea turtle. The Corridor is one of the most remarkable of Puerto Rico's enchanting natural landscapes. Its 3,000 acres between Luquillo and Fajardo contain one of the last undeveloped coastlines in Puerto Rico, and host the main island's largest and most important nesting beach for the endangered leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), including the second most important nesting site for this species in U.S. jurisdiction. On February 22, 2010, the Sierra Club petitioned[1] your agencies to protect the Corridor as critical habitat for the leatherbacks. We ask you to grant that petition.

A broad national coalition supports conserving the Corridor. The undersigned organizations include the National Puerto Rican Coalition, which has represented the Puerto Rican community for over thirty years, Comité Noviembre, which brings together most of the oldest and most prestigious Puerto Rican organizations representing the Puerto Rican community living in the U.S. mainland, the Puerto Rico-based Coalition for the Northeast Ecological Corridor, with more than 11,000 members, which includes businesspeople and fishermen, surfers and hikers, tourism industry workers and conservationists, and the Sierra Club, which is the largest and oldest grassroots environmental group in the United States. Signatories to this letter are international conservation leaders, and include winners of the Goldman Environmental Award. We are all united in our belief that Puerto Rico's economic and environmental future depends upon conserving places like the Corridor.

[1] The petition is attached, and is also available online at: http://www.puertorico.sierraclub.org/ppt/CriticalHabitatNEC.pdf. In an appendix to this letter, we share some of the most important data from that petition.

The protection federal designation provides would require scientific experts in your agencies to ensure that many forms of development do not damage or destroy the Corridor. That federal engagement will move Puerto Rico towards a brighter economic future, rooted in locally-owned businesses, sustainable development, and ecotourism. With federal protection in place, Luquillo and Fajardo could develop into "gateway" communities for both the Corridor and to El Yunque National Rainforest. Already, the Corridor communities host thousands of tourists and locals every year for an annual leatherback turtle festival, which generates tourism revenue. With continued protection, this green future will blossom.

Last October, Governor Luis Fortuño, eliminated the designation of the area as a nature reserve. The Corridor is now at risk. Construction of mega-resorts and luxury housing in the Corridor, as some have proposed, would be detrimental for people and turtles alike. Huge resorts often cut off neighboring communities' coastal access, close popular fishing, surfing, swimming, and camping areas, pay low wages, and send most profits off the island. Basic principles of environmental justice and sustainable development require rejecting that path.

The scientific case for protecting the Corridor, as the Sierra Club's petition explains in great detail, and which must drive your decisions, is very strong, including that:

- The Fish and Wildlife Service has stated in formal comments and biological opinions that no other beach in mainland Puerto Rico can sustain a large leatherback nesting population;
- Hundreds of leatherbacks have nested in the Corridor every year for at least the past decade.
- Your Departments have protected leatherback beaches based on just a single year of data, much less the decades of documented use in the Corridor.
- Without habitat protection, this valuable area may be damaged or destroyed.

The extraordinary scientific record here provides strong support for protection. Saving the nesting beaches and nearshore waters of the Corridor for leatherbacks will also help preserve a brighter future for Puerto Rico. The leadership and support of your Departments is critical in ensuring a positive future for the Island and its residents.

Sincerely,

Angel Iglesias-Santana
President
Asociación de Comerciantes y Profesionales de Fajardo (ACOMPRO)

Miguel Dávila
President
Asociación de Pescadores de Maternillo y Mansión del Sapo de Fajardo/ Puerto Rico Fishermen Federation

Angel Berríos,
President
Asociación de Residentes del Barrio Juan Martín de Luquillo

Carlos Cabrero
Puerto Rico Professional Surfing Champion 2008-2009, 2009-2010
Puerto Rico Professional Surfing Association

Alexis Massol-González
President
Casa Pueblo
2002 Goldman Environmental Award Recipient

Peter Galvin
Conservation Director
Center for Biological Diversity

Manuel Valdes-Pizzini, Ph.D.
Director
Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the Littoral Zone, University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez

Abel Vale Nieves
President
Ciudadanos del Karso
2009 USDA Forest Service International Institute of Tropical Forestry Conservation Award Recipient

Teresa Santiago
Chair
Comité Noviembre

Rosa Hilda Ramos
Spokesperson
Comunidades Unidas Contra la Contaminación (CUCCo)
2008 Goldman Environmental Award Recipient

S.E.R. Mons. Eusebio Ramos-Morales
Bishop
Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao, Puerto Rico, Roman Catholic Church

Scott Edwards
Director of Latin America & Caribbean
Environmental Defense Fund

John Hocevar
Oceans Campaign Director
Greenpeace USA

Lillian Rodríguez-López
President
The Hispanic Federation

Suleika Cabrera
President
Institute for the Puerto Rican-Hispanic Elderly, New York

Luis Jorge Rivera-Herrera
Environmental Scientist and Planner, Iniciativa para un Desarrollo Sustentable
2007 USDA Forest Service International Institute of Tropical Forestry
Conservation Award Recipient

Hector Sanchez
Executive Director
Labor Council for Latin American Advancement

Juan E. Rosario
Spokesperson
Misión Industrial
2004 Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World Award Recipient / 1995 Alston-Bannerman Fellow / 2004 Distinguished Graduate Student from the University of Puerto Rico's Medical Sciences Campus, Graduate School of Public Health

Anna Rosario
President
National Conference of Puerto Rican Women

Rafael Cancel-Vazquez
Executive Director
National Environmental Law Association (ANDA)
Echoinggreen 2008 Fellow / 2007 Judy Weightman Memorial Public Interest Award from the American Bar Association / 2003 Truman Scholar

Rafael Fantauzzi
Chair
National Latino Coalition on Climate Change
President and CEO
National Puerto Rico Coalition, Inc.

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Sheila Ward
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President
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Jorge Acosta-Bonilla
President
Puerto Rico Mountain Bike Commission, affiliated to the Puerto Rico Cycling Federation

Gabriel Lugo
President
Puerto Rican Ornithological Society, Inc. (SOPI)

Anselmo De Portu-Hamawi, LPP
President
Puerto Rico Planning Society

Juan Palerm
President
Puerto Rico Surfing Federation

Angel Sosa
President
Sierra Club, Puerto Rico Chapter

Michael Brune
Executive Director
Sierra Club

Jim Moriarty
CEO
Surfrider Foundation

Rvdo. Edward Rivera-Santiago
General Pastor
United Evangelical Church of Puerto Rico

Robert Kennedy, Jr., Esq.
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Waterkeeper Alliance

cc:

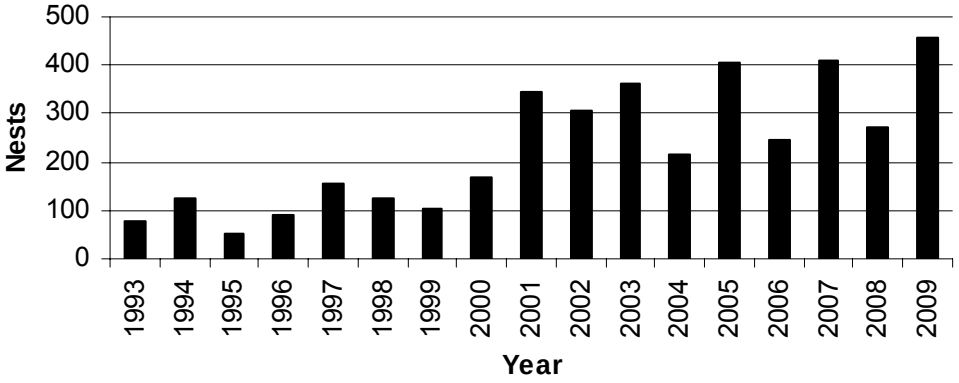
Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW, Room 5128
Washington, DC 20230

Rowan Gould
Acting Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Appendix: Evidence from the Corridor

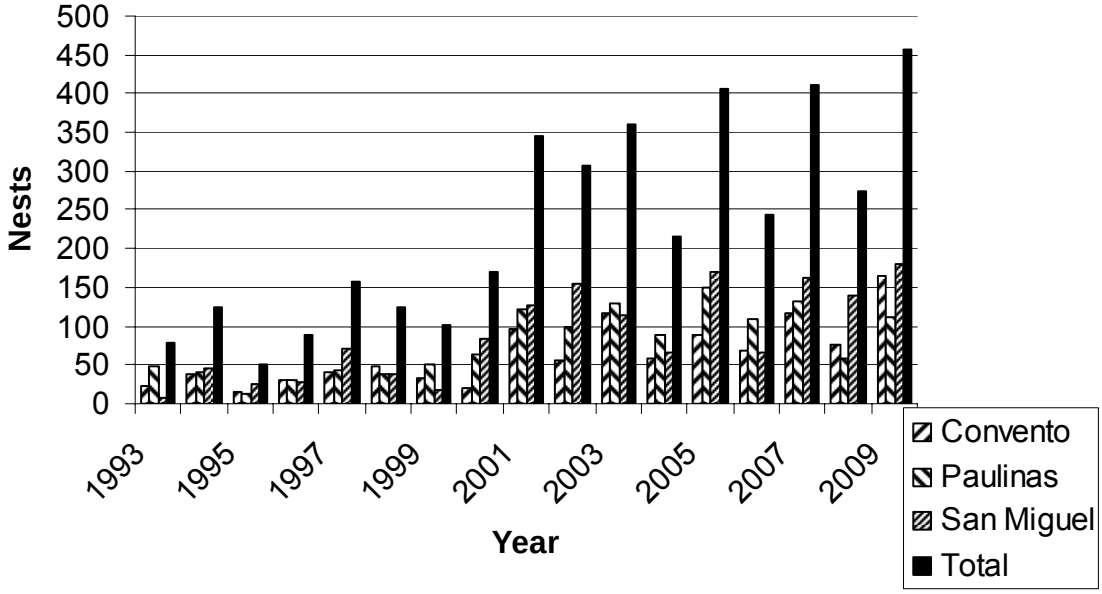
The Sierra Club's petition provides a detailed discussion of the science supporting including the Corridor in the leatherback's critical habitat; we include a brief recap here. The data shows that the Northeast Ecological Corridor is becoming a steadily more important nesting site:

Chart 1: Nests on Northeast Ecological Corridor Beaches (1993-2009)



It also shows that this increased activity is spread across each of the beaches of the Corridor:

Chart 2: Nests on Each Northeast Ecological Corridor Beache (1993-2009)



Finally, the petition includes detailed maps of the Corridor, showing how it maintains a green and undeveloped coastline for turtles and people alike:

It is time for federal action to protect this critically important landscape.