

Land Fragmentation: Is There Enough Room for All of Us?

Land fragmentation is the term used to describe what happens when a larger ranch is broken up onto many smaller “ranchettes”, giving rise to many more people living on an area of land that previously only had one or two families on it. It is a common thing that has happened and continues to happen at a faster pace throughout much of the Hill Country. It is where many of us are now living, and when I say us I am certainly including my wife and I.

So I certainly understand the attraction of being able to buy a small piece of land and live out in the “country”, away from the noise and crowds of the city and to be surrounded by a, relatively, native habitat with native flora and fauna.

The problem is that when we do that, we are degrading that native habitat we wanted to live in—too many people living on too few acres means we are essentially “loving it to death.” As the saying goes, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

I did a little research. According to Google, the total land surface area of the earth is a bit over 57 million square miles, of which about 33% is desert and 24% too mountainous for habitation, which leaves about 24.6 million square miles of **habitable** area on the Earth, which is a little less than 16 billion acres.

There are now about 7.5 billion people on Earth, so roughly 2 acres of livable land for every one of us. Or, if the average family, worldwide, is 4 people, that means 8 acres available for every family on Earth.

Obviously, the population distribution across the globe is not uniform, which is fortunate for those of us in the Hill Country, even those in the big Hill Country cities like Kerrville. If most of the world’s population didn’t live stacked on top of each other (Literally, in high-rise apartment buildings), those of us in the Hill Country would be feeling really crowded right now.

But if there are only two acres of livable land on the planet for every person, one of the obvious things is that those two acres have to provide each person with all of the food, water, shelter, energy and minerals that person needs throughout his/her life. Think about that for a while. (OK, some of the food and energy we get from the ocean, and with desalination, we could get some water too, but you get the idea.)

One could ask, what difference would it have made if instead of all of us moving out into the country on small properties, we had stayed in the cities or had moved into the cities of the Hill Country? The cities would obviously be larger, both in area as well as in population. The countryside would have many fewer people living there and there would probably be more large ranches still functioning.

But would those areas be better native habitat? Possibly, but not necessarily. If the economy was such that the large ranchers had to overgraze their ranches in order to

make a living, or that they could not afford to manage cedar, then the habitat might be no better than if it had been broken up into ranchettes. It is hard to know, "What would have happened if?" And it is an academic question anyway, because I am pretty sure that in the future more and more of the Hill Country will be broken up into "developments".

So, dealing with where we are in the beginning of 2017, I can only offer one suggestion. And that is for all of us current and future ranchette owners to become the best native habitat land stewards we can be so that the impact of our presence on our little pieces of native habitat will be minimal.

How can we do that? We can design our homes to be as minimally intrusive on the landscape as possible, minimize the amount of impervious cover, capture rainwater, refrain from planting any non-native plants, prevent our cats and dogs from free-ranging, manage the cedar and the deer, and live with and enjoy our native animals.

Let's enjoy it, not destroy 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 Spoiling It." He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.