

Executive Summary

With its cypress-shaded rivers, wooded limestone hills, luxuriant spring wildflowers, and water-carved caverns, the Hill Country is one of our state's greatest natural treasures. This Central Texas ecoregion, also known as the Edwards Plateau (Figure 1), encompasses more than 93,240 square kilometers (36,000 square miles). The Hill Country is home to many plants and animals both common and rare, including 81 plant and 67 animal species with global rankings from "very rare" to "critically imperiled".

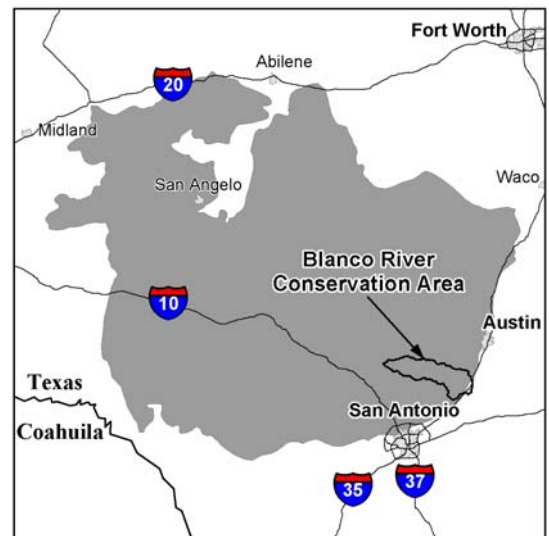
Of course, people live here too. Seven counties in the Hill Country ranked among the top 100 fastest-growing counties in the country between 1990 and 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Much of this burgeoning growth is over the Edwards and Trinity Aquifers, bringing to the fore the urgent need for careful land-use planning in order to avoid future water contamination and shortages. Many Hill Country rivers stand to be affected by this growth, not least among them the Blanco (which sits atop the Trinity Aquifer).

This river has few major tributaries and lies in a fairly undeveloped basin; as such, it is one of Texas' more pristine river systems. The Blanco River has its headwaters at springs in Kendall County, and then flows through Blanco and Hays counties to end at the San Marcos River. This 140-kilometer (87-mile) river supports a breathtaking array of aquatic and terrestrial life, in addition to being a special place in the heart of many Texans. Water from the Blanco ultimately reaches the Guadalupe River and the Gulf of Mexico. This means its influence is seen for hundreds of miles, all the way to our coastal estuaries.



Figure 2. Blanco River basin

Figure 1. Edwards Plateau ecoregion



Because of the biological importance of this area, and the immediate and impending pressures it faces, the Conservancy has joined others already working to conserve the natural heritage within the river basin (Figure 2). Through local partnerships, The Nature Conservancy is committed to helping human communities find ways to live productively and sustainably in this delicate environment, while conserving the diverse native plants and animals that depend on this scenic landscape. The Nature Conservancy will partner with public, private and commercial interests to:

- Encourage sustainable use of groundwater and surface water in the Blanco River basin
- Promote building practices that minimize habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation
- Remove technical roadblocks to ecologically sustainable land management
- Retain the area's rich natural and cultural heritage, along with a sustainable economy

The Planning Process for Blanco River

The Nature Conservancy of Texas completed the draft ecoregional assessment for the Edwards Plateau (Figure 1, Appendix A) in 2003. The portfolio of conservation areas (places with high biodiversity) established by this assessment included areas surrounding the Blanco River, and led the Conservancy to establish a Blanco River project. Geographically, the Blanco River basin, which essentially defines the project boundary, encompasses or intersects six of these ecoregional conservation areas, areas of high biodiversity that may also be at risk for serious degradation (Appendix A). The Nature Conservancy was not alone, or first, in recognizing the significance of this part of the Hill Country. Local residents have been collaborating in various ways for years to retain their way of life and their natural resources, working mainly within small grass roots organizations. The Conservancy felt that we could add to the work ongoing here, and set out to begin exploring ways to further advance conservation in the area. The Conservancy works with the philosophy that effective conservation should benefit not just natural resources, but also the human communities that have a stake in those resources, and that our work should enhance rather than detract from local communities. Likewise, we recognize and appreciate the history of sound land stewardship and the achievements of other conservation groups that precede our entrance into this area.

Thus, the first logical step in our project exploration was to initiate a dialogue with community members, to learn what their priorities were, to determine what goals were shared among various interest groups, and to hear what the community thought the Conservancy could do to add to the conservation picture in the Blanco River watershed. We began by inviting over 30 stakeholder representatives (Appendix G) to a two-day meeting, during which the group delved into the aforementioned issues. The next step in the planning process integrated members of this first “community team” with biologists to form a “technical team.” The technical team conducted a science-based conservation needs assessment based on conservation and lifestyle priorities identified by the community team. The results of these two meetings were shared with the larger river basin community as a draft of this conservation plan. The draft was revised based on input from all these teams and groups, and now stands as the blueprint which will guide our work and partnerships.

This conservation plan represents the beginning of our conversations and collaboration with local residents. While it is the result of extensive consultation, we realize that we have not yet reached all the interested individuals in this area. A large part of our ongoing outreach work will revolve around that challenge, and our interactions with community members will continue to inform and influence how we work to help conserve the Blanco River watershed. We wish to thank all the people who devoted so much of their time to this planning project. This plan belongs to you.