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*Mosquito Beach, Culebra, Puerto Rico: A case study documenting user conflicts over impacts to estuarine wetlands and bay, and involving beach and access privatization in a developing rural watershed.*

**Abstract**

The island of Culebra Puerto Rico is undergoing rapid development. Decision-making processes are non-participatory and have often had negative permanent environmental consequences. Using a chronological format we summarized events regarding coastal user and agency conflicts that emerged over 1) the chronic contamination from erosion of an estuarine wetland and connected bay; 2) the deforestation and privatization of an ecologically sensitive wilderness beach area; and 3) the selective restriction of access to and from the impacted area (beach). The focal area is a coastal watershed and estuary bisected by two rural, low- density housing developments. Protective resource designations include endangered species critical feeding and nesting habitats, special zoning, and public policy. Land clearing for access roads has resulted in chronic sediment and nutrient- loaded runoff to estuarine wetlands, coastal seagrass and coral reef communities. The conflict chronology has been tracked through agency notifications and response letters, as well as through municipal and superior courts. Major lessons learned are: 1) obscure and non-participatory decision-making planning processes are detrimental to the public interest and the environment; 2) enforcement is obstructed by interdepartmental confusion regarding the permitting process; 3) there is a need for policy changes to integrate actions among local agencies, departments within local agencies, and with relevant federal agencies for coastal resource conservation; and 5) there is a need to adopt Anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) legislation to protect whistle blowers critical to the conservation of federally protected wetlands. With policy modifications and local enforcement education, similar and escalating coastal user conflicts may be resolvable outside of the courts in a time frame where resource conservation (not just restoration) could be realized and further burden to courts and associated public funds significantly reduced.