



United States Department of Agriculture  
Forest Service  
FS-518

# CENTENNIAL MINI-HISTORIES OF THE FOREST SERVICE

First Government Forest Reserves in the Hemisphere

# 5 First Government Forest Reserves in the Hemisphere



Although 1991 marks the centennial of the creation of the forest reserves under the 1891 act, they were not the first government forest reserves in the New World. Fifteen years before President **Benjamin Harrison** (1833–1901) proclaimed the first Federal forest reserve (the Yellowstone Forest Reserve), the Spanish Crown had established reserves in Puerto Rico, then part of the Spanish Empire. The present Caribbean National Forest was formed from part of these lands.

Increased population pressure accelerated the rapid and widespread destruction of forest resources in Puerto Rico in the 19th century as forests were cleared for agricultural land, the economic base of the nation. The colonial wars of independence and illegal trade of timber led Governor **Salvador Melendez Bruno** to restrict the sale of wood considered important for naval use in 1816.

If military concerns led to the first consideration of forest depletion, it was the impact of farming that really led to conservation measures. Alarmed by the extent of deforestation resulting from government-sponsored farming, Governor **Miguel de la Torre** issued a decree in 1824 to stem harm to watersheds by planting trees—the first conservation law in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico remained under the dominion of Spain, which drafted the first comprehensive forest laws (1839) and set up forestry commissions that led to

the first islandwide forest inventory in 1843. These were directed by *ingenieros de montes* [forest engineers] for the *cuervo de montes* [forest corps], a department directed by the minister of public works and staffed by graduates of the Spanish forestry school.

Government protection of the forest resources eroded in the next decades as Spain's ability to fund distant programs faded along with its economic status. Yet, in 1876 King Alfonso XII strove to ensure continued conservation of soils and water quality and flows in Puerto Rico by creating forest reserves. Because the forests were sources of roofing material, fuelwood, and sawtimber for people, extractive regulations needed to be enforced by the *servicio de monteros* [forest service].

As part of the settlement of the Spanish–American War of 1898, control of Puerto Rico passed to the United States of America, which has governed it since then as a “commonwealth.” In 1903, the Luquillo Forest Reserve was declared and in 1907 it was named a national forest. (It has the distinction of being the only forest reserve that was not established under authority of the 1891 act. Instead, the reserve was established under a 1902 act of Congress that gave the President 1 year to reserve “Crown lands” ceded to the United States by Spain in the Treaty of 1898.) In 1935 it was renamed the Caribbean National Forest and additional land was purchased. In 1939, the Tropical Forest Experiment Station (now the Institute of Tropical Forestry) was established in Puerto Rico. Plans are underway to create an “international management model for tropical forests” in the only tropical ecosystem in the National Forest System—the Caribbean National Forest.