

Bamberger Ranch Preserve: Teaching Good Land Stewardship by Example

In 1969, J. David Bamberger, then CEO of Church's Fried Chicken, bought 3000 acres of land south of Johnson City. He purposely chose a piece of property that was in very bad shape—almost totally covered in cedar, no water sources at all, poor grazing for livestock and poor habitat for wildlife.

Back then, there were very few sources of information on how to restore degraded land, and even fewer examples of places where it had been done successfully. With an inordinate amount of common sense and good judgment, a willingness to spend time, labor and money to improve the property, and a perseverance to learn from mistakes and keep on working, Bamberger has transformed the ranch into a model of what Hill Country property should look like.

The early efforts involved removing Ashe juniper, planting native grasses, and controlling erosion. Springs appeared where they had not been seen for years, if ever. As time went on, and the former cedar brakes became grasslands, prairies and savannas, work continued with ways to better capture rainwater. Thousands of native trees and shrubs were planted, another 2500 acres were added to the ranch, and cattle were reintroduced as yet another tool to manage the habitat.

There are now lakes, ponds and stock tanks where there were once none, and an estimated 1000 plus acre feet of water (326,000,000 gallons!) flow out of the ranch into a creek that flows into the Pedernales and then to the Colorado River where the City of Austin uses the water that was not available in 1969! Bamberger's success in getting springs flowing by practicing good land stewardship lends credence to Lyndon Johnson's famous 1947 quote, "Saving the water and the soil must begin where the first raindrop falls".

The carrying capacity of the ranch for grazers has more than doubled, and Bamberger has even worked on developing a new breed of cattle with 1/8th buffalo genes. (As further evidence of the good stewardship practiced at the ranch, they have recently removed the cattle from the ranch and plan to rest the pastures for a couple of years as a response to our current unprecedented drought, a practice advocated by many experts today). In addition, the ranch maintains a herd of endangered Scimitar-horned oryx as part of an international program to save the species from extinction. The number of bird species noted has risen from less than 50 to over 200. And the first ever man-made bat cave has been constructed and is attracting bats.

The ranch has now been established as a Preserve so their work can continue well into the future. For all of these accomplishments, J. David Bamberger and his Preserve, have been the recipients of a long list of awards and recognitions. This would all be worth noting even if it were the end of the story. But it's not.

The Bamberger Ranch Preserve has not only served as an example of good land management for years, but the ranch has been the site for the education of thousands of landowners, school children, and adults of all interests, as well as the site for many academic research projects. To me it is the combination of being both an excellent example of how land should be managed as well as providing numerous educational programs at the Preserve that really makes it stand out. The only other property I know of in our area that combines these two attributes is the Kerr Wildlife Management Area, managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department outside of Hunt.

Back in 2002 and 2003, my wife and I took 5 or 6 full-day workshops at the Bamberger Ranch, on topics such as native grasses, tree and shrub identification, range science, water and erosion management, and the general philosophy of habitat management and land stewardship. We found them all very instructive and a lot of fun as well.

I would urge all landowners and anyone else interested in land management and conserving our native Texas, or who just wants to see what a very well-managed ranch looks like, to go to the Bamberger Ranch Preserve web site, www.bambergerranch.org, or contact them at 2341 Blue Ridge Dr., Johnson City, TX, 78636, 830-868-2630 to learn about programs open to the public.

Until next time...

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