

## Encouraging Signs in Hill Country Land Management

A lot of those of us who are concerned about the future conditions of the Hill Country tend to focus on the problems we see in land management. To greatly oversimplify the issue, too many properties in the Hill Country have less-than ideal native habitat, mostly caused by past or present overgrazing, overbrowsing by deer, goats and exotics, cedar encroachment, and/or erosion of the soil.

To complicate all of the above are three forces over which we have little or no influence: (1) loss of native habitat to “development,” (2) land fragmentation in which large ranches are broken up into many small lots resulting in greatly increased human density on the land, and (3) all of the above exacerbated by the projected increase in the human population in the next few decades. And of course, the issue of water looms large over everything mentioned above.

But there is some hope here as well. I think it was Winston Churchill who said something to the effect, “Americans will always do the right thing after they try everything else first.”

Recently, within a few days of each other I read two accounts of people who have had great success in improving the conditions on their property, and it got me to thinking about all the good things I know of that people are practicing today that weren't being done a couple of decades or so ago. Here are some of them:

Rainwater harvesting seems to be steadily increasing, both by individuals as well as businesses. When done in the city, this not only reduces the demand for purified city water but it also reduces the volume of storm water and potential flooding problems during heavy rains. When done in the country this reduces the amount of water withdrawn from our aquifers, making them last longer. Also, folks who harvest rainwater are more aware of water usage and thus less likely to waste water like they might have in the past.

The number of properties being converted from regular Ag Valuation to Wildlife Valuation continues to increase. People under wildlife management use practice land management with greater emphasis on improving native habitat for wildlife than for just for grazing, even though livestock are still allowed. The result tends to be healthier, better functioning habitat, greater wildlife diversity, and a greater awareness of wildlife needs by the owners.

Since the greatest loss of native habitat tends to be rural land lost to development (suburbs, shopping centers, parking lots, roads, etc.) as well as land fragmentation, conservation easements, which generally limit the number of additional residences that can be built in the future, serve to protect native habitat into the future. The landowners can certify how many, if any, new residences can be built in the future while maintaining their ability to continue to use the land as they see fit.

Improved land management techniques are an ever-increasing factor in improving the condition of the land on many properties, especially larger properties with livestock. These improved techniques usually begin with simply reduced stocking rates, rotational grazing, and managing the deer population. Other techniques may include cedar management yielding more grazable acres, which, if done properly, can also make for a more diverse habitat. More advanced techniques may include fencing the livestock out of riparian areas as well as high intensity short duration grazing systems.

The result of all of the above is that more and more properties are being better managed than they were 20, 30 or more years ago. Also, many of the new land owners moving into the Hill Country, especially those on 50 to 100 acres or more, are likely financially able to spend more money, per acre, maintaining the land than previous ranchers could afford to do.

Finally, something I have had some involvement with, our Hill Country Master Naturalist chapter has now trained about 500 Hill Country residents, many of whom own rural property and all of whom are far more aware of the issues of land management and native habitat than the average person and their volunteer efforts are making a difference in many ways. State-wide, there are now over 11,000 Master Naturalists.

So, yes there are problems in maintaining our native Hill Country habitat, and we obviously need to accomplish much more, but things are at least moving in the right direction.

Happy New Year!

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at [jstmn@ktc.com](mailto:jstmn@ktc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).