

How Can We Protect the Hill Country?

Recently I watched a few of the episodes of the Ken Burns' film, "The National Parks: Americas Best Idea". I had seen the whole series before, but I found it well worth watching again. What struck me on watching this time was how we, the American people, owe a huge debt of gratitude to only a handful of people who were responsible for the creation of the National Park Service.

The National Park Service was created in 1916, largely through the efforts of Steve Mather and Horace Albright. Prior to that there were a few National Parks (Yellowstone, Yosemite), but no government agency to manage them, and they were beginning to be abused. Largely through Mather's management the parks became well-managed and many more parks were added to the system, and even in the 1920s, millions of Americans visited the parks.

And these were Americans that didn't even know they wanted the parks until they were established and the word spread. And that is the point that struck me the most. There was not strong public demand for more parks, and in most places there was active local opposition to the establishment of a new park. And in fact, none of the parks that were established up until the Great Smoky Mountains NP in 1934, were purchased by federal government funds.

Where would we be today if none of our National Parks had been created and protected before they were totally destroyed by overuse and commercial activity? Looking back over the 100 years since the establishment of the National Park Service we can all be extremely grateful to the handful of men with vision and determination who saved all of these National Treasures for us to enjoy today.

When it comes to nature, my main focus is the Hill Country. And so I ask the question now. How will the residents of the Hill Country in 2116 feel about those of us entrusted with the management of the Hill Country today and what will we have left them? Is there a Steve Mather or Horace Albright for the Hill Country? And if there is, will we listen to them?

By my count there are about 20 state parks, state natural areas, and wildlife management areas in the Hill Country. But some of them are filled to over capacity with people in busy seasons, and over half have no camping facilities. When the population of the Hill Country doubles in the next few decades, where will all the new people go to experience native Hill Country habitat?

There is one new area that was recently donated to Texas Parks and Wildlife that will be available to visitors in a few years. It will be the Albert and Bessie Kronkosky State Natural Area, a 3,800-acre property between Boerne and Pipe Creek. This is especially important because that is an area that is growing fast with many ranches and natural areas being broken up for "developments" and "ranchettes". It is in an especially

geologically and ecologically sensitive area on the Balcones Escarpment, and it contains an astonishing number of important species of native vegetation.

And there may be similar future donations of private land to the state, but it is unlikely such donations will match the increase in population or be of a quality that deserves state park status. There are of course many well-managed private ranches in the Hill Country that are truly beautiful, healthy, diverse native habitats, but that would not necessarily lend themselves to unlimited public access. And many owners of those properties would not likely want too many people to visit, nor have the facilities for them to do so.

The worry about these properties is that although they serve to protect and conserve healthy native habitat today, and are thus vital to the preservation of a healthy Hill Country landscape, unless protected by conservation easements or something similar, they could in the future be lost to development or to poor management.

The Hill Country needs some mechanism to help landowners of special places maintain their land. Some organizations that strive to do just that include several of the local land trusts, the Nature Conservancy, and the Hill Country Alliance. Organizations that help educate the public on these matters include local nature centers, Native Plant Society of Texas chapters, and the Texas Master Naturalists.

Your support of these organizations will help to protect the future of the Hill Country.

Until next time...

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