Why Puerto Rico?

Being born and raised in the Western United States, the only mention of Puerto Rico is in the news following a natural disaster. In 2017, Hurricane Maria took the lives of nearly 3000 people, causing an outflow of Puerto Ricans leaving their homelands to mainland USA, with a 17 percent increase of Puerto Ricans in mainland U.S. from October 2017 to January 2018 (Alexander 2019). Knowing that Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, I wanted to know if the lives of Puerto Ricans are similar to mine, or if it would be a reflection of the stark painting Puerto Rico had been painted in.

Objectives

Prior to going to Puerto Rico, I had a few objectives I wanted to accomplish. Foremost, I wanted to interact with as many Puerto Ricans residents and get insight into the culture. I also wanted to get a look into agricultural practive, particularly because of the lack of U.S. support. Lastly, I aimed to get an idea of what Puerto Ricans thought of us, Americans.

Culture

Immediately upon arrival, I was welcomed with blistering heat and a warm embrace from the locals. Hospitality is an understatement. I, a total stranger, was immediately treated as though I was a life-long friend.

While touring San Juan, something that struck me was the lack of animosity towards colonialism. The sight of a proudly displayed Christopher Columbus statue struck me, as this is something that is actively being dismantled on mainland U.S. I believe this to be party to the fact that most Puerto Ricans have a lineage of roughly 10-15 percent Taino, with the rest being primarily European and African blood (Schroeder et al. 2016). To hate colonization would in part be hating themselves, and the Puerto Rican people are proud to be who they are.

One of our faculty members, Elizabeth Daly, gave us a “tour” of El Morro in San Juan that was used to protect the island in the 14th and 15th century. Oregon sure doesn’t have that!

Reflection

Having spent a week in Puerto Rico, it became apparent that my view of Puerto Rico is heavily associated with the aftermath of natural disaster. However, not much of what is currently going on is touched on. It is rare you here about what is going on in Puerto Rico, and my trip opened my eyes to the resilience of the residents and eagerness to continue building upon their country. Puerto Ricans are proud people, and they have truly showed me what it means to be driven and resilient. Through storms and governmental mismangement, they have maintained nimble and able to pivot towards making progress. From my experiences and interactions, it is apparent that Puerto Rico will soon be in the news for research breakthroughs. I look forward to using my research to connect the important relationship between natural resources and anthropogenic interactions, and how by taking care of our resources we in turn take care of ourselves. To say I am inspired is an understatement.

Agriculture

One of our trip-hosted opportunities that resonated with me most was our visit to Jose Rafael Medina’s banana farm. Here, we were greeted with coffee and warm smiles from him and his wife. We followed him down to a barren plot of land, in which we helped clear debris in preparation for planting juvenile bananas. His dedication to his Finka, and resiliency, encapsulated the Puerto Rican mindset. He made it clear to me he is easy-going, but not a pushover. Rafael shared some consejos that touched me, and I am beyond grateful to have him share them with me overlooking is property.

We were also able to interact with students and faculty at INTERbarranquitas and learn about ongoing research projects looking at spirulina, a type of algae, that is full of protein and is being used as a novel research species to help with potential cell-damage prevention.

References:


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