

Now the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico is clear: it is the most destructive Atlantic storm on record. No larger area has been hit so completely, anywhere in the world, in at least the past half century. Rather than spending money to rebuild Puerto Rico, Congress should resettle Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States.

The era of climate change is upon us, with devastating storms becoming ever more intense in the Caribbean. Puerto Rico is densely overpopulated, with an economy that was already shattered before the storm hit. A year ago the electrical grid failed. Now the water supply is gone, and a damaged dam has required a massive evacuation. Flash floods have displaced thousands of people.

Half of the island's population lives in the capital city of San Juan. That city's large buildings built of brick and stone were not as damaged as the rural areas, where houses made of wood were splintered like matchsticks. If reconstruction takes place, it should be to build large masonry apartment and commercial buildings with minimal exposed surfaces and strong solar-paneled roofs.

Rural areas should not be rebuilt. If the jungle is allowed to reclaim the interior, this will be a significant contribution to global reforestation. Puerto Rico's future should be focused on coastal tourism, with vacation rentals along the beaches that can be closed during the hurricane months of August, September, and October. The reality of a changed climate should be recognized, with the island mainly depopulated during the dangerous months.

Ever since the United States took Puerto Rico by force in 1898, its citizens have suffered as de facto colonial subjects. Now at least, since they have U.S. citizenship, there are no legal limitations on their relocation to the states. Faced with a bankrupt economy, over the past decade people have been leaving the island in historic numbers. More Puerto Ricans now live on the mainland than on the island. Maria will only make matters worse, especially for the nearly half of the island's remaining population that lives in poverty. They deserve the chance to start a new life elsewhere.

If relocation is offered to Puerto Ricans made homeless by Maria, the interior of the battered island will be allowed to return to its natural state. Congress should not lose this opportunity to make a substantial difference, both for the well-being of Puerto Ricans and for the benefit of the environment.