

Land Fragmentation: What We Are Doing to the Hill Country

Those of us who chose to live on small properties in the country all have any number of reasons for doing so, and I suspect nearly everyone really loves being in the country. But some of us don't like the consequences of what we are doing to the Hill Country. Let me explain.

Let's consider a rancher who inherited 1000 acres from his father and has been ranching all of his life on that property. He raised two kids and put them through college, but it is getting harder and harder to make a living ranching these days. Furthermore, his kids have good jobs in the city and little interest in ranching or living in the country.

Then a developer offers him way more money per acre for his property than he can ever make ranching, and as much as the rancher and his wife hate the idea of leaving their ranch home and moving into the city, the economics of the situation can't be ignored.

So then the developer divides the 1000 acres into 100, ten acre lots and sells each lot for a handsome profit, but still at a price that many of us were glad to pay to get our little piece of Texas. So what happens to the land now?

Over the years, at some time in the past the ranch was almost certainly overgrazed and the deer population has probably grown beyond healthy levels, but the rancher has cut back on the number of cows and kept the cedar to manageable levels. But other than those things, the rancher and his family have had a very light footprint on the land; only one house, a barn or two, one water well and a couple of windmills, one septic system, no paved roads, only a short utility line to the house, two dogs and a barn cat. And in recent years, hunters have helped keep his deer population down somewhat.

But once the 100 lots are sold and built on, that thousand acres will look very different. Instead of one house, one water well and one septic system there will now be 100 of each. Instead of 2 barns there will now be maybe 30, most with RVs in them. Instead of 4 to 6 people there will now be over 300. Where there were no paved roads, now there will likely be 5 to 8 miles along with 3 to 5 miles of utility lines. Where there were at most about 6,000 square feet of impervious cover, there may now be close to 1 million sq. ft. And where there used to be hunters, there are now regulations preventing hunting, plus a good number of residents actively feeding the deer.

The impact of all these changes on the native habitat, native flora and fauna is substantial and probably irreversible. The effect of this increased human population is not just on the thousand acres of the subdivision but also on neighboring properties in terms of storm-water flow, aquifer drawdown, septic system overflow, increased deer population, free-roaming dogs and cats, etc. And the general public will notice that where there used to be scenes of beautiful Hill Country hills, now those scenes are spoiled by views of numerous mega-mansions on hilltops.

It would be easy to blame the developers. But when you think about it “We have met the enemy and he is us!”.

So what can we do about it? Short of building a wall around the Hill Country and locking the gate, not much. But what we can do is to make sure that as rural landowners, we manage our activities and land in the most environmentally and native habitat friendly way possible.

We can minimize impervious surfaces and/or install rainwater catchment facilities. We can refrain from overgrazing with livestock or pets and encourage the growth of understory plants. We can control dogs and cats and prevent them from running free to chase and kill wildlife. We can refrain from feeding deer and work to find ways to control the deer population. We can refrain from introducing any non-native vegetation. If we have creek or river frontage, we can manage the riparian area in the best way possible, maintaining good creek-side vegetation. We can support organizations seeking to protect the Hill Country ecology by advocacy, by accepting conservation easements, by creating preserves, etc.

Given the increasing population, these things are the least we can do.

Until next time...

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