

## What are the Experts Saying About Taking Care of the Hill Country?

I recently attended the Annual Leadership Conference of the Hill Country Alliance (HCA). The HCA is one of my favorite organizations, for several reasons. First, its focus is the land, the water and the people of the Hill Country. One of their main activities is to host educational events to help educate the public about various ecological issues in the Hill Country.

One of their main strengths is that they bring together individuals and organizations that might not ever talk to each other but who have knowledge and expertise in important areas of land management, water conservation and use, and the general health of the Hill Country habitat. These folks include ranchers, farmers, landowners, government agency experts, business and industry people and elected officials—all people who have a stake in the future of the Hill Country.

This particular day-long conference consisted of nearly 200 individuals from all walks of life who have knowledge of, concern for, and ideas about how to protect and preserve our Hill Country natural resources, including our farms, our ranches, our wildlife, our springs, seeps and creeks and our aquifers.

And there are three forces at work that threaten these natural resources. One is the loss of native habitat to “development” which displaces native vegetation, wildlife and porous soil (which captures rainwater) while at the same time introducing more people to demand more natural resources.

Another is land fragmentation which introduces hundreds of people, houses, water wells, septic tanks, roads, etc. on land once occupied by a single ranch family, thus disrupting the native habitat.

The third force is the projected increase in population in the next 30 to 50 years and the demands they will put on our natural resources (especially water) which are already stretched to the limit by current residents.

Here are some of the thoughts, notes, and ideas I took away from this conference; some were new, but mostly they were just new ways to talk about old issues.

Good land management is essential if the land is to capture rainwater to maintain our springs, creeks and aquifers—in other words, maintaining our water resources requires good land stewardship. Taking care of the land is good for our way of life and for the economy as well as for its natural beauty.

Many times and places, the public has voted to spend money to save the environment, including purchasing watershed acreages to protect the aquifer, so it is not true that the public doesn't care.

A couple of quotes: “The public has no idea how serious the water shortage is.” And, “Now is the time to protect our water for the future.”

Garry Merritt, Real County Judge had a really interesting story. Real is a much smaller and less populated county than most of the Hill Country. But Judge Merritt set out on a long term project to see what people valued in their lives and what they wanted in the future. He set up a committee and they in turn hosted quite a few town hall meetings to get the residents ideas on these subjects and then they hired a firm to send out detailed opinion surveys to everyone in the county to collect even more opinions.

The results of all of this might be surprising to some people, maybe not to others. Economic development was not on the top of the list, nor was growth, or attracting new restaurants or other business. What the population of Real county wanted most for the future was to maintain their quality of life and preserve the small-town atmosphere they currently have. For many of them, the latter was probably what they moved to Real for in the first place.

That reminded me of a quote I have in my book from an Australian environmentalist, "The economy is going to have to get smaller in terms of physical impact...To do that you need a growth model based on giving people more time to enjoy life, but with less stuff."

Or, to me it means, we should learn to consume less, conserve more, and enjoy the natural world around us.

Food for thought.

Until next time...

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