

Does it Matter How Rural Property is Managed?

I was having a casual conversation with someone recently who lives in the city and I happened to say something to the effect that it matters to everyone how rural property is managed. To which the person I was talking with responded, “Why does it matter to me? Doesn’t everyone have the right to do whatever they want to on their property?” And the answer is, of course everyone does has the right to manage their property however they see fit—this is Texas! But that doesn’t mean that how they do it doesn’t affect the rest of us.

Some readers may be thinking I am referring to unsightly junk yards or other industrial facilities that affect others, but that kind of thing is just a small part of what I am referring to.

In the 25 year period ending in 2007, Texas lost 2.9 million acres of agricultural land (farms and ranches) to “development” (houses, shopping centers, roads, filling stations, etc.). That is about the size of Bandera, Gillespie, Kendall, Kerr and Kimble counties combined! Now, project that thought to the next 25 to 40 years when the population of Texas is projected to double.

The amount of native areas (rangeland, grassland, savannas, woodlands, and riparian areas) is shrinking fast. But that land is important to all of us, because as Lyndon Johnson said back in 1947, “Saving the water and the soil must start where the first raindrop falls”, and the first raindrops fall on these shrinking native areas.

To make matters worse, many old time ranches are being subdivided into hundreds of small parcels of land to give many of us a place to live in the country. But this land fragmentation has consequences. Where only one family once occupied the ranch, after it is subdivided many families will live there resulting in a huge increase in people, dogs, cats, water wells, septic systems, roads, use of pesticides, etc.

So one of the reasons why we care how native land is managed is because we are losing it at a rapid rate. Another reason why we care is because how land is managed affects us all in terms of the local economy, the quantity and quality of water available to us all, the health of the habitat for native wildlife, the beauty of the countryside, the value of the land, and the ability of the land to withstand droughts and floods.

In the Hill Country, land that is well managed is not excessively overgrazed (cattle, sheep, goats, and exotics) or overbrowsed (goats, exotics, white-tailed deer) or brush covered (cedar). Rather, well-managed Hill Country land has a good stand of native grasses with little bare ground and a diverse collection of native trees and shrubs, all of which makes for a good habitat for all of our native animals.

Land that has a good vegetative cover will maintain a healthy, fertile soil with a high organic content, which is the ideal situation for capturing and holding rainwater and preventing erosion. This in turn makes for greater aquifer, spring and seep recharge which helps to maintain the base flow of creeks and rivers between rainfall events.

Conversely, land that is severely overgrazed and overbrowsed will have significant bare ground subject to erosion, little or no vegetation below the browseline, soil that is less porous with less organic matter thus capable of adsorbing less rainwater. Land that is excessively cedar-covered will result in a less diverse habitat, less rainwater reaching the ground, and more runoff and erosion.

Given the current trends in our human population and our current and future projected water situation, we need to consider every acre of our native land as precious. In the future, we will have fewer acres of unspoiled native habitat per person than we do now, so it just makes sense to protect and conserve as much of it now as we can. Our grandkids will thank us for it.

So, yes, landowners have the right to manage their land however they wish. The hope is that all landowners, regardless of size, will come to see themselves not as the final owners of their property, but as the custodians of the land that they will sometime pass along to future generations. Simple courtesy and common sense will dictate that they pass it on in at least as good a shape as they found it.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spiling It". He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.