



## A Personal Experience in the Discovery of Archaeology: My Voice as a Citizen

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# A Personal Experience in the Discovery of Archaeology: My Voice as a Citizen

HÉCTOR M. RIVERA-CLAUDIO

I am a retired accountant, and a swimming instructor by vocation. I currently live in the city of San Juan, Puerto Rico. In the following paragraphs, I share my own experiences of becoming a volunteer citizen scientist in the *Trazando el Pasado* (Tracing the Past) project and a member of *Amigos Para la Naturaleza*, a unit of the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust. This in turn led to my participation in the 80th annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in San Francisco, California, in 2015.

Before sharing my own experience as a citizen scientist, and by way of introduction, it is said that any great work of art must also have an appropriate frame. I think it may therefore be prudent to frame my own presentation by first stating that I live in Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island that is the smallest of the Greater Antilles. The island is approximately 100 miles in length and 35 miles wide, and it enjoys a sub-tropical climate.

One can visit El Yunque, the only tropical rainforest within the U.S National Park System, and then after two-hour trip be in the Guánica Dry Forest, which U.N.E.S.C.O. has designated world biosphere reserve. The island possesses great natural and cultural wealth, with a vast range of historic and prehistoric sites, cave systems with subterranean rivers, mangroves, dry forests, canyons and sinkholes, and tremendous biodiversity.

I was born in the town of Guayama, approximately 35 miles directly south of the island's capital of San Juan. The town's name derives from a Taíno word indicating that it was the territory of the indigenous *cacique*<sup>1</sup> Guamani or Guamanique. This area is rich in cultural heritage drawn from the contributions of the Taíno, Spaniards and Africans, and we still preserve words and phrases that reflect this history of diverse origins.

From an early age, I have always had a passion for nature and conservation. I am a member of the *Speleological Society of Puerto Rico*, the *Puerto Rico Camping Association*, the *Natural History Society*, and I enjoy kayaking and indulging in amateur environmental photography. My passion for nature and culture inspired me to become involved with the *Puerto Rico Conservation Trust* (PRCT), now referred to as *Para la Naturaleza* (PLN), where I first became a member (as a Friend) in 1997. My more than 15 years of involvement with the PRCT have also given me the opportunity to witness the creation and transformation of the

Friends (*Amigos*) Program, the founding of *Para la Naturaleza*, and the creation of the Citizen Science Program in 2008. The organization seeks to involve civil society in the conservation of the island's natural ecosystems, with the ultimate goal of expanding the percentage of protected land in Puerto Rico from the current 8 per cent to 33 per cent by 2033. As a member of the *Amigos* Program, I participate in the quarterly tour itinerary, which offers visits to the organization's conservation areas. During these tours PLN environmental interpreters explain the importance, history, and ecological value of these reserves.

On one occasion, when I was visiting *Hacienda La Esperanza*, a PRCT reserve near the town of Manatí along the northeast coast of Puerto Rico, I realized that there was a group of people working with archaeological artefacts. I learned that they were part of a National Science Foundation-funded pilot programme which seeks to teach volunteers by putting them into contact with scientists.

My own participation in the field of archaeology began under the direction of Dr Agamemnon Gus Pantel. I also participated in other research initiatives through the *Ciudadano Científico* (Citizen Science) Program, working on a bird census, as well as studies relating to coastlines, water quality, and bat populations, all of which helped me gain a varied perspective on the sciences. In my initial experience with archaeology I became familiar with the cleaning and classification of artefacts and basic transect sampling.

For some reason I have always been attracted to anything involving ruins, passionate to learn about the cultures that preceded us, and to see whatever vestiges they have left behind. In 2013, *Para la Naturaleza* launched a second Citizen Science initiative, which featured far greater participation and more expansive and in-depth projects involving archaeology, coastlines, forests, river water quality, and bird and bat populations. Although all of these projects interested me, I was most attracted to Dr Isabel Rivera-Collazo's archaeology project, possibly due to its greater multidisciplinary focus. This new project aimed to generate a greater understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment in the Río Grande de Manatí river basin.

In this most recent phase, thanks to Dr Rivera-Collazo and her assistants, the PRCT personnel and the *Para la Naturaleza* unit, I have learned to apply scientific methodology, transect protocols (Figure 1), the use of tools and technology, and how archaeology extends so much further than what we see in museums, documentaries, and films such as *Indiana Jones*. Contrary to what I had previously understood, I learned that archaeology today has a predominantly low-impact approach aimed at preserving archaeological resources and protecting the natural and historic environments. In this way, we can achieve our objectives of learning about the past without destroying what we are researching. With the skills I have acquired, I now have even more tools to learn about history on my own and to share these with others, using science to protect our environment and our culture.

Through my participation, I have discovered that archaeological studies can determine how humans have, since their first appearance on the surface of the earth, had an impact on their surroundings, the environment, and even nature, of which they are unquestionably a part. Although we may not be fully aware of how humanity, nature, and the environment are connected, the truth of the matter is that we are in constant interaction. In general terms, the cultures that have had the greatest



FIGURE 1 Transect protocols. Hacienda La Esperanza, a Puerto Rico Conservation Trust reserve, near town of Manati along the Northeast coast of Puerto Rico.

awareness of nature have had the least impact on it. Unfortunately, intervention by certain interests in various cultures who are either oblivious to nature or excessively motivated by monetary gain are exposing humanity to the possibility of extinction.



FIGURE 2 Archaeology Project, Open House, Scientific Citizenship 2015, Puerto Rico Conservation Trust.

The personnel involved in the ‘Citizen Science: Exploring the Río Grande de Manatí’ project offers everyone the opportunity to receive training to assist scientists conducting studies in affiliation with the PRCT. The participants also share their experiences and encourage more people to get involved (see Figure 2), raising awareness about the different fields and teaching them how to protect the environment. The PRCT provides an ideal atmosphere for creativity. As a result of this interaction with the scientists, community members and the PRCT, some of the volunteers have taken on a deeper commitment by becoming core community citizen scientists, developing our own research based on our interests, and also make a difference at the community level.

In my own case, I have been motivated to conduct a research project on the use of farming terraces, which was of particular interest to me, even though they are not used today. This research is the result of a visit to Finca El Cuco, in the town of Ciales, Puerto Rico, one of the properties owned by the PRCT. Here we discovered a series of abandoned agricultural terraces dating from the early twentieth century. With the support of Dr Rivera-Collazo, her assistants, and volunteers and staff members from the Citizen Science Program, we will be conducting research on these terraces and the impact they have had on neighbouring communities. We will be carrying out field research and ethnographic studies in the community in order to compile relevant data.

In creating this project, the Citizen Science Program has given me the opportunity to be in close contact with a scientific community that I once felt was very distant

from my own reality. As a citizen scientist, I can interact more with the people around me and impart this message of conservation, thanks to the scientific knowledge I have gained by participating in these projects. Being aware of our roots and our past enables us to better understand the present and aspire to create a better future.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Pre-colombian chiefs or leaders of Taino tribes

## Notes on contributor

Héctor M. Rivera-Claudio has a BBA from University of Puerto Rico, with Management and Accounting Mayors. He is a retired accountant and volunteer in the Citizen Scientist Program of *Para La Naturaleza*, a unit of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, active in various fields since February 2010. He has been part of the core volunteers in the archaeology programme since October 2013. In April 2015, he described his own experiences in becoming a volunteer citizen scientist in the 80th annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in San Francisco, California.

He firmly believes that as we get closer to nature and pursue its preservation, we naturally develop a more spiritual consciousness.

Then, doing community archaeology is one of the principal means of achieving this because we are acquiring and sharing knowledge of our past. In former times, we were more respectful of our natural surroundings.

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