



FRESHWATER CONSERVATION

Protecting our most important natural resource

conservation profile

Shaping policy

One way The Nature Conservancy works to protect our state's freshwater resources is by assisting in the enacting and implementation of local initiatives and legislation.

Since 1992, the Conservancy has participated in efforts to pass public ballot measures that have raised \$406.5 million for land and water conservation in Central and South Texas alone.

Time and again the citizens of San Antonio, Austin and San Marcos and voters in Travis, Hays, Kendall and Bexar counties have proved their willingness to safeguard open spaces and water resources. These initiatives have helped protect some of the most beautiful and ecologically important natural features in Texas, including Barton and San Marcos springs, the San Marcos River and the Edwards Aquifer contributing and recharge zones.

We also provide data and input to the Texas Environmental Flows Commission, which was assembled by the Governor to determine appropriate instream flows in our state's rivers. These standards will allow us to ascertain the ecological needs of different watersheds in Texas and design appropriate conservation measures.



Devils River (© Paul Barwick)

Because of its sheer size, variety of terrain and biological diversity, Texas is home to communities with differing economies, traditions and heritage. Texas' major cities are hubs of modern commerce while vast rural portions of the state are dedicated to ranching and agriculture. Despite these differences, one issue the entire state can agree on is the importance of water.

The rivers that unfurl across the land and the springs that carry ancient water from deep, underground

aquifers unite this state. Water rises from underground aquifers into rivers and flows across the state into bays, estuaries and ultimately, the Gulf of Mexico. Each component is part of a physically and biologically connected network that spreads life-giving water throughout the state. Every living creature, human or animal, needs water to survive. The industries that contribute to the economy of the state – ranching, agriculture and manufacturing to name but a few – depend on a lasting supply of clean, abundant water.



Barton Creek (© Lynn McBride)

The Nature Conservancy of Texas has been committed to protecting our state's water since its inception in 1964. In recent years, those efforts have taken on an increased urgency. Studies indicate that by 2040, the population in Texas will more than double to 43.5 million people while water resources will decrease by nearly 20 percent. This disparity is why the Conservancy is investing significant time and effort to conserve freshwater resources.

In Texas, we have projects that benefit the Devils, Blanco, Frio, Nueces, Sabinal, and Pedernales rivers. We have preserves that protect large portions of Independence, Love and Barton creeks. We work extensively to conserve the Edwards and Trinity aquifers, both major sources of water for human use. At Caddo Lake, we work to safeguard the state's only natural lake and its tributary creeks. We have helped protect nearly 250,000 acres of Texas' coastline, where a staggering diversity of life is supported by freshwater that flows from rivers into bays and estuaries.

This suite of projects gives us valuable experience and a template

for future success as we look to implement larger and more extensive conservation measures.

In order to expand the scope and breadth of our freshwater conservation efforts, Conservancy scientists are studying the entire network of Texas' water systems. The most important step of that process is prioritizing aquatic sites and assessing threats through the extensive assessment of the state's entire freshwater resources. This prioritization allows the Conservancy to design and implement the most effective and lasting water conservation strategies.

Since different waters support different human and wildlife communities, conservation needs and strategies vary from place to place. Creating an overall classification of all the freshwater systems in Texas enables science staff to study and assess a river or stream within the context of its overall ecological importance. We also collaborate with staff from Texas state agencies or use river classification to inform instream flow policy.

The next step is to conduct baseline studies to address key research ques-

tions and ascertain the overall quality of a particular system. The Conservancy often conducts such studies in conjunction with private landowners and government and academic partners.

Baseline studies help set minimum standards for the quantity and quality of water, as well as the condition of the aquatic and terrestrial communities dependent on that water system. These standards equip staff to design and implement conservation strategies and monitor their effectiveness. In Central Texas alone, this process is helping us protect and conserve five major rivers — the Blanco, Pedernales, Frio, Sabinal and Nueces — through three community-based projects.

The only way to effectively protect any watershed is to enlist the local stakeholders in the preservation process. This includes advocating responsible stewardship of watershed lands through practices such as brush management, prescribed fire, and appropriate grazing management. Since the majority of Texas lands are privately owned, lasting conservation can only be achieved in cooperation with private landowners.

The Conservancy is determined to build on existing projects to expand freshwater conservation to all of Texas' major rivers and aquifers. Conserving water for tomorrow is a conservation legacy we can leave for for future generations.

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