

## How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling it

Often, in talks to various groups on the subject of our native habitat, I say there are three forces over which we have very little control but which are decreasing the amount of native habitat in the Hill Country.

The three are: (1) farm and ranch land sold to development (housing projects, shopping centers, schools, parking lots, roads, etc.), (2) land fragmentation of larger ranches being broken up into many small parcels thus giving myself and many others a place to live in the country, and (3) the projected doubling of the state population in the next 30 to 50 years. Economics is obviously the main driver for all of the above.

But when you look at it carefully, it turns out that there are a certain number of land management options that those of us who are the recipients (consumers) of the land fragmentation can do to partially mitigate some of the problems created by the fragmentation and our living on small acreages in the country.

A typical land fragmentation in the Hill Country might go something like this: a rancher with a 1000 acres sells to a developer for way more than he can make running cows. The developer divides the land up into 100, ten acre lots which he sells to folks like me and many of you as well. When fully developed there will be 100 times as many houses, water wells, septic systems, people, free ranging dogs and cats, and many more times that of paved roads, utility lines, and impervious cover, all of which serve to degrade the original native habitat.

And of course, the increased number of people in the area puts pressure on schools, police, fire, emergency services, and businesses of all kinds, all of which have to expand or find new locations for larger facilities. So even more land is lost to development.

And like most of you, I didn't give any thought to any of this before we moved here.

But there are some things we can do to help mitigate our impact on the surrounding nature and the natural habitat. It amounts to living with the lightest footprint on the land as possible. And to do that, it helps greatly to do a little research and plan before you build.

With adequate planning it is possible for people to live only on the renewable electricity they produce themselves and to capture all of their water needs from rainwater. While going without electricity from the grid may be a bit more than many folks are ready to do, either mentally or economically, the Hill Country is full of folks who capture all of the rainwater they need for a cost similar to that of drilling a well.

But planning ahead can allow you do to lots of other things that lighten your footprint for very little cost. Things such as plumbing the house for separate waste water collection from washing machines, showers and bath tubs, installation of energy-saving

appliances and fixtures, collecting air conditioner condensate, etc. all of which reduces your dependence on a well.

Every new construction should include a rainwater collection system, whether for potable water use inside or just for watering plants.

If you feel you must have a lawn, keep it to the minimum size acceptable to you, only mow it at a high setting on the mower and as infrequently as possible. Many of us have found that without judgmental neighbors with big green lawns, the actual need for a typical lawn disappears along with the lawn mower.

Other ways to have minimal impact on the environment is to plant only native plants, keep dogs and cats indoors, provide feed and water for the birds but only in locations that do not have hiding places for cats. If the land around you is free of any hardwood understory (shrubs, vines), then you could plant native species inside a fence and make a small oasis of natural habitat (but only if you won't have outside cats.)

Remember, Mother nature took perfect care of the Hill Country before we got here and she never had a lawn mower, or chain saw, or tree pruner, and she didn't rake leaves or use pesticides or fertilizers. And she certainly didn't shoot wildlife.

So move to the country to enjoy it as it is and not to try to make it into something that more resembles the park-like environment you came from.

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](mailto:jstmn@ktc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).