

Why the Condition of Hill Country Rangeland Matters to All of Us

In the past few months I have written several columns about the changes that have taken place in the Hill Country habitat since settlement, the conditions of current Hill Country properties and how these conditions could be improved. Many readers who do not own rural property may have been thinking none of these issues are a concern to them. They would be wrong. The condition of the rangeland around us matters to all of us.

The main points I made in the previous columns were that severely overgrazed, overbrowsed properties with no vegetation below the browseline were undesirable and unproductive as are properties that have been taken over by cedar to the point of the exclusion of all other vegetation. A more ideal habitat would be one that is not overgrazed, overbrowsed or cedar-covered, but one with good stands of native grasses as well as a variety of native shrubs and trees that provides food, water and shelter for livestock and native wildlife.

Healthy, diverse, native, Hill Country habitats are a benefit to all of us, even to apartment dwellers in the city.

Healthy habitats are capable of producing more vegetation for both grazers as well as browsers on a year to year basis, because the plants are fundamentally healthy. That means that these properties are more productive both in terms of the capability of producing livestock and income for the owner as well as providing habitat for native white-tailed deer which can also increase the owner's income.

Healthy, productive rangelands means more money in the local economy, more tax revenue to the local city and county governments, more employment and in general a better, more vibrant society that benefits us all.

Properties with good stands of native grasses and limited amounts of cedar are much better at capturing rainwater and allowing it to infiltrate into the soil where it nourishes the vegetation, but also seeps into local water tables and in some cases into deeper aquifers as well. It is water in the shallow water tables along the riparian areas of all of our creeks and streams that provide the base flow in times between rain events.

Properties with little grass cover and a lot of bare ground allow the water to runoff during a rainstorm, down into the creeks and downstream toward the Gulf of Mexico, taking a lot of our Hill Country soil with it, which also pollutes our surface water. Properties with excessive cedar cover also have significant losses of rainfall to interception by the leaves of the junipers and evaporation back into the air so that the amount of rainfall reaching the ground is significantly less than where it falls on a grassland.

Given the scarcity and importance of water for all of us, we need the surrounding landscape to capture as much rainfall as possible. More on this next week.

When shown pictures of degraded landscapes or dense cedar-covered properties or grass and tree covered savannas with a diversity of vegetation types, most people choose the latter and the most beautiful. And let's face it, one of the things that has drawn many of us to the Hill Country is its beauty. But it is not just the beauty of such a habitat, it is more sustainable, long term and more resilient in terms of being able to survive droughts, floods and disease or pest infestations.

The healthy habitat described above and in previous columns is also a better wildlife habitat. Good wildlife habitat means the ability to sustain many different species of native wildlife including the insect pollinators that keep our gardens and orchards alive as well as provide food for all of our native songbirds. A healthy native wildlife community means one where there is balance among the species so that no one species gets out of control and none are extirpated either. Most everyone likes to be able to see our native critters occasionally.

Finally, as the human population increases and consumes more and more of our native habitat to make more roads, parking lots, shopping centers, etc., more and more of our native habitat will be gone. We need as much as possible conserved so that the increasing urban population has a chance to see it, if only from a car.

So yes, we all have a stake in how rural property is managed.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the book "Hill Country Landowner's Guide". He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.