

# When Hurricane Maria tore through Puerto Rico, climate change became a family tragedy

By Isaiah Sosa



Isaiah Sosa, one of six winners of Connecticut Sea Grant's diverse youth scholarship, holds Norman, a tortoise kept in the biology classroom at the High School in the Community in New Haven. Photo: Judy Benson

I remember back in 2017, when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico and devastated its people.

Our family in Connecticut had to send lots of supplies to relatives there dealing with power outages, food shortages, infrastructure damage and numerous other impacts. Thankfully no lives in my family were lost during the hurricane, but that was not the case for everyone. The Puerto Rican government estimates that 2,975 people died on the island because of the hurricane. Another half million residents migrated off the island after the storm, according to the National Institutes of Health.

**Isaiah Sosa** is 17 years old and a senior at the High School in the Community in New Haven. He is a jazz musician and also very passionate about Puerto Rico, where his parents were born, and bringing attention to issues there that need to be solved.



Flooding and other damage from storms that have lashed Puerto Rico repeatedly since 2017 have impeded recovery efforts on the island since Hurricane Maria. Photo: Efrain Figueroa / Puerto Rico Sea Grant



Due to repeated flooding of agricultural fields in Puerto Rico, growing food on the island has become increasingly difficult. Photo: Efrain Figueroa / Puerto Rico Sea Grant

My relatives in Puerto Rico were actually near starvation for a time after the hurricane. They have recovered since then, but this difficult and traumatic time they endured left a lasting impression on me about the effects of climate change on some of the most vulnerable populations of the world.

NASA Science states that climate change directly and significantly strengthens the power and frequency of hurricanes. As emissions from fossil fuels increase, Earth's atmosphere grows warmer, causing stronger winds and storm tides. When hurricanes form, powered by extra energy from the higher global temperatures, almost anything unfortunate enough to be directly in their path is at risk of being destroyed. Higher carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere from fossil fuel emissions are also causing the ocean to become more acidic, putting many of the marine resources needed to sustain people as well as marine and terrestrial wildlife at risk. Not only does climate change negatively affect our Earth, but also humans.

This is the side of climate change people tend to ignore. Men, women, and children around the world are suffering because of the effects of climate change on their communities, farms and livelihoods. Many are losing family members as hunger and poor nutrition increase. My Puerto Rican

relatives survived many months of hardship after the hurricane. They had to start growing crops year-round to be able to eat and afford living costs. But this has become harder because of climate change. Because of shifts in wind patterns and ocean currents, the island is receiving less of the kind of rainfall needed to support crops, so plants don't grow as fast. Seven years after Hurricane Maria, the island is still working to rebuild what it lost. At least three hurricanes have lashed Puerto Rico since then, setting back meaningful long-term recovery efforts.

We have the resources to stop using fossil fuels and change to a more sustainable and environmentally sound way to get energy. We have renewable sources from solar, wind, geothermal and plant and animal wastes. The potential for solar energy is especially encouraging, because of the tremendous output of the sun, and is also cheaper and more efficient than fossil fuels, according to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. This is what we need to focus on developing to its maximum capacity.

Puerto Rico was only one of many places that has been negatively effected by our changing climate. Although many people have already suffered, we can help prevent and lessen the impacts of climate change for future generations.

