

Monkeys on island near Puerto Rico struggle to survive after hurricane

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Monkeys move about on Cayo Santiago, known as Monkey Island, in Puerto Rico on October 4, 2017. One of the first places Hurricane Maria hit in the U.S. territory on September 20, 2017, was Monkey Island, a 40-acre outcropping off the east coast that is considered one of the world's most important sites for research into how primates think, socialize and evolve. Photo from AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa

CAYO SANTIAGO, Puerto Rico — On September 20, Puerto Rico was hit by a terrible storm. It was called Hurricane Maria. The island was hit with strong winds and rain. Many homes and roads were torn up. Thousands of people still do not have power or water.

Puerto Rico is not a state but it is part of the United States. Its people are American. Life after the storm has been very hard for them. It has also been hard for one very special group of monkeys.

Off the coast of Puerto Rico is a tiny island called Cayo Santiago. Many know it as Monkey Island. More than 1,000 monkeys live there. It is a place where scientists can study monkeys in the wild.

The storm hit Monkey Island very hard. It ripped out plants. The monkeys' metal drinking containers were wrecked. The dock where boats land on the island was washed away. As a result, workers have had trouble getting food to the island. Many of the monkeys are now going hungry.

Just Enough Food To Survive

Now, workers are rushing to bring bags of monkey food onto the island. They have to carry them in tiny sailboats. The monkeys are only being fed what they need to survive, because there is so little food.

So far, though, none of them have died.

"All of our tools were destroyed," said Angelina Ruiz Lambides. She is the director of the science center on the island. She wondered who would pay for repairs and rescues.

"Does FEMA cover this?" she asked.

FEMA stands for the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It is a department of the government. It gives people help after natural disasters like hurricanes.

Monkey Island Was The Perfect Spot

The story of Monkey Island begins in 1938. That is when a man named Clarence Ray Carpenter brought a group of monkeys to the United States for scientific study.

Where would he put them? He wanted a place to study monkeys in the wild. Wild monkeys can be hard to keep up with, though. That's why Carpenter chose an island. That way, monkeys are free to move about, but they cannot get too far.

Carpenter started with about 400 monkeys. That number has more than doubled.

Saving The Island

Now, workers are trying to put the island back together. Scientists from outside Puerto Rico are bringing in equipment to help out. Their work has been paid for by donations. Many people have given money to help the effort.

James Higham is a professor at New York University. He studies how monkeys act, think and communicate.

He thinks the effort to save Monkey Island has been heroic. He is afraid that it cannot continue for long, though. Workers are doing the best they can, he said. But they need more help.