

Does it Matter How Everyone Manages Their Land?

Much of today's column is inspired by two articles in the latest "Texas Wildlife" magazine by Steve Nelle. Steve is not only a friend of mine, but my expert-of-choice whenever I have any question pertaining to land management. He is also a fan, as am I, of the writings of Aldo Leopold.

In one article, Steve quotes from a 1938 essay by Leopold as follows, "There is as yet, no social stigma in the possession of a gullied farm, a wrecked forest, or a polluted stream, provided the dividends suffice to send the youngsters to college."

It was more common in Leopold's time for people to move onto a new piece of land and farm it or graze it until it was no longer productive and then to simply move to a "fresh" piece of land and start over. These days, land prices being what they are and the fact that there are fewer "fresh" pieces of property left, that kind of activity is less common.

But that doesn't mean that there are not people who still cause, or allow, their property to become so degraded, overgrazed, eroded, and/or cedar choked that recovery is near impossible. To be clear, it is important to state that, legally, a person can do whatever they want to with their land as long as they don't negatively impact their neighbors.

So we mostly observe such degraded properties with the attitude that, "I am glad it is not ours", or maybe "I am glad he is not my neighbor."

But the fact that it is not ours or our neighbors doesn't mean it doesn't matter to all of us, that we are not affected by it. And the way it matters to all of us was the topic of Nelle's other article in the magazine, and that has to do with water.

All the water we have now, or have ever had, or ever will have, in our rivers, our lakes, our aquifers, our wells, at one time or another fell to earth as rain and fell on someone's property. What happens then makes all the difference in the world.

In one extreme, the property could be a shopping center and a parking lot, all impervious surfaces so that none of the water that falls on that property can soak into the earth. Every drop of water then runs into the storm sewer system and into the river and down to the ocean in a matter of a few days. We didn't get to use any of it.

I know, you are thinking, what about capturing the storm water in lakes? How much of a storm runoff is captured by a lake depends on how full the lake is when it rains, it could be a substantial amount, it could be very little.

In contrast, if the property was a well-managed ranch or ranchette that had a good covering of native grass and as well as of native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers, all of which can slow the water down and give it time to soak into the ground, the water will be available to us, even between rain events.

From there the water can either be taken up by the vegetation or flow downhill to replenish the local water table which in turn can help provide the base flow for our creeks and rivers in between rainfall events. Some of the water might seep deeper to replenish aquifers. And this is the water we use every day.

Perhaps some numbers provided by Nelle will help illustrate the importance or what happens to that raindrop. For every 100 acres that receives 25 inches of rain in a year (a little less than our average), 65 million gallons of water will fall, the equivalent of 120 gallons every minute for the entire year! That is enough water to supply a village of 2000 people.

So how much of the rain runs off and how much soaks into the ground determines how much useable water we get from that property during the rainstorm. And how the land is managed largely determines that distribution.

Overgrazed pastures and riparian areas lead to excessive runoff and erosion, whereas land managed to have good stands of native grasses and well-vegetated riparian areas, slow down the water and prevent erosion.

So yes, it does matter to all of us how land is managed. Most old-time observers think our Hill Country is generally better managed today than even 20 or 30 years ago. But we still have more work to do to capture all the water that falls.

Until next time...

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