

V.I.D.A.S Public Comment CRTF 2015

My name is Mariola Laureano Rojas I am from grupo V.I.D.A.S. and this is our public comment, I would like to thank the task force for providing us with the opportunity to present our work in this event and let us speak in behalf of the north coast community. We've been recognized with outstanding community level participation developing the Vega Baja-Manati submarine gardens natural reserve.

Looking back at the last coral reef task force meeting, seven years ago, with some exceptions things are relatively the same. This is due to the situation of a 161 permit law, named by the community environmental NGOs as gunpoint permit law. This eliminates the enforcement capability of regulatory agencies. The amendment 151 doesn't guarantee public participation. This means that the people don't have the standing to protect and defend the ecosystems that surround their communities. We have laws that can't be implemented or enforced due to the permit laws, this impacts greatly on traditionally under serve communities that are trying to protect, preserve and restore areas around them. I have noticed that this year the task force has focused a lot on involving the communities in different preservation and restoration projects, this cannot be achieved if there are laws that limit our legal and social standing in these situations. It's hard to understand how we advocate for peoples involvement in these projects, but at the same time deny them the right. Community founded projects have already been established for years. Sea turtle monitoring, mangrove and forest restoration, and coral reef restoration have been around for almost a decade. But these projects have been working with rare mini-grants and the very own member's public connections. Examples are: if we need tie wraps for the coral units, we go ask the owner of a hardware store for donations. If we need test tubes for water sampling, we go to the local laboratory, etc. All these community based projects have been working relatively on their own for a decade or more. And now we are facing a new threat for water bodies in Puerto Rico with projects like the Trash Incinerator in Arecibo, proposed by Energy Answers right in the Caño Tiburones Natural Reserve, which we have not yet concluded the effects of acidification it might have in the water. What we do know is that it affects the genetic chain of every living body and it provokes cancer.

Thanks to the efforts of the community groups supported by collaboration agreements with other NGO's the academia and the agencies like SAM (Marine Environment Society), CESAM (Students Chapter Marine Environment Society), UPR/CATEC (Center for Applied Tropical Ecology and Conservation), DNER (Department of Natural Environmental Resources). And also the help of NOAA Restoration Center.