



What is a National Wildlife Refuge and Why has a Large Part of Vieques Been Designated as One?



USFWS

Aerial photo of Puerto Mosquito in eastern Vieques

What is a National Wildlife Refuge?

A national wildlife refuge is a place that provides habitat for threatened and endangered species, as well as for resident and migratory birds. A refuge offers an extraordinary opportunity for recreational activities that are compatible with wildlife. Depending on the refuge, these activities may include fishing, hunting, observing and photographing wildlife, environmental education and interpretation. A refuge also provides economic opportunities to communities through ecotourism, as long as the ecological integrity of the refuge's natural resources is maintained.

Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is one of the 542 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Refuges are found in all 50 states, as well as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. This national network of land and water is managed by the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service, with the mission of conserving, managing and, if possible, restoring fish, plants and wildlife as well as their habitats, for the benefit of present and future generations. The people of Vieques have a great opportunity to establish eco-tourism-related businesses that are compatible with Vieques National Wildlife Refuge!



Peter Dutton

Leatherback sea turtle

The National Wildlife Refuge System has a long and successful history in the United States. It began in 1903, thanks to then-President Teddy Roosevelt. That same year, the first refuge was established at Pelican Island, Florida. The year 2003 has marked a century of life for National Wildlife Refuge System.

The National Wildlife Refuge of Culebra is one of the oldest refuges in the United States. In 1909, it was established by then-President Teddy Roosevelt. Each year more than 50,000 marine birds of 13 species come to Culebra to raise their young.

Why has a large part of Vieques been designated as a national wildlife refuge?

In ecological terms, parts of the island are very valuable. Vieques has one of the best dry sub-tropical forests in the Caribbean. It is home to at least four endangered plant species and 10 endangered animal species.

Hot sands along the undeveloped beaches make Vieques an ideal site for the nests of the leatherback, hawksbill and green sea turtles. The sea grass beds along the coasts serve as a refuge and feeding ground for green turtles and West Indian manatees. We all have an opportunity to contribute to the conservation and restoration of unique natural resources!



USFWS

Tri-colored heron in a mangrove lagoon

Like various other U.S. military bases, the U.S. Navy base in Vieques was turned into a National Wildlife Refuge. The U.S. Congress has the authority to decide the future use of any military base that closes and is transferred to civilian hands. The law that governs the transfer of federal land on Vieques from military to civilian hands is called "The Floyd D. Spense Defense Authorization Act of 2001." You can find this law on the Internet at <http://www.defenselink.mil/dodgc/lrs/docs/PL107107.txt>.

Vieques National Wildlife Refuge was established two years ago when 3100 acres of land at the western end of the island was transferred to the Service to be managed as a refuge. In May 2003, the refuge grew dramatically in size, when the U.S. Navy transferred 14,500 additional acres.



USFWS

Refuge manager Oscar Díaz examines one of many unexploded ordnance



USFWS

The Navy transferred the former bombing range to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on May 1, 2003.

Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is one of nine refuges in the Caribbean. There are five in Puerto Rico: Cabo Rojo, Laguna Cartagena, Desecheo, Culebra and Vieques. The three in the U.S. Virgin Islands are Sandy Point, Buck Island and Green Cay. There is also a refuge on the island of Navassa, which is off the coast of Haiti.

How can you help to protect, manage and restore the natural resources of Vieques?

You can participate in and support conservation efforts to ensure that the refuge benefits both people and wildlife. Visit the refuge office to obtain information about the refuge and its habitats. Pass this information on to your family and to others in the community. Work with the Service to restore these habitats so they can be enjoyed by you and by future generations!

What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?

It is the principle federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats, for the benefit of present and future generations. The system of 542 National Wildlife Refuges that the Service manages covers more than 95 million acres of land and water.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, promotes and participates in the conservation and restoration of habitats and provides economic aid to other countries to support their conservation efforts.

To obtain more information please contact:

Oscar A. Díaz Marrero
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Vieques National Wildlife Refuge
PO Box 1527
Vieques, Puerto Rico 00765
Tel.: 787/741 2138
Fax: 787/741 2158
e-mail: fw4_rw_caribbean_island@fws.gov
<http://southeast.fws.gov/vieques>