

## **Punta Verraco, Cerro Toro and Punta Ventanas Wildlife Protection Resolution**

Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds  
Biennial Meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, July 19-23, 2007

WHEREAS, Punta Verraco, Cerro Toro and Punta Ventanas consist of multiple extremely diverse and unique landforms, containing mature tropical forests of xerophytic organisms that possess an enormous ecological value in terms of its flora and fauna, considered among the least impacted remaining subtropical dry forest habitats in the Caribbean region and an integral part of the Guayanilla Bay Estuary, Puerto Rico's third largest estuary, which has served for centuries as a source of food, recreation, relaxation, and contemplation of nature by local residents and fishermen; and

WHEREAS, this ecosystem lies next to the internationally recognized Guánica State Forest, designed by the Man and Biosphere Program of the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as a "Biosphere Reserve" in 198, for its large number of diverse organisms unique to this region and for its preservation, a world-rarity, since only an estimated 1% of dry forest remains on Earth, which along with Punta Verraco, Cerro Toro and Punta Ventanas constitute one of the largest tropical coastal dry forests in the world; and

WHEREAS, this ecosystem contains at least eight plant species, four bird species, two amphibians species, a significant number of marine mammals and other marine organisms recognized as endemic, threatened or endangered according to local and federal agencies, not including other species that are expected to arise as further scientific studies are performed; and

WHEREAS, this ecosystem has an eciduous dwarf forest submerged by low tides, containing many elements that are unique to the insular Caribbean area, the Greater Antilles and Puerto Rico, and a number of different types of unique dry forests eco-regions that come together along a peninsula composed of quaternary karst formations separated of Puerto Rico's main island by marshlands and mangroves associated to the Yauco River watershed, some of which have been degraded by decades of nearby agricultural activities; and

WHEREAS, this ecosystem contains the largest amount of fragile marine arcs in the world, great beauty and extraordinary natural scenic singularity, biological and landscape diversity, dramatic coastal cliffs, majestic scenic views of the Guayanilla Bay Estuary and the Caribbean Sea, robust tropical karst areas, geomorphologic structures of significant distinctiveness, with scientific and geological value that contain evidence to the earliest origins in the formation of Puerto Rico, and pre Columbian archeological sites some of which belong to the Saladoid (500-280 BC), Ostionoid and earlier Archaic hunter-gatherer-fisher pre-ceramic cultures, attributes which add up to create an incalculable potential for research and nature-based tourism; and

WHEREAS, the Guánica State Forest was selected on January 2007 as one of 20 special forests of eco-climatic priority, for its unique tropical dry forest characteristics, by the National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON), a continental-scale research platform based in the United States, for discovering and understanding the impacts of climate change, land-use change, and invasive species on ecology; and

WHEREAS, the eventual restoration of the large pre-agricultural wetlands formed by the Yauco River delta at its historical outlet between Ventanas beach and Cerro Toro Mountain has the potential to foster, once again, potentially rich wildlife habitat and valuable refuge for the Brown Pelican, the Roseate Tern, the Yellow-shouldered Blackbird, the West Indian Whistling-Duck and other endemic, endangered and threatened bird, fish amphibian, insect, and crustacean species; and

WHEREAS, the construction and operation of the industrial wind farm project proposed by Windmar Renewables, Inc. on this tropical dry forest represents a serious ecological and social conflict, with irreversible potential damage to critical wildlife species and essential habitat, and hence, a clear case of environmental injustice to communities that had to suffer the excessive burdens associated with pollution from nearby energy related industries including two power plants and a now abandoned petroleum refinery, that could become, if allowed, a dangerous precedent for the conservation and enhancement of other vulnerable, biological and landscape diverse, ecologically sensitive wildlife habitats in Puerto Rico; and

WHEREAS, local and federal environmental agencies have filed and disregarded complains issued by public and governmental officials regarding serious negative impacts and violations to over 10 laws and regulations by the developer of this proposed industrial wind farm project, regarding the construction of nearly 15 km of new roads that caused destruction of over 2,000 trees, two caves, four archeological sites and Puerto Rican Nightjar critical habitat, without proper permits and without having an approved Environmental Impact Declaration; and

WHEREAS, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources identified these lands in its Master Plan for the Commonwealth Forests in 1999, as a priority for acquisition and conservation, to be included to the Guánica State Forest and regarded by the United States Fish and Wildlife as a critical habitat for several federally listed species; and

WHEREAS, this proposed industrial wind farm project has not carried out thorough scientific methodological analysis of the site's biodiversity nor sufficient scientific details regarding noise levels and other potential health issues and effects on wildlife and on nearby residents at Faro, Indios, Boca, Rufina and Playa communities in the municipality of Guayanilla, located within 0.9 and 2 miles from the proposed industrial wind farm project; and

WHEREAS, the protection of the integrity of these lands will enlarge the guaranteed critical habitat for endemic and endangered species in the southwestern coast of Puerto Rico, creating a buffer zone between anthropogenic maritime activities in the Guayanilla Bay Estuary and the protected lands to the west of this location; and

WHEREAS, this ecosystem is a major feeding habitat for the Brown Pelican and the Roseate Tern, which have been reported to nest nearby at coral islets offshore, such as Maria Langa and Palomas Cays, for which the proposed industrial wind farm project will be located within their flying pathways, and which have been showing continuous population reductions trends in Puerto Rico during recent decades; and

WHEREAS, recent studies have found that wind farms should not be built near populations of birds of conservation importance because the birds do not seem to 'get used' to wind farms and because the longer wind farms are in operation, the worse the decline of many bird species appears to become, especially waterfowl near wind farms sited at estuaries and in shallow coastal waters; and

WHEREAS, available studies have found significant negative impacts of poorly sited wind farms on bird abundance, posing a significant hazard for birds that can cause severe problems through disturbance, habitat loss/damage or collision with turbines, particularly of Anseriformes (wildfowl) and Charadriiformes (waders), suggesting that a precautionary approach should be adopted to wind farm development near aggregations of these taxa in coastal locations; and

WHEREAS, studies of the European Nightjars (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) in England show that these Nightjars, similar to the Puerto Rican Nightjar, could be impacted by wind turbine blades as this species approaches beacons while feeding on insects attracted by nocturnal light, conditions which in the Punta Verraco, Cerro Toro and Punta Ventanas could account for the mortality potential of five percent of the global population of the Critically Endangered Puerto Rican Nightjar; and

WHEREAS, the proposed industrial wind farm project will destroy approximately 100 acres of dry forest, causing land displacement of the Puerto Rican Nightjar population, with the potential to negatively impact 40 of the 46 identified territories of this insectivorous ground nesting species at this ecosystem, which is an integral part of the proposed South Karst IBA (Important Bird Area), comprising, alongside with the Guánica State Forest, the most important remaining stronghold for the Puerto Rican Nightjar; and

WHEREAS, the construction and operation of the proposed industrial wind farm project on such an important coastal critical wildlife habitat, the only known for some of its threatened and endangered species, will endanger the potential for the down-listing and eventual removal of many of them from the Federal endangered species list, such as the Brown Pelican and the Dry Forest Lizard, which for decades have been known to be on a population decline; and

WHEREAS, the proposed industrial wind farm project will cause conditions which are known to be causing bird population declines, including loss and fragmentation of nesting and wintering habitat for local and Neotropical migratory species traveling along the Atlantic Flyway, increased incidence of brood parasitism by Shiny Cowbirds, increased mortality due to depredation by feral cats and other exotic predatory species, and alteration of feeding habits, especially upon insectivorous species due to possible insect population changes due to the mechanical movement of turbine blades, wind turbulences, and herbicides used to maintain roads cleared of vegetation; and

WHEREAS, approximately one million bats of at least eight different species, located at the Convento cave system in the Guayanilla-Peñuelas border and at several caves within the Guánica State Forest within a distance of less than five miles, together with other bats inhabiting Punta Ventanas and Punta Verraco are expected to suffer high mortality rates due to collisions with the wind farm blades, as has been documented on other wind farms located near large bat colonies, since they are known to use these lands as part of their feeding habitat on a daily basis, insectivorous species being of particular concern; and

WHEREAS, the United States Fish and Wildlife's incidental take permit issued to this proposed industrial wind farm project demonstrates a serious contradiction towards the Endangered Species Act that was established specifically to protect vulnerable species such as the Puerto Rican Nightjar, whose global population has been reduced between 1,400 and 2,000 individuals, and the Brown Pelican, which according to Windmar's own studies, will have insignificant mortality rates due to

collisions with wind turbine, since this species is already in decline in Puerto Rico and is expected to become extinct within several decades; and

WHEREAS, local communities, scientists and non profit organizations from around Puerto Rico and the world, have recognized the, vulnerability and exceptional natural value of this ecosystem and committed efforts towards its protection and conservation; and

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds, at its Biannual Meeting assembled July 19-23, 2007 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, hereby acknowledges that: (1) Punta Verraco, Cerro Toro and Punta Ventanas provide critical wildlife habitat for many Neotropical migratory birds and other federally and locally listed endangered and threatened species; (2) this ecosystem has landscapes, coastal marine arcs and other special attributes that are unique and not found anywhere else in the world; (3) this ecosystem possesses extraordinary ecological diversity, and is therefore, an area of critical value for research in tropical forest management, and (4) the ecological services and benefits that it provides cannot be duplicated elsewhere in the highly urbanized island; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds urges the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources and other governmental agencies to fulfill their obligation to investigate complaints, to dealt with the alleged violations to the full extent of the law, and to create critical habitats and recovery plans for the listed species, with special concern to the Brown Pelican, the Roseate Tern, the Puerto Rican Nighthawk and the Puerto Rican Plain Pigeon; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds urges the Planning Board of Puerto Rico to classify this area as an Especially Protected Rustic Conservation Zone and urges the Puerto Rico's Department of Natural and Environmental Resources to revoke endorsement of this project and acquire these lands for their protection and ecological enhancement using funds available through the Herencia 100,000 Conservation Program and a co-management plan with the participation of local communities and scientists to implement educational, scientific and habitat restoration activities; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds urges the Government of Puerto Rico and other Caribbean region governments to develop, a comprehensive energy policy to encourage energy efficiency, provide research and development resources, design and location guidelines, and incentives for new power generating installations, taking into account scientific and public participation regarding valuable technological, environmental and social considerations, along with security of supply and economic feasibility; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds supports environmentally-friendly energies in general, but regrets and finds unacceptable that the first industrial wind farm project in Puerto Rico has been proposed in Punta Verraco, Cerro Toro and Punta Ventanas, an area regarded as one of the most valuable wildlife habitats in the Caribbean, where the construction of this project has the potential to reduce Earth's biodiversity heritage and cause devastating ecological, cultural, scientific and social negative impacts.