

The Texas Hill Country: Are We Loving it to Death?

I have been in love with the Hill Country since I was a kid. Growing up in the drier, treeless, hill-less High Plains, when my family took vacations and other trips to the Hill Country, it opened up a, literally, whole new world to me. And even thirty years of living outside of Texas didn't dim that affection.

But the Hill Country has changed since I was a kid, and I have now lived here long enough (17 years) to have witnessed continuing changes. And most of the changes have not necessarily been for the better. I guess that explains why I have spent as much time as possible trying to preserve as much of our native habitat as possible.

The three most obvious changes in the Hill Country, that I have seen over my lifetime, have been the encroachment of cedar, the greatly increased deer population and the increasing human population. The increase in cedar cover was largely caused by overgrazing and especially the lack of frequent fire. The increase in the deer population was caused by the elimination of the screw-worm fly, hunters taking fewer deer, and people feeding them. And the human population resulted because so many people, like myself, liked it so much they wanted to live here.

And thus the question. Are we loving it to death?

But what has been done is done; we can't change the past. But we can have some effect on the future. Here are three facts that concern me looking into the future.

First, we are losing Hill Country acreage. In the 25-year period from 1982 to 2007, Texas lost 2.9 million acres of farm and rangeland to "development." That is about the size of Bandera, Gillespie, Kendall, Kerr and Kimble counties combined! Granted, most of that loss was around the big cities, but we have lost our share.

Second, as old ranches are broken up and subdivided into many smaller parcels of land (for folks like me to buy as places to live), this land fragmentation adds many more humans living on land previously occupied by very few, with the result of a greatly degraded native habitat.

Third, the population of Texas is predicted to double in the next 30 to 50 years. Unfortunately, the Hill Country is one of the fastest areas of growth in the state..

Just taking those three facts together leads one to conclude that in the future there will be many fewer acres of even somewhat native habitat, more acres of spoiled habitat, and many more people living here. Thus many fewer acres of native habitat, native scenery, and Hill Country beauty, per person, left for future residents to enjoy. What there will be more of is roads, shopping centers, suburbs, parking lots, and traffic.

And, of course, there will be fewer gallons of water available per person.

The hope is that we, individually and collectively as a society, will learn to live here with a smaller footprint. We will have to consume less and conserve more. To do that we need to take a longer view of the world and the future of the Hill Country. We need to listen to what Teddy Roosevelt said over 100 years ago, "Wildlife belongs to the people, but not merely to the people now alive, but to the unborn people. The 'greatest good for the greatest number' applies to the number within the womb of time, compared to which those now alive form but an insignificant fraction."

We need to leave this place in better shape than we found it. And we will need the help of the younger generation to do this. Unfortunately, many young people are growing up with less connection to the natural world than their predecessors. As an example of this, last year, Jonathan Jarvis, the director of the National Park Service, said, "Young people are more separated from the natural world than perhaps any generation before them." He went on to say, "The national parks risk obsolescence in the eyes of an increasingly diverse and distracted demographic." I find that a truly frightening thought.

We need to consider those forces that we cannot control in all of our thoughts, our plans and our actions, but to also address those things that we can control and to think long term about the future and about the generations to inherit this beautiful place.

Until next time...

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