

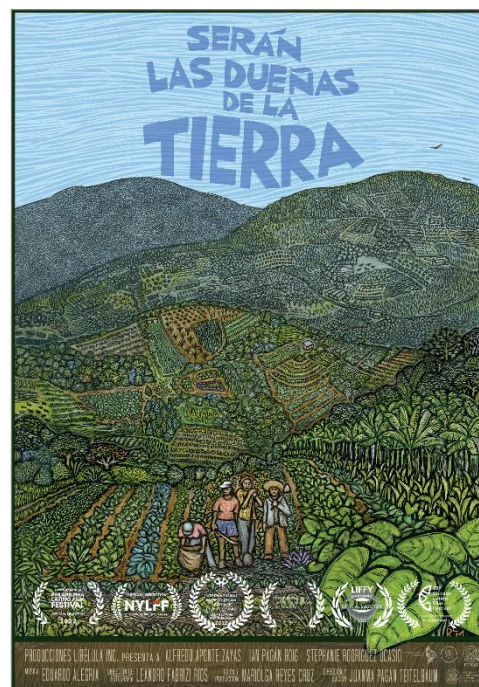
Agroecology is the future of Puerto Rican agriculture

Film review by

Molly DelCarmen Anderson *

Middlebury College and University of Vermont

Review of *Serán las dueñas de la tierra* (*Stewards of the Land*) [Film]; JuanMa Pagán Teitelbaum (Director). (2022). New Day Films. 92 minutes; Spanish with English subtitles. Website: <https://www.newday.com/films/stewards-of-the-land-seran-las-duenas-de-la-tierra>



Submitted June 29, 2026 / Published online August 14, 2026

Citation: Anderson, M. D. (2026). Agroecology is the future of Puerto Rican agriculture [Film review]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2026.154.030>

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The documentary film *Serán las dueñas de la tierra* (*Stewards of the Land*) depicts a struggle that everyone in the U.S. should know about: not just to understand how difficult growing healthy food is, but also to see the consequences of colonialism on our unincorporated territory of Puerto Rico and

its corrupt land allocation practices. The film follows three landless farmers in Puerto Rico as they try to obtain and keep farmland. Puerto Rico imports 85% of its food, and one-third of the population is food insecure. Yet it has large amounts of prime, fertile farmland, water, and sun; under other circumstances, it could be feeding all of its people well and exporting produce. Hurricanes have wreaked havoc on its farms over the past eight years (especially Irma and María in 2017), but better preparation and infrastructure might help farmers to retain more of their crops.

As a farmer remarks late in the film,

You hear a lot of people say that young people don't want to work, especially in ... produc-

* Molly Anderson has worked on the transformation of food systems in the direction of greater ecological integrity and justice for over 30 years. She is interested in linking lessons from international work with efforts in the U.S. on agroecology, the right to food, and understanding power blockages to transformation. She is Professor of Food Studies Emerita, Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont, and Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA; mollya@middlebury.edu;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7717-1025>

tion. However, there's a resurgence of young people that are interested but have little access to agricultural land. The government closes the doors on them. The Land Authority, which has land to lease, often gives them to private companies. Puerto Rico is the largest seed producer in the world now. But they are foreign companies and don't contribute much to the country's agriculture. All they do is pay starvation wages and pollute our crops.

The three young farmers whom the film follows are indomitable. Ian Pagán Roig at Josco Bravo, a farm and project, says that he has had to start over five times in three years after major hurricanes, drought, and flooding. He is farming a small plot in Toa Alta near where he grew up, and teaching agroecology to multigenerational classes. Stephanie Rodríguez Ocasio teaches middle-school students farming and healthy eating. After losing rented land that she fought to obtain, she makes an arrangement with a sympathetic landowner who wants to help young farmers to access land. She continues to teach young people, however. Alfredo Aponte Zayas, whom we first see in the U.S. shoveling snow, moved to Puerto Rico to farm after getting a PhD in 2016. Securing land from the Land Authority took a long time, but he finally was able to plow and plant his field. Hurricanes wiped out his entire crop and he fell behind in land payments. Rather than granting a waiver, the Land Authority evicted him; his farm has been abandoned ever since. Since he had a family to support, he ended up getting a job as a forage specialist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). In the film, we see Alfredo meet with the local Land Authority director and point out that failing to support and educate young farmers is totally against the Land Authority's lofty mission to advance Puerto Rican agriculture. It seems clear that staff people in the Land Authority are being paid off to give contracts to foreign companies, and the farmers feel helpless. Alfredo wonders if they might join together in a movement, but for now they are under the boot of the Land Authority.

I was lucky to be able to visit Josco Bravo in 2024 and was thoroughly impressed with Ian's dedication to growing more food for Puerto Ricans

and teaching others how to start farms. This is unmistakably conveyed in the film as well: he has become almost legendary through the students who have worked with him. He learned farming as he was growing up, then got an undergraduate degree in soil science and a master's degree in soil restoration with organic practices. His comment on the university system is that departments of agronomy produce agronomists, not farmers. Although I visited after the Land Authority had tried to evict him following Hurricane María, he was focused on just getting on with his work instead of recriminations. Donations from outsiders prevented the eviction, and since 2017 Josco Bravo has produced at least 80,000 pounds of food and taught over 300 aspiring farmers.

It is infuriating to me, as a U.S. citizen, to see how young farmers are undermined by the Puerto Rican Land Authority. Young farmers like Ian and Stephanie should be receiving abundant government support and good salaries for what they are doing, not spending their time trying to simply keep their land. Ian pointed out in the film that, because of their soil conservation practices, they had good topsoil even after the hurricanes, unlike other farmers whose soil washed away. Erosion is a huge problem all over Puerto Rico; the government is ignoring some of the best ways to keep soil, as well as ways to reduce food insecurity and dependence on food imports. Meanwhile, most people in the mainland U.S. see Puerto Rico as a playground of beaches and the quaint little streets of Old San Juan. *Stewards of the Land* can help to raise awareness of another side of Puerto Rico.

This film would be appropriate for students from middle school through undergraduate studies. Ideally, it would be accompanied by discussion of colonialism, Puerto Rico's fight for autonomy from Spain and the U.S., and differences between agroecology and industrial agriculture. The farmer helping Stephanie says at one point that almost all of the farmers using industrial agriculture had died of cancer, but those farming without synthetic pesticides had healthy lives. Stephanie's students sell the produce they have raised from door to door, and one calls out "Chemical-free lettuce!" to entice more customers after one customer does not know what "organic" means.

The film is a bit choppy, jumping from one story to another, but the viewer can piece together the stories of the three courageous farmers by the end. There is very little political commentary, although we see the infamous footage of Donald Trump tossing rolls of paper towels into an audience of people who had lost every

thing in Hurricane María. It is obvious that food aid at the time was insufficient. For people who have lost their homes and belongings, agroecology offers a hopeful way of becoming self-sufficient for food. This film demonstrates the deep resilience of the Puerto Rican people despite multiple adversities.

