
[Puerto Rico: Poetry that saved a forest](#)

Many years before there was scientific evidence of the destruction of the environment, the major artists and poets had noted the phenomenon in their essays, songs and poetry. In Puerto Rico, authors such as Enrique Laguerre, Abelardo Diaz Alfaro and Luis Llorens Torres denounced the destruction of our beautiful landscape and valuable natural resources, done in the name of "progress". The well-known poet, Juan Antonio Corretjer observed with great pain the overwhelming encroachment of concrete and the use of poisonous chemicals in Puerto Rican farming.

In his last years on earth, he used to entertain himself riding on horseback along the banks of the Encantado River in the village of Ciales. The Encantado River, although it is not very well known, is one of the great natural marvels of Puerto Rico. Along its stretches there are majestic cascades and pools that served as an inspiration to several of Corretjer's most well know and famous works.

In 1984, during one of his last travels on horseback along the river-banks, the coffee-grower, Tato Rodriguez asked him how he saw the plantation, and the poet answered "It is very nice, but there is no shade." In fact, all the leafy trees and exuberant vegetation had been razed to the ground to plant monoculture coffee, kept productive with the use of insecticides and synthetic fertilisers.

With the years, Don Tato and various colleagues of his became aware of the damage caused by this agriculture, described by some as "modern." "The populations of birds were depleted due to deforestation and the use of chemicals. Then the butterflies disappeared and I even saw lizards die because of the insecticides. This has made me aware: if this happens to these little animals, it must be doing me harm too."

Using Corritjers poetry in combination with the most advanced concepts of ecological farming and environmental protection, Don Tato together with other neighbours from Ciales and citizens from all over Puerto Rico established the Corretjer Forest. It is precisely at Don Tato's old coffee plantation where Corretjer used to ride. The Forest that offers visitors a spectacular view of almost vertical geological formations, consists of some 62 hectares.

The coffee plantation, invaded by weeds is being gradually reforested and replanted with the trees mentioned in Corretjer's poetry, and with numerous native species. "We have planted fruit trees, trees for timber and leguminous plants," we were told by Don Tato. "We have planted capá prieto, guaba, guamá, moca, caimito, maricao, citrus, maga, teak, ausubo, cedar, royal palm, moralón and carbonero."

It is not a simple plantation of trees but the creation of a complex, healthy and productive ecosystem, providing jobs and food and serving as an eco-tourist resource. Since the project for reforestation was started and the use of chemical products has been stopped, the birds and pollinating insects that had disappeared were returning. "The singing bees are already back, we had not seen them for a long time," Don Tato told us "the sanpedritos, which are like miniature parrots and only live in caves, had gone, but since we stopped using chemicals they are back. Once again we can hear the mucaros at night."

The Forest is a primordial educational project. Since last year, hundreds of children from schools in the different villages have visited it to plant trees and learn about environmental protection and Corretjer's poetry. All the trees are planted by children.

"We prepare educational modules inspired by Don Juan Antonio Corretjer and the landscape of Ciales which moved him to write those poems," explained Marta Nuñez, Don Tato's wife. "This is done with the endorsement of the superintendents and directors. We take the modules to schools, the children between kindergarten and fifth grade study them, and then we take them on excursions to the Forest to plant trees."

"It is wonderful to see the first grade boys and girls planting the trees so tenderly, that healthy, clean look, that has not yet been contaminated, and how they touch those roots."

"The children plant trees and I plant guineo which helps to control weeds and improves the soil," said Don Tato. "You talk to them of trees and what each one is good for. For example, the capa prieto, you explain what it is, how it flowers and what its timber can be used for."

Nuñez emphasised the importance of the cultural component of the Forest. "We have been gathering our folklore that was disappearing and which is not taught at schools. The experience is so good that when the teachers say good bye, they say 'please invite us back next year'."

By: Carmelo Ruiz Marrero, e-mail: carmelo_ruiz@yahoo.com , version adapted by the author of the article published in Claridad on 29 November 2002.