The solids waste issues in Puerto Rico have reached a key point. With the production of about 4.5 pounds of waste per person per day and poor access to recycling, we must take action. The Zero Waste campaign of the Sierra Club of Puerto Rico aims to promote and encourage Puerto Ricans to take concrete steps to achieve a zero waste society. When manufacturing processes and our lifestyles do not focus on the generation of waste, the need for landfills and incinerators disappear. Our goal is to ensure people have the tools, community infrastructure, knowledge and skill to reach zero waste. We work on recycling at events, moving public policy, set model businesses and towns, and provide educational outreach work as part of our zero waste campaign.

The Sierra Club of Puerto Rico is part of the Anti-Incineration Coalition formed in 2010. This Coalition was formed to stop the construction of the Arecibo Waste Incinerator and is composed of groups such as Madres de Negro de Arecibo, Ciudadanos en Defensa del Ambiente (Citizens in Defense of the Environment), Basura Cero Arecibo, Colegio de Medicos de Puerto Rico (College of Physicians), and others. The Coalition has facilitated educational forums, takes legal actions, and plans events with the goal of stopping the construction of the Arecibo waste incinerator.

Since the formation of the Coalition, there have been challenges to identify specific resources for legal actions, and the best strategy to take down the proposed Arecibo Incinerator. The waste management issue in the island is complex because each municipality is in charge of their waste disposal and is entitled to make their own decisions. This creates an uneven disposal and recycling practice island-wide; and makes it harder for private recycling and zero waste industries to insert themselves in the market.

In our Sierra Club’s Zero Waste campaign, we have worked to support the Coalition in taking legal action such as lawsuits and official comments to intervene in permits requested by the proponents of the waste incinerator. In addition, the Zero Waste Campaign of the Sierra Club focuses on educational outreach to schools and communities to create recycling plans, identify local policies to support and approve legislation such as plastic bag bans and the bottle bill, and creates demand for better recycling systems in key events like the Leatherback Sea Turtle Festival (Festival del Tinglar) and other community-based activities throughout the island. In the development of our Zero Waste Campaign, we have realized that there is a lack of streamlined data for waste management in Puerto Rico and that local agencies in charge of solid waste lack resources and personnel to achieve their mandate.