



BLANCO RIVER PROJECT

*Conserving aquatic treasures
in the Texas Hill Country*

conservation profile

Ecoregion: Edwards Plateau.

Conservation Elements: Springs and seeps, riparian forests and floodplains. Canyon system, upland grasslands, savannas and shrublands. Blanco natural heritage sites, rural and village ambience, sustainable Hill Country economy, golden-cheeked warbler, black-capped vireo, speckled chub, Texas shiner, Guadalupe bass, Cagle's map turtle, headwater catfish, swamp rabbit, Texas horned lizard, canyon mock-orange, purple-spike coralroot, granite spiderwort and others.

Stresses: Home development, unsustainable ground and surface water use, excessive wildlife herbivory, unsustainable grazing practices, incompatible fire management.

Strategies: Promote sustainable water use and appropriate land management, encourage environmentally sensitive building, conserve natural and cultural heritage.

Partners: Texas State University-San Marcos, Wimberley Valley Watershed Association, Guadalupe Blanco River Trust, other non-governmental organizations, private landowners, local communities, and state and federal natural resource conservation agencies.



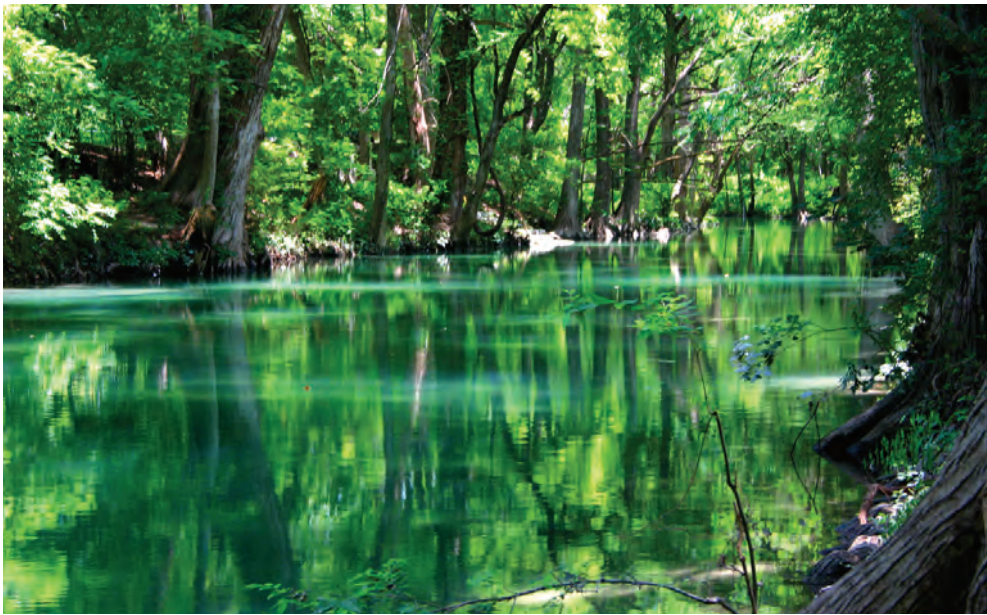
Blanco River (© Lynn McBride)

During its 87-mile course through three counties, the Blanco River is the defining element in some of the Texas Hill Country's most beautiful scenery. There are shady banks lined with cypress, pecan and willow trees; hills and bluffs punctuated with live oaks and limestone outcroppings; and deep pools where fish hang suspended in glassy green water. Its name – Blanco, or "white" – comes from its white limestone riverbanks and streambeds.

This swift but shallow river is a vital link in the Edwards Plateau

Ecoregion, as it is known to ecologists. It is part of a network of rivers and aquifers that residents in Austin, San Marcos, San Antonio and the surrounding countryside depend on for drinking water, agriculture and recreation. Its basin spans more than 400 miles.

Fast-paced development threatens the Hill Country and the freshwater resources that sustain its native plants and animals. Seven Hill Country counties ranked among the top 100 fastest-growing counties in the United States, according to



Blanco River (© Lynn McBride)

the U.S. Census Bureau. For example, Hays County – home to Wimberley and San Marcos – doubled its population between 1980 and 2000 to 97,000 people; projections suggest its population could reach 167,000 in another eight years.

The Blanco River has few major tributaries and lies in a fairly undeveloped part of the region; as such, it is one of Texas' more pristine river systems. The river's headwaters begin in the springs of Kendall County, where waters then flow through Blanco and Hays counties to end at the San Marcos River. The San Marcos, which is special to many Texans, also supports a breathtaking array of aquatic and terrestrial life. Waters from the Blanco ultimately reach the Guadalupe River and the Gulf of Mexico. Its influence, therefore, is seen for hundreds of miles, all the way to Texas' coastal estuaries.

Project Launched

To conserve the resources and natural treasures of the Hill Country, the Conservancy launched the Blanco River Project in cooperation with public and private partners in 2003.

The project encourages voluntary collaboration among private landowners, community leaders, government agencies, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations. Its goal is to conserve the diversity of life found in the Blanco River Valley, with particular emphasis on aquatic resources; aquatic system function; and rare or unique plants, animals and communities. Because land ownership within the 400-square-mile project area overwhelmingly is private, the Conservancy's strategy is to work with private landowners and other partners in a variety of ways.

Initiatives planned or underway include supporting Texas State University-San Marcos aquatic research and monitoring programs; providing aquatic and terrestrial management information and cost share support to private landowners; supporting sustainable ground and surface water management; and promoting ecologically compatible home development.

Identifying Stresses on the Blanco River

Because of this region's biological importance and the immediate

pressures from development that it faces, the Conservancy joined others working to conserve the natural heritage within the river's basin. Together, they created a project plan that balanced ecological needs with lifestyle priorities that were identified by local residents. This plan – which is merely the beginning of a collaboration with local residents – forms a blueprint that will guide conservation work and partnerships. The Conservancy's interactions with community members will continue to inform and influence how the Blanco River watershed is conserved.

As a part of the planning process, the team found incompatible development, unsustainable water use and over-abundance of white-tailed deer had a negative influence on the diversity of life found in the Blanco River Valley. Other concerns included incompatible vegetation clearing, incompatible fire management, unsustainable grazing practices and the spreading of invasive native and non-native species. Many of these stresses were identified as concerns across the broader landscape during the ecoregional planning process for the Edwards Plateau. It is hoped that tools, techniques, partnerships and approaches developed as the Blanco River Project unfolds will be readily transferable to similar landscapes throughout the Edwards Plateau, which is nationally recognized as an important area for biodiversity conservation.

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