

RANGER CORPS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, PUERTO RICO

Comdr. RENIER MENDEZ, Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources, Puertra de Tierra, Puerto Rico 00906

Abstract: The Ranger Corps has clearly demonstrated its value and effectiveness in improving the management of Puerto Rico's Natural Resources. It has provided a climate of security and inspired respect islandwide to the general public, communities, government agencies and the judiciary branch. As human beings, the Rangers understanding of the idiosyncrasy of our Island together with their impartial and objective actions, have been able to gain the confidence of our citizens. We are aware that much more needs to be done and that more resources are necessary. Nevertheless we cannot but feel proud of our achievements in the 3 years of our existence.

Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Fish & Wildl. Agencies 34:664-666

Puerto Rico is a beautiful and fascinating island in the Caribbean Sea. Beautiful, thanks to nature and fascinating because of the historical forces that have shaped the Island's destiny. It has a 4 century heritage of Spanish language and culture, has been part of the U.S. since 1898, and its people are U.S. citizens since 1917. Shaped like a parallelogram, Puerto Rico measures 111 miles east-west and 36 miles northsouth.

Together with smaller off-shore island as well as keys and islets, Puerto Rico's land area is 3,435 square miles, roughly the size of Connecticut.

The Department of Natural Resources created in 1972 has the responsibility, among other things to watch for the conservation and proper use of the natural resources which belong to the people of Puerto Rico. To assure the observance of the Laws, administered by the Secretary of this Department, it has now available a Ranger Corps.

This organization created under Public Law No. 1, of June 29, 1977 is a civilian organization for law enforcement and it is expected that the Corps will be an effective instrument of the Secretary to prosecute through the administrative process or in court, the violators of the laws which he enforces.

Acknowledgement must be given to Governor Romero-Barcelo who became aware of the need for a Ranger Corps, took the necessary measures for its implementation and has given it his complete support, and to the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, Dr. Fred V. Soltero-Harrington, who has dedicated many working hours to establish the guidelines for an organization of high professional stature.

ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION

Funding for the Rangers Corps was initially provided by the Federal Department of Labor, through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973.

Additional funds were subsequently allocated by the government of Puerto Rico, clearly illustrating its commitment to improve management of the Natural Resources of Puerto Rico.

"Federal Coastal Management funds have also been used for personnel salaries and equipment contributing to the growth and development of the organizations."¹

¹Puerto Rico Coastal Management Program Report

BASIC OPERATIONAL DIVISION

For administrative and operational purposes the Rangers Corps is divided into 3 major divisions, Terrestrial, Marine and Aerial.

The Terrestrial Division consists of 7 Regions: Metropolitan (San Juan), North (Arecibo), Northwest (Aguadilla), West (Mayaguez), South (Ponce), Southwest (Guayama) and East (Humacao). In addition, the following 7 detachments have been created: 1) Detachment of Mona—which includes Monito and adjacent keys, 2) Detachment of Culebra—which includes Culebrita and adjacent keys and islets, 3) Detachment of Vieques—which includes adjacent keys and islets, 4) Detachment of Guajataca—within the Guajataca Forest, 5) Detachment of Toro Negro—within the Toro Negro Forest, 6) Detachment of Carite—within the Carite Forest and 7) Detachment of Boqueron—located in the southwestern part of the island, which includes adjacent keys and islets.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

It is generally acknowledged that the growth and development of the Corps has had marked influence in the management of Puerto Rico's natural resources.

In 1977 the Corps initiated its work with 5 rangers. In October of the same year, 80 rangers graduated from the Police Academy and the first group of commissioned officers graduated from the Lively Law Enforcement Center in Tallahassee, Florida. Actually the Corps consists of 280 rangers and there are 115 cadets undergoing training.

The increase in transport-communications equipment has been noteworthy; from 5 vehicles, 0 radios, 0 airplane and 2 boats in 1977, to 52 vehicles with radios, 18 boats and 2 airplanes. Despite this continued improvement more needs to be done and the arrival of 21 vehicles is expected before the end of this year.

Presently, new physical facilities are under construction to house the Ranger Corps Central Office and they will be completed by the end of the year.

CORPS ACTIVITIES

Activities performed by the rangers encompass multiple services within law enforcement, protection and community educational areas related to natural resources.

The enforcement action includes the observance of all the laws of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico referring to the conservation and development of the natural resources. Among them are: 1) extraction of the materials from the earth crust, 2) hunting, 3) fishing, 4) sand, gravel and rock, 5) constructions on the litoral zone or mangrove swamps, 6) wildlife of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, 7) forests of Puerto Rico, 8) conservation, development and use of the water resources of Puerto Rico, 9) prevention of floods and conservation of beaches and rivers, 10) conservation and development of Culebra and 11) conservation of coral reefs or its components.

Special mention must be made of Mona Island, "which is a limestone tableland surrounded by cliffs and interrupted sporadically by bands of beach. The island is uninhabited; its flora and fauna include a large number of endemic species and its principal value is as a natural reserve".² Due to the fact that it is located far away from the coast of Puerto Rico, the Ranger Corps represents various agencies, both from the state and federal government, in charge of the observance of the law and public order.

EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY SERVICES

The Corps relates to the communities in many ways. First, it has an islandwide program

²Puerto Rico Coastal Management Program Report

of counselling and education to help make the general public aware of the need to protect our natural resources. When a violation occurs, the Corps issues initially a warning citation which usually includes an orientation to the violator. When a second violation by the same party occurs, the citation is handled, administratively or judicially.

We have spot announcements on T.V. and movie theaters prepared by the Department showing how the general public and the Corps can help to protect the natural resources of the island.

The Corps assist in conferences or activities of the Department of Natural Resources. It also offers conferences and audio-visual presentations of educational material to all school levels, civic and private organizations.

TRAINING PROGRAM

To increase the efficiency level of the Corps and improve personnel capability, a training section was organized in 1979, at central level. Its mission is to organize and plan performance oriented training for all units.

All personnel receive training as law enforcement officers in a 12-week program by the Police Academy of Puerto Rico, in coordination with the Corps Training Unit.

Commissioned and non-commissioned officers undergo a 5-week training course at the Lively Law Enforcement in Tallahassee.

Training for selected rangers is also conducted with the help of the following state and federal agencies:

1) Wildlife Officer Training Academy in Florida, Wildlife Law Enforcement, Florida Game and Fish Commission. (4-week training for commissioned officers)

2) Law enforcement training for boat patrol units with the U.S. Coast Guard, (2-week training program)

3) Law enforcement training for boat patrol units with the Florida Marine Patrol, Department of Natural Resources, Florida. (1-week training program)

4) Law Enforcement and Recreation Institute: Michigan State University. (1-week training program)

5) Park Ranger Institute, Michigan State University.

OPERATIONS

Land

The average mileage covered by vehicle is 3,100 miles per month. During the past year the land patrol units have been involved in 2,315 interventions.³

Water

One 41' Rachel Carson, one 31' Bertran Sardinera, two 28 foot Bertrams—The Sabanera and the Gacela are used for coast patrolling purposes. Records indicate "the boats have been used for approximately 1,300 hours during the past years and have been involved in approximately 390 interventions".⁴

Air

The airplanes are used primarily for patrolling. Records for the past year demonstrate, "out of a total of approximately 640 flying hours 384 hours are approximately 61 percent were devoted to patrolling"⁵ The remaining hours were devoted to Research—8 percent, Culebra Management—10 percent, and Administration of Department of Natural Resources 21 percent.

³Ranger Corps Annual Report, 1979-1980

⁴Ibid

⁵Ibid