



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW TIME (06:47)

VAHL'S BOXWOOD (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH OMAR MONSEGUR)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by USFWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there. This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. And I'm on the phone today with Omar Monsegur, a fish and wildlife biologist at the Service's Caribbean Ecological Services field office. Hi, Omar. How are you today?

MR. MONSEGUR: I'm fine. Good morning.

MS. LEON: Omar, we're hoping that you can tell our listeners a little about the Vahl's boxwood.

MR. MONSEGUR: Well, Vahl's boxwood is an endemic species to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, specifically St. Croix. The species grows to be about 4 meters to probably 5 meters high. It is a monoecious species. That means that you have male and female flowers on the same plant. And usually, what you have is a cluster of flowers with a female flower on the center surrounded by several male flowers.

What we know about the species is that it is wind-pollinated, and the fruit is small-capsule. When it's ripe, it explodes and releases the seed. So it depends on a mechanical dispersal. The other thing is that the species flowers basically between March to May, and it sets fruits by June to July. So it is synchronized with the rain season.

MS. LEON: Okay. So this is a rare plant. Can you tell us about the current population and major reasons for the species' decline?

MR. MONSEGUR: Well, let's talk about the history of the species. The species was discovered over 100 years ago by the first collectors working in the Caribbean. And, at that time, the species was discovered from St. Croix and from Puerto Rico.

For a long time, the species was considered extinct in the wild, mostly due to habitat destruction and the deforestation in the Caribbean. So you have an idea, about 99 percent of the island of Puerto Rico was deforested. Can you imagine the whole island, the forest being cut for charcoal and for agriculture? So the habitat of the species was destroyed.

And the species was not found again until the 1950s. At that time, the species was known from two populations. And when the species was listed endangered in 1985, we only know two populations with less than 100 individuals. That was the status of the species by the time of listing.

Currently, we know about ten populations. We then estimate 4,000 individuals. That's a huge number in the jump of individuals. It doesn't mean that the species does not require protection, but it is a great step in the recovery of the species.

And actually, we are almost sure that all the known populations are doing fine, and there is recruitment. That means that there is flowering; there is fruit production, and we have evidence of juveniles and small plants being recruited.

MS. LEON: Are there any conservation actions that are currently underway?

MR. MONSEGUR: First, what we need to do is protect the currently known population. The majority, about 80 percent of populations lie within private properties subject to urban development. And that's a huge stress because once you lose the populations, and once you damage the habitat, it's very hard to recover the habitat conditions necessary for the establishment. So protecting the habitat and protecting the known population is critical for the recovery. If we don't work on this, we're going to lose the potential to recover the species.

We are working with our partners here in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. One of the populations is located within a national wildlife refuge managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. This is the Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge in St. Croix. So that population is protected.

Our other partner in Puerto Rico is the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources. They have one population within one of their state forests. That's the Guajataca Forest. And, basically, the person in charge right now of the propagation of the species is the forest manager at the Guajataca Forest. He's

propagating the species from seed, and he's providing the Service with the material that we are using to establish new populations.

So far, one was established at the Guajataca Forest that was done by the Department of Natural Resources. And the Service established one population within a property managed by the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust that was about a year ago. And today, the plants are completely fine. There is 100 percent of survival. In fact, some of the individuals are already producing flowers. So it seems to be a real success for the species.

MS. LEON: So with 80 percent of the population occurring on private land, are we engaging private landowners at all?

MR. MONSEGUR: We are very proactive in that sense. We are trying to identify the landowners of these properties. In fact, one of the properties belongs to the Government of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico Power and Energy Authority, they manage a power plant that has a piece of land that harbors one of the historical populations, and we are trying to make a deal with them to protect that population till they transfer the land to the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources.

We are also working with the private landowners to set these populations in these areas into conservation because the area is not also the habitat of Vahl's boxwood but, also, is the habitat of several other species. So if we protect these populations, we are also protecting the habitat of several listed species, including animals; for example, the Puerto Rican Nightjar.

MS. LEON: Right. Well, thank you so much, Omar, for taking the time to speak with us today. It was a real pleasure having you on.

MR. MONSEGUR: Thanks, and I hope that all these efforts ends in the recovery of the species and sets an example to work with other species in the Caribbean.

MS. LEON: For the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this is Sarah Leon.