

Our Texas Hill Country: Are We Loving it to Death?

When I was a kid, I loved Cheetos, the cheese-flavored snack. Until one time I ate so many at one time that I got sick. Now, to this day, I can't stand the smell of them. Too much of a good thing can cease to be a good thing.

I love the Hill Country. And when I say that I am thinking about the trees and the grass and the hills and the creeks; in other words, the natural Hill Country, our native habitat. And then a few days ago I was driving on a road I hadn't been on for a while that always had a very nice view of two tree-covered hills and a valley below. Except this time what I saw was two motel-sized houses being built on top of the two hills! It is just not the same anymore.

Between 1982 and 2007, in the US, 23,000,000 acres of agricultural land (farms and ranches) were converted to "developed" land (housing developments, shopping centers, schools, roads, etc.). That is an area the size of Indiana!

Texas leads all other states, by far, in the number of acres lost. Texas lost 2,900,000 acres in that same time period. That is about the size of Bandera, Gillespie, Kendall, Kerr and Kimble counties combined! Fortunately, most of the area lost was not in the Hill Country but around Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth and Austin/San Antonio. More recent numbers show that Texas lost 590,000 acres between 1997 and 2012.

But it is not just land lost to development that concerns most of us, but land fragmentation—the splitting up of large ranches into small lots. Andy Sansom tells an interesting story about pipeline right-of-ways in Gillespie Co.

"In 1928 in order to get all the way across Gillespie Country, the pipeline company dealt with 12 landowners. In 2011, the pipeline was removed, and this time, across that same country, the pipeline company had to deal with 2000 landowners.... And this in a county we still consider "rural."

How many of us are living on land that was once a much larger ranch? A lot of us. The 22 acres I own and live on was part of a larger ranch 50 years ago. But in a few years from now when I die, two of the three lots that make up the 22 acres will probably be sold separately so there will be 3 houses on those 22 little acres.

A couple of weeks ago I wrote about how nature (native areas, habitat) are ecosystems which provide us with essential goods and services. But we are shrinking the amount of native ecosystems and adding increasing numbers of humans requiring these services. These trends can't continue indefinitely.

To understand why land fragmentation is detrimental to the quality and quantity of native habitat, think about what happens when a 1000-acre ranch is subdivided into 100, ten-acre lots.

Once the 100 lots are sold and built on, that thousand acres will look very different. Instead of one house, one water well and one septic system there will now be 100 of

each. Instead of 2 barns there will now be maybe 30, most with RVs in them. Instead of 4 to 6 people there will now be over 300. Where there were no paved roads, now there will likely be 5 to 8 miles along with 3 to 5 miles of utility lines. Where there were at most about 6,000 square feet of impervious cover, there may now be close to 1 million sq. ft. And where there used to be hunters, there are now regulations preventing hunting, plus a good number of residents actively feeding the deer.

Some of those new residents will undoubtedly improve the habitat on their property and take good care of it. But there will be others that do many detrimental things to the property, some of which may also affect their neighbors.

Consider the fact that everything I have said above about the Hill Country applies to the conditions that exist today. Now, factor in the projecting doubling of the Hill Country population over the next 30 to 50 years. Will the new residents take better care of the Hill Country than we have or will things get even worse?

Food for thought.

Until next time...

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. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.