


Texas Lands

The Foundation of Conservation

 the glorious beauty of that scene. Fancy would in vain attempt to paint it! Below, stretching for twenty-five miles in length, and twelve in breadth, lay a sea of pale green, hemmed in by timber of a darker hue; flowers of every variety, shade and form, interspersed over the surface; a dark green belt of verdure here and there, making the ravines and water courses, and groves of trees, or clumps, or single trees, scattered in such perfect arrangement over the whole, as to seem as though some eminent artist had perfected the work.”

- W.B. Parker, 1854¹

AN ECOLOGICAL WONDERLAND

The supreme artist did paint that scene. But the stunning Texas landscapes that W.B. Parker admired were more than awesome scenery. They were part of an ecologically balanced wonder fashioned over millennia. It was a place where native grasses held the soil that retained the water, which fed the flowers and trees that nurtured the grasses in an unending cycle. Because it worked in perfect harmony, the cycle could renew itself year after year. For too long, we chose to believe these lands were indestructible. We were wrong. These lands are under attack and are being lost at an alarming rate - more than 180,000 acres every year. Today, Texas leads all other states in the loss of rural farm and ranch land. ²

THE THREAT OF URBANIZATION

In the name of progress, we have lost sight of the very reasons that made Texas so appealing. As the native grasses, hardwood bottomlands, wetlands and habitat disappear before the sprawl of urbanization, more than species and beauty face extinction. We risk losing a valuable economic partner: the land and its owners.

THE DEMISE OF THE FAMILY FARM

In 2000, then Governor George W. Bush's Task Force on Conservation concluded that the fragmentation of large family-owned farms and ranches pose the greatest threat to wildlife habitat, eco-systems and agriculture in Texas. Of the 144 million acres that are privately held, 91 million acres (63 percent) are owned by only 6 percent of our landowners.³ Most are caring stewards who would rather not sell or divide their lands. Many of those owners have come to revalue not only the beauty but also the economics of good land stewardship. They have partnered with others who recognize that the land is worth more than the market value of the moment, organizations such as The Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, local land trusts, the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department and many others. But too often, it is not enough. The pressures are too great, financial returns too low, property taxes too high and the financial commitment to private lands conservation programs too paltry.

RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP HAS GREAT REWARDS

Yet like all other benefits of conservation: parklands and open space, hunting, fishing and wildlife watching, the lands can add enormous value where good stewardship is allowed to flourish. That value added translates into direct expenditures and financial rewards to landowners, local businesses and sporting goods providers. They are worth repeating: **billions of dollars of income, millions of dollars in sales tax receipts and hundreds of thousands of jobs.**



CONSERVING TEXAS' LANDS: ONE DROP AT A TIME

In 2000, the citizens of San Antonio approved, with a 56% positive vote, a 1/8 cent sales tax increase to purchase undeveloped land in the recharge zones of the Edwards Aquifer. The \$65 million generated will not only allow nature to continue to produce fresh water, but at the same time conserve agricultural lands, open space and wildlife habitat. Informed voters chose to invest now in programs that pay for themselves in short order, while conserving the open spaces of Bexar County for years to come.

But big numbers are impersonal. According to a study of the economic impact of quail hunting in Cottle and Childress Counties, in 2002-2003 quail hunters spent **\$230,490** on direct expenditures. When the standard economic multiplier is applied, that results in an economic impact of **\$691,000 for the community.**⁴ Not bad for two rural counties, especially since these figures reflect only a three-month period and don't take into account revenue from privately-owned ranches.

The total value of land conservation cannot be segmented in "this community" or "that ranch." It's the fragmentation and destruction of the fragile eco-systems of the state as a whole that most concerned Governor George Bush's conservation task force. What was not articulated was the cost. Saving Texas' lands will have a significant price, but the next question is: compared to what?

If our state's lands are to be preserved, the responsibility of land conservation rests on all Texans, including those who are fortunate enough to own their own ranches and those who enjoy Texas through public venues such as parks and preserves. We must continue to explore all possible methods of wise investment, such as a meaningful **Purchase of Development Rights** program, to insure that Texas' lands continue to return enriching dividends.

-
- ¹ W.B. Parker. Summer and Fall 1854, notes taken during the expedition commanded by Capt. R. B. Marcy through unexplored Texas.
² *Texas Rural Lands*: An overview of the Rural Land Fragmentation Project conducted by the Texas A&M University System in partnership with American Farmland Trust, 2003.
³ *Taking Care of Texas*: A Report from the Governor's Task Force on Conservation, 2000.
⁴ *Quail Economics*: A Survey to Determine Hunter Influence on Rural Communities in the Rolling Plains of Texas, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, 2002-2003.
-

If you would like more information about conservation in Texas, contact the Texas Coalition for Conservation at txcoalition@aol.com, fax (512) 349-2439, or phone (512) 349-2449.