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**December 1, 2018**  
**Puerto Rico in the Wake of Crisis: Toward a Just (After) life of Disaster**

Trees have been present in our lives since the beginning of time. As such, human beings have developed a special connection to trees and their benefits. When catastrophic events happen, like a hurricane in a tropical archipelago with extraordinary and diverse flora, our lives are deeply affected. It is in that moment when we realize to value the benefits that trees provide us.

Some of these benefits include:

1. Nutrients, vitamins, and minerals
2. Wood for construction, furniture, flooring, and other applications
3. Home remedies and medicines
4. Air purification
5. Air and water production
6. Energy conservation by shading buildings
7. Reduction of land erosion
8. Refuge and food for animals
9. Protection against UV rays
10. Sense of community
11. Protection against global warming

On September 20, 2017, our lives changed forever. The worst natural disaster in our history, hurricane María, came to change everything. Many people prepared as best they could. Many others, those with limited economic resources, were not so lucky. The death toll is still a mystery due to governmental inefficiencies. Additionally, and centrally to my talk here today, our environment was affected immensely. The destruction of trees by the hurricane was vast, but government actions—both local and federal—took this destruction to unimaginable and irresponsible levels. Fallen trees and surviving trees were destroyed and converted to vegetative material with absolutely no value for construction, artisanry, and other necessities. This useless material was then dumped in our landfills.

Yet within this chaotic situation, there came an unprecedented access to wood and wood-related resources for us woodturners. Through concerned and curious Puerto Ricans, we now had free access to wood that we would not have had access to before the hurricane. Some of these wood resources are still available now, more than one year after the hurricane. In fact, I still receive calls from people asking for me to come pick up tree trunks of great economic and artisanal value in their homes or neighborhoods. A lot of these calls are coming in from mountain zone towns that are still hard to access.

In terms of wood and what is being done collectively post-hurricane, there are various groups that have been arduously working to build better protocols, new opportunities, and set up preservation and education programs. Here I share three with their proposed measures and the challenges they have encountered in the process.

### 1. Puerto Rican Woodturners Association

Under the AAW (American Association of Woodturners), the Puerto Rico chapter—the first Spanish-speaking chapter of the Association—was founded three years ago. After the hurricane, the chapter saw an increase in membership, especially of people who want to learn about wood and the economic opportunities it can bring to their households. As a chapter, we have identified various needs and have established a series of programs to develop each interested individual in the art of woodturning. These programs include workshops, demonstrations, fundraising, and materials/tools collections. Due to Puerto Rico being an archipelago in the middle of the Caribbean, our biggest challenge as a chapter is that most companies in the United States that produce the tools and equipment necessary for woodturning do not ship here. This constitutes a major challenge for all of us woodturning artisans.

### 2. USFS – United States Forest Service

The friends over at the United States Forest Service identified the great opportunity to develop a market for wood and wood products in Puerto Rico. As such, they convened roundtables that were attended by artisans, arborists, members of the “Caribbean Climate Hub,” sawmill owners, representatives of wood processing equipment companies, university professors, and the “Para la Naturaleza” collective. In these roundtables, we began to generate a protocol to manage natural emergencies that target the management of trees and vegetative material, which did not exist prior to hurricane María. Additionally, we established a directory that contributed ideas regarding the management, disposition, and importance of conserving trees. Unfortunately, the greatest challenge to the work of this collective of people USFS gathered has been the in-existent communication and cooperation between the Engineer Corps, FEMA, and various local agencies so that artisans can access wood.

### 3. Greenwood – [www.greenwoodglobal.org](http://www.greenwoodglobal.org)

In April 2018, representatives from Greenwood visited Puerto Rico. Greenwood is an organization that trains artisans to create high-quality wood products in order to add value to forest resources and create incentives to protect biodiversity. Greenwood visited us to understand the magnitude of the situation in Puerto Rico, how to contribute to the development of artisanal markets related to wood, and to help build a more resilient community of woodworkers and woodturners like those already established in Central and South America. Additionally, Greenwood, with the help of the Puerto Rican Association of Woodturners and “Para la Naturaleza,” are developing a pilot program named “Artisan Eco Tours” which plans forest visits, artisan workshops, educational chats, and the sale of artisanal works around the

archipelago. All of this will work to simultaneously explain and educate locals and tourists about the importance of trees.

To see photos of Dennis Colón's works, please visit:

Instagram account: [https://www.instagram.com/dj\\_woodturning/](https://www.instagram.com/dj_woodturning/)

Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/DJ\\_Woodturning-1783073985249442/photos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/DJ_Woodturning-1783073985249442/photos/?ref=page_internal)