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## Martín Peña Channel Project in San Juan Wins UN World Habitat Award

By Caribbean Business on February 29, 2016



SAN JUAN – Puerto Rico-based community land trust Fideicomiso de la Tierra del Caño Martín Peña has won the 2015-16 United Nations World Habitat Award, which honors “innovative and replicable initiatives” that address issues affecting human settlements. The award will be conferred in October, during the third UN Habitat global summit, which takes place every 20 years.

The Fideicomiso de la Tierra is the first community land trust in Puerto Rico. It was created by the residents of densely populated communities along a highly polluted tidal channel in the San Juan Metropolitan Area as a tool to overcome poverty and achieve environmental justice. The channel’s obstruction leads to constant flooding with polluted waters affecting the health and safety of thousands, and its ecosystem restoration is being led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Corporación del Proyecto ENLACE. Land Trust members collectively own 200 acres of valuable land, while also owning surface rights to the plot of land where their homes are located.

The World Habitat Awards were established in 1985 by the Building and Social Housing Foundation as part of its contribution to the UN. Two awards of 10,000 pounds (\$13,852) are given annually to projects that provide practical and innovative solutions to housing needs and problems.

“We are proud to obtain this honor for Puerto Rico as an acknowledgement of what can be accomplished through ample citizen participation and community work towards a common vision for better living conditions,” said Carmen L. Febres-Alméstica, president of the grassroots Group of the Eight Communities Adjacent to the Martín Peña Channel (G-8) Inc., and member of the land trust’s board.

In November, 2015, a team of evaluators from United Kingdom-based BSHF visited the Caño Martín Peña communities and met with residents, community leaders, collaborators, and representatives from the G-8, the Fideicomiso, and the Corporación del Proyecto ENLACE del Caño Martín Peña, which leads the implementation of the development plan for the area.

“With the support of partners and collaborators, the communities along the Martín Peña channel designed an innovative tool to prevent gentrification as an unintended consequence of urban and environmental restoration projects, while addressing the lack of formal land titles through collective ownership,” María E. Hernández Torrales, the trust’s board president, explained. “These communities have placed Puerto Rico once again as a reference point in housing innovation.”

Leilani Fahra, UN special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing explained: “The project

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tackles a number of core elements for the right to housing such as ensuring security of tenure for those living in informal settlements, community participation and protection of land. It recognizes housing is a human right rather than a commodity. Women are community leaders, and the project ensures them title to properties.”

David Ireland, BSHF executive director, added: “The empowerment of these communities is outstanding. They have used a Community Land Trust to turn the threat of displacement of an

informal settlement into something very special—a strong and flourishing neighborhood in which everybody is engaged. It is arguably one of the most democratic places on earth.”

This year’s finalists were from Brazil, Colombia, Bhutan, Malawi, and the United Kingdom.

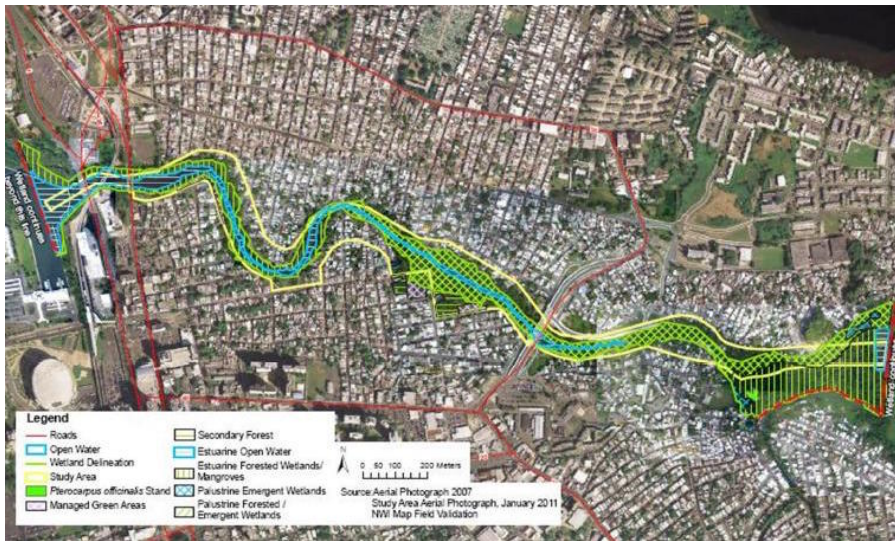
“We expect that this award will help us consolidate support in Puerto Rico and abroad for our land trust, and help us obtain the resources needed to ecologically restore the Caño and finally be able to live in healthy conditions,” concluded Febres-Alméstica.

Online: [worldhabitatawards.org](http://worldhabitatawards.org) and [cano3punto7.org](http://cano3punto7.org).

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