

Chapter 1

The Philosophy

In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we have been taught.—Bada Diom

I presume that if you have opened this book and have come to this page, we have certain things in common. It is probably safe to assume that you own a piece of property, probably in the Texas Hill Country, and that you have at least some questions or concerns about how to manage it. It is with those assumptions that this book is written.

We all agree, I believe, that if you bring children into this world you have a certain moral obligation to nurture and protect them for as long as necessary. Likewise, I would argue, if you adopt a puppy or a kitten you have a similar obligation. I would further suggest that a somewhat similar obligation pertains to buying a piece of land. People and puppies have finite lifetimes, but the land lives on forever, so our actions with respect to the land have a longer-lasting effect than how we raise our kids or pets.

Being a good steward of the land should be as much a requirement of a good citizen as being a good parent. Regardless of what the laws and the books in the courthouse say, we don't really "own" the land, we are just the current tenants who are taking care of the place for a brief time before passing it on to the next generation. Common sense and common courtesy require that we leave the land in at least as good a condition as we found it.

As Aldo Leopold, famed ecologist, conservationist, and environmentalist, wrote in "*Sand County Almanac*" in 1949, "We abuse land because we consider it a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man. . . . That land is a community is a basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics."

Professor Larry White, of Texas AgriLife Extension at Texas A & M, puts the idea somewhat differently:

"As a rancher/landowner you manage an entire ecosystem of interrelated factors and resources. Some factors you can control, others you "learn" to live within constraints or suffer the consequences. Your Land Ethics and Stewardship Goals determine what you select to do.

Land Ethics is the moral philosophy, standards of conduct and moral judgment related to the land/natural resources/environment.

Land Stewardship is assuming the responsibilities for the care and use of the land resource."

Texans have a strong attitude that "It's my land and I will do what I want to on it." As a consequence, we have few laws regulating what you can in fact do with your land. Zoning laws are pretty much nonexistent in rural areas, as are most any other legal restrictions. One could argue that this is good or bad, but in reality it is what it is.

About 95 percent of the land area in the state of Texas is privately owned. In spite of some great state parks and magnificent national parks, we have a smaller percentage of public land than most other states. The relevance of this fact is, simply, that if land is to be conserved and managed well, it will have to be done by private landowners. And given the lack of any rules or restrictions in this area, it will have to be done voluntarily. Thus, to use Professor White's

terms, the land ethics and land stewardship of individual landowners are critical to keeping Texas looking like Texas.

In the coming chapters, I discuss in detail why we all have an interest in how everyone else is managing their land. But for now a quote from Lyndon Johnson, in 1947, before he ever went to Washington, sums it up best: “Saving the water and the soil must start where the first raindrop falls.”

We proceed with the assumption that there is at least general agreement as to the ethical responsibilities attendant to owning a piece of property, and that we all want to “take care” of our land, to “manage it well,” to “leave it in better shape than we found it.” But well-meaning people with the best of intentions can do bad things if they don’t know what is, in fact, good and bad land management practice. And before we can talk about the details, we have to have at least a broad general picture of what we think our land should look like, what the ideal Hill Country landscape should be. What is our goal?

When asked that question, some intelligent, well-meaning folks might answer that they want “nature to take its course.” This sounds good; who could be against nature, after all? The problem is that this is not really a vision of what they want the land to look like, but rather a *laissez-faire* management style that accepts whatever results. In most areas of the Hill Country, what would result is a cedar brake.

Other folks might answer that they want the land to look like it did before Europeans began settling the area, that is, before about 1830. At first thought, this sounds like a great vision. But to do that, we would have to stop farming and let the land revert to grassland, take down all the fences, and bring back huge herds of bison. We would also have to bring back the black bear, the wolf, and larger numbers of mountain lions. We would have to let wildfires burn themselves out. Clearly, that isn’t going to happen.

So what would describe an ideal Hill Country landscape? I think the best answer is to think about the land as a biologist would and invoke two of the most powerful concepts in biology and ecology: diversity and sustainability. *Diversity* has to do with variety, in terms of both numbers of plant and animal species and sizes and ages of the longer-lived species. *Sustainability* has to do with the ability of the ecosystem to continue long term in the current state. My dictionary defines *sustainable* in this context as, “a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged.” An ecosystem is sustainable if there is a balance of the numbers of each species so that consumers only consume as much as the land can produce over the long term. No one species crowds out any others, no species becomes overpopulated, and none is eliminated.

You will notice that the above definitions do not list which species should or should not be present or any specific stocking rate or crop. That is because there may be many different collections of species that will work in different ecosystems throughout the Hill Country. No two pieces of property are exactly alike; no two will have exactly the same percentage of each species.

The definition of an ideal Hill Country landscape below is my attempt to put into words a description of my vision. Yours may be quite different. That’s okay. In fact, that’s good. And even if you can’t put your vision into words, if you at least have a general mental picture of what you want your place to become, or continue to be, then you can be in a position to judge each possible management activity in terms of your vision. And that is what this book is designed to help you do.

My ideal Hill Country landscape would:

- Consist of a high level of native vegetative diversity, of a quality and quantity that are sustainable long term and that captures rainwater and prevents soil erosion.
- Support natural populations of native animals by providing food, water, shelter, and cover without degrading the habitat.
- Contain a mixture of mid- and tall grasses interspersed with various forbs (broad-leaved herbaceous plants, wildflowers and weeds) and many different species of trees and understory shrubs

Finally, as the population of the Hill Country increases and the rainfall doesn't, we are going to be increasingly concerned about our water supply. In later chapters I discuss why land management affects water quality and quantity, but suffice it to say at this point that how we all manage our properties affects all the rest of us in terms of our water supply. Good land management tends to improve water quality and quantity; poor land management does the opposite. So we all have a stake in what our neighbor is doing on his land, and we all have an obligation to our neighbors to take care of our own land.