

A close-up photograph showing three hands holding coffee-related items. One hand holds a white cup with latte art, another holds a black coffee grinder, and a third holds another white cup with latte art. The background is blurred, suggesting a coffee shop or cafe setting.

Hurricane Maria and the Coffee Industry (2017): Devastation and Survival

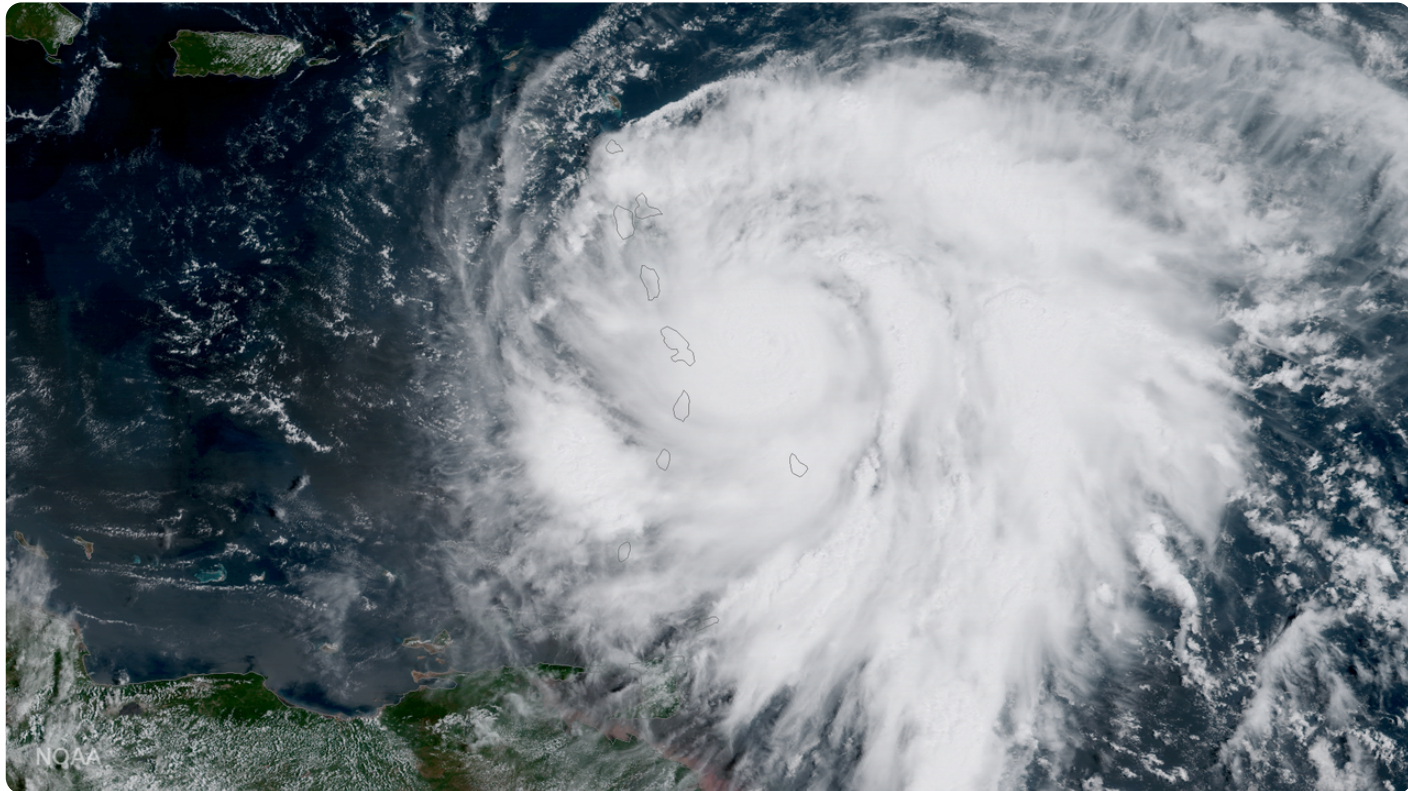


On the morning of September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria carved a path of destruction across Puerto Rico that left the island's coffee industry facing its

worst crisis in over a century. The Category 4 storm made landfall near Yabucoa with sustained winds of 155 miles per hour, tore across the central mountain spine of the island, and wiped out an estimated 80% of Puerto Rico's coffee trees. The damage, measured in dollars, was approximately \$85 million to farmers at the farm-gate level. Measured in human terms, it was incalculable. This article documents what Maria did to Puerto Rican coffee, and why the recovery took eight full years to complete.

The Storm Hits the Mountains

Hurricane Maria followed a devastating path directly through Puerto Rico's coffee-growing zones. After making landfall on the southeast coast, the storm moved northwest across the island, crossing the Cordillera Central — the central mountain range where virtually all the island's coffee is grown. The storm's eye passed over or near the coffee-producing municipalities of Yabucoa, Cayey, Aibonito, Barranquitas, Utuado, Adjuntas, and Lares, with extreme wind and rain impacting Yauco, Jayuya, and Maricao as well.



Coffee plants are particularly vulnerable to hurricane damage. They are tall, top-heavy after a summer of fruit development, and almost always grown on steep mountain slopes where wind speeds accelerate and water erosion is severe. Maria's combination of sustained Category 4 winds, torrential rainfall (up to 40 inches in some mountain locations), and days of saturated soils produced catastrophic consequences for coffee farms across the island.

Immediate Damage: 80% Tree Loss

Within 48 hours of the storm, it was clear that Puerto Rico's coffee industry had been functionally destroyed. Secretary of Agriculture Carlos Flores Ortega reported that Hurricane Maria had damaged 85% of the island's coffee harvest. The number of coffee trees destroyed approached 80% of the total — approximately 10 to 15 million individual plants uprooted, snapped at the trunk, stripped of leaves, or buried under landslides.

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*Coffee farm destruction after Hurricane Maria with
downed trees and debris covering slopes*

Image curation pending

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Almost every farm in the central mountains suffered severe damage. Mature coffee plants, which take three to four years to begin producing after planting and reach peak

productivity at around seven years, were lost on farms that had operated for generations. Farmers who had expected their best harvest in a decade — with cherries already ripening on the trees when the storm hit — lost both the immediate crop and the plants that would have produced crops for years to come.

The Economic Scale of the Disaster

The immediate financial impact at the farm level was estimated at \$85 million — the value of the lost harvest at farm-gate prices. This figure understates the true economic scope. It does not include the cost of replanting, the years of lost revenue while new plants reached maturity, the damage to processing infrastructure, the lost wages for coffee pickers and farmworkers, or the ripple effects through coffee-dependent communities in the mountain region.



Before Maria, Puerto Rico's coffee industry generated roughly \$25 to \$30 million annually in farm-gate revenue and supported thousands of jobs directly and indirectly. The storm threatened the economic viability of the entire sector. Many older farmers questioned whether to replant at all. Some sold their land. Others retired. A significant number of farms that had operated continuously for decades ceased production after Maria and never restarted.

Individual Farmer Stories

Behind the aggregate numbers were thousands of individual stories of loss. Vanessa Arroyo Sánchez and her husband Miguel Ángel Torres Díaz, coffee farmers in Jayuya, lost half of their 18 hectares of coffee and their entire seedling nursery. Iris Jeannette in

Adjuntas lost over 20,000 trees and more than \$100,000 in labor and investment. Third-generation farmer Israel Gonzalez at Sandra Farms in Adjuntas saw nearly his entire crop destroyed. Domingo Antonio Romano and his wife Nilsa in Las Marías, who grew primarily coffee, mango, and orange trees, found their farm reduced to ruin — and their municipality cut off from the rest of the island for two months afterward.



These stories, documented by reporters from NBC News, the Marketplace podcast, Living on Earth, Global Press Journal, and Barista Magazine in the years following the storm, shared common elements. Farmers cried when describing the sight of their farms after the hurricane. They talked about the decades of work lost in a single afternoon. They described the difficulty of deciding whether to start over when they were already in their sixties or seventies. They expressed pride in their coffee and their heritage, and a stubborn unwillingness to abandon the tradition — even when the economics did not obviously justify continuing.

The Months of Isolation

Hurricane Maria did more than destroy coffee trees. It destroyed the infrastructure needed to recover from the damage. The island-wide electrical grid failed catastrophically, with some mountain communities remaining without power for over a year. Roads were blocked by landslides, downed trees, and damaged bridges. Cell service and internet access were unreliable or nonexistent for months. Water systems failed. Many smaller mountain communities were completely cut off from the rest of the island during the critical early recovery period.



For coffee farmers, the loss of electricity was catastrophic. Irrigation pumps could not operate. Depulping machinery required power. Cold storage was impossible. Many farms that had managed to save some harvest from the storm watched that harvest spoil in the weeks following, because there was no way to process it. Personal circumstances compounded the agricultural crisis. Farmers dealt with damaged homes, injured family members, and the slow return of even basic services like running water and food deliveries.

Why Coffee Recovery Takes Years

Coffee is not like most crops. It cannot be replanted and harvested within a single season. A new coffee seedling takes three years to begin producing cherries, five years to approach commercial productivity, and seven years to reach peak yield. The multi-year recovery timeline meant that farmers who replanted after Maria would not see a full harvest again until 2024 or later — even if the replanting began immediately in 2018, which it rarely did.



Financial realities further slowed recovery. Coffee farming in Puerto Rico operates on narrow margins even in good years. Farmers whose last harvest was destroyed, who had mortgage payments and equipment loans to maintain, often lacked the cash

reserves to purchase tens of thousands of seedlings, hire replanting labor, and wait years for the first new harvest. Without external assistance, many farms would simply not have been able to recover at all.

The Comparison with Earlier Disasters

Hurricane Maria was not the first hurricane to devastate Puerto Rican coffee. Hurricane San Ciriaco in 1899 destroyed 80% of the island's coffee harvest and is widely blamed for ending the Golden Age of Puerto Rican coffee export dominance. Hurricane San Felipe II in 1928 caused further catastrophic losses. Hurricane Georges in 1998 damaged coffee farms extensively. Each of these storms reshaped the industry, and each was followed by debate about whether the coffee sector could — or should — recover.

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Historical photograph from 1899 showing Hurricane San Ciriaco damage to Puerto Rican farms

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Hurricane Maria differed from its predecessors in several important ways. The 2017 storm hit an industry already in structural decline, competing against cheaper coffee from other origins in an era of low commodity prices. Most Puerto Rican coffee farmers

in 2017 were older than their counterparts had been in 1899 or 1928. And unlike in 1899, when Puerto Rico was an agricultural economy with limited alternatives, 2017 offered former coffee farmers many other ways to earn a living. The question of whether farmers would replant was therefore more uncertain than in any previous crisis.

The Five Years After Maria

The first year after Maria was a period of immediate survival. Emergency aid flowed to the island from federal agencies, the Hispanic Federation, and various nonprofits. The Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture distributed seeds and seedlings through extension offices. World Coffee Research began assessing the surviving genetic stock of Puerto Rican coffee varieties. Small-scale replanting began, though the scale was inadequate relative to the losses.

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Nursery workers preparing thousands of young coffee seedlings for distribution to farmers post-Maria

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The second through fifth years saw larger, coordinated efforts. The Hispanic Federation, with funding from Lin-Manuel Miranda's family, Nespresso, Puerto Rico Coffee Roasters, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Starbucks Foundation, and the Colibrí

Foundation, launched a three-year Coffee Revitalization Initiative that scaled up seedling distribution and farmer training. TechnoServe provided agronomic training to more than 500 farmers through in-person visits, virtual training videos, and local demonstration plots. By 2022, over 2 million Arabica seedlings had been distributed to 1,139 smallholder coffee farmers.

The 2025 Milestone

In 2025, the Hispanic Federation and Lin-Manuel Miranda announced that Puerto Rico's coffee production had surpassed pre-Hurricane Maria levels for the first time. Eight years after the storm. The announcement was a significant milestone — not a return to the Golden Age, but a demonstration that coordinated effort, farmer resilience, and sustained investment could bring back an industry that many observers had written off as terminally damaged in 2017.



The recovery is not complete. Many farms have not replanted. Many pre-Maria coffee acres remain abandoned. The industry is smaller and more concentrated than before the storm. But it is alive, and increasingly focused on specialty coffee rather than commodity production. In that sense, Hurricane Maria may have accelerated a strategic shift that was already under way, forcing Puerto Rican coffee farmers to double down on quality, origin, and direct relationships with buyers — the factors that now define the island's coffee identity.

Lessons from Hurricane Maria

The storm taught hard lessons about vulnerability and resilience. Monoculture sun-grown coffee proved dangerously exposed to extreme weather. Diversified agroforestry farms suffered significant but generally lesser damage because shade trees protected

the coffee plants from wind and reduced soil erosion during the intense rainfall. These lessons are shaping the post-Maria generation of farms, most of which are being rebuilt with more shade, more tree species, better soil management, and better integration with the surrounding mountain ecosystem.



Hurricane Maria also demonstrated the importance of coordinated institutional response. Individual farmers, no matter how hardworking, could not have recovered from the storm's scale of damage without the combined contribution of federal agencies, international nonprofits, philanthropic foundations, private coffee companies, and local cooperatives. The recovery model developed after Maria — centered on multi-year support, seedling distribution, farmer training, and quality market development — is now

studied globally as a template for responding to major agricultural disasters.

Key Facts — Hurricane Maria and Coffee

- Date of landfall: September 20, 2017 near Yabucoa
- Category: 4 with sustained winds of 155 mph
- Coffee tree losses: approximately 80% of the island's coffee plants
- Harvest losses: 85% of the 2017-2018 crop
- Farm-gate economic loss: approximately \$85 million
- Number of smallholder farmers affected: estimated 2,000+
- Recovery timeline: production surpassed pre-Maria levels in 2025 (8 years)
- Seedlings distributed: over 2 million since 2018
- Farmers reached by Revivamos Nuestro Café program: more than 1,139
- Partners in recovery: Hispanic Federation, Nespresso, TechnoServe, World Coffee Research, Rockefeller Foundation, Starbucks Foundation, Colibrí Foundation, Miranda family

Frequently Asked Questions

When did Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico? Hurricane Maria made landfall near Yabucoa on the southeast coast of Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017 as a Category 4 storm with sustained winds of 155 mph. It crossed the island from southeast to northwest, devastating the central mountain coffee region.

What percentage of coffee trees did Hurricane Maria destroy? Approximately 80% of Puerto Rico's coffee trees were destroyed or severely damaged by Hurricane Maria. The 2017-2018 harvest was 85% lost. This represents roughly 10 to 15 million individual coffee plants across the island.

How long did Puerto Rico's coffee industry take to recover from Maria? Coffee production surpassed pre-Maria levels for the first time in 2025, approximately eight

years after the storm. The long recovery reflects the multi-year maturation cycle of coffee plants and the scale of the damage.

Who helped Puerto Rican coffee farmers recover from Maria? Major contributors to the recovery included the Hispanic Federation, Lin-Manuel Miranda's family, Nespresso, Puerto Rico Coffee Roasters, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Starbucks Foundation, the Colibrí Foundation, TechnoServe, World Coffee Research, the Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Did Hurricane Maria change Puerto Rican coffee farming? Yes. The storm accelerated an existing shift away from commodity production toward specialty coffee. Replanted farms tend to use more shade trees, more diverse varieties, and more sustainable agroforestry practices than the pre-Maria plantings. The industry is now smaller but increasingly quality-focused.

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Watch: We Still Here — Grassroots Hurricane Maria Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico

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