



## HABITAT, SCHMABITAT!

By Dr. James C. Kroll

**W**e hear a lot lately about protecting habitat. In the last issue, I discussed how much Texas has changed in the last 100 years; so much so, there are very few places within the state that look anything like they did before western man got here. Today, Texas is a patchwork quilt of vegetative types and ecological communities—some sustainable, some not.

Dr. Neal Wilkins, et al. at Texas A&M recently produced excellent information on fragmentation of our land (<http://landinfo.tamu.edu/projects>). In their report, *Texas Rural Lands: Trends and Conservation Implications for the 21st century*, they report the most significant land-use change from 1992-2001 was from native rangelands and crops to non-native, improved pastures. There are not many species that thrive on coastal Bermuda grass.

The report also presents alarming trends in fragmentation of the family farm or ranch. Fragmentation, you may remember, is the breaking up of larger parcels into increasingly smaller tracts. "Areas that remain in large ranches (more than 2,000 acres), are more likely to remain native rangelands," they state. At the same time, however, an increasing number of properties are being sold for recreational use. This has resulted in an average annual increase in per acre price of around 2.7 percent.

The trend toward recreational use of land is both good and bad. It is good in that rarely does the buyer put his land into an intensive agricultural enterprise. He is buying the land to enjoy nature, and often for hunting. The bad side is that he also purchases land as a "discretionary" use of his money, and is more than likely to sell out when the economy turns

downward.

In the Pineywoods of eastern Texas, timber companies are selling land at an alarming rate, breaking up extremely large holdings at a fast pace. When you combine these trends with declining agricultural prices, increasing fuel costs and loss of migrant labor, the outlook for maintaining the family farm is bleak. It is an irrefutable fact the day is gone when you can make a decent living in agriculture, at least in traditional agriculture.

It also is a fact government is not the answer to these problems. You only have to visit a national park or wildlife management area to prove that to

yourself. Studies have shown the vast majority of wildlife live on private lands. Bureaucrats, by their nature, do not have the same loyalties to the land as a private landowner. Proprietary interest leads to good land management.

My personal epiphany came in 1995 when I made my first trip to Africa. Though I hunted both in Zimbabwe and South Africa, I spent most of my time in the latter. Africa was not what I had expected it to be. Human population growth has increased to the point where it cannot be sustained by the land. The only game occurring outside of game ranches

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were the smaller, more elusive species of antelope (bush buck, duiker, etc.).

The game ranches represented a striking contrast. All you had to do is stand on a fence line and look inside and outside the managed property. On the inside were thriving plant communities and game; on the outside, bare ground and no game.

In South Africa, game ranching is a viable land-use. Unlike in the U.S., where game departments discourage intensive management of game animals, the South African government not only supports this enterprise, but also provides technical guidance to landowners. And, this guidance does not include forcing landowners to manage their lands the way the biologist thinks. The emphasis is on native game and economics. There is no room for exotics.

"Extension" biologists understand game ranching saves wild land, but only if the owner can economically justify the effort. The ranches provide acceptable returns from a variety of activities, including: 1) hunting, 2) eco-tourism, 3) sale of stocker animals and 4) commercial production of game meats. As a consequence, ranchers are doing every thing they can to improve the various habitats on their lands—a win-win both for wildlife and man.

Unfortunately, here in the states, we often see the exact opposite. American biologists have been trained—almost brain-washed—in the concept the best way to have wildlife and their habitats is to restrict use to recreation.

It is a paradox a landowner can cut down the forest or clear the brushland and then plant the land to improved grasses and then stock it fence to fence with exotics (cattle, sheep and goats). But, the same landowner cannot intensively manage the animals native to his land for profit.

The white-tailed deer was equipped by God to live on our lands, and it is the appropriate species to manage. Deer not only are aesthetically appealing, they also provide many hours of recreational hunting and highly nutritious food. A cow will wean a calf weighing about 350-450 pounds, about half her body weight. She

eats grasses and forbs and turns to browse in hard times, but cows are non-native and do not use natural forages as efficiently.

A whitetail doe can produce two fawns, weighing collectively 120 pounds or more, equal to or greater than her body weight. On the same land where cattle, sheep and goats roam today, we could support at least six deer on the same amount of land needed per cow.

Using the South African model, Texas landowners can realize acceptable profits from native game, but only if they are allowed to intensively manage these species. And, as in South Africa, this could be a check against fragmentation and habitat loss. This especially is true for the small landowner.

Biologists of all types—agency, private and university (me)—are philosophically on the side of the "little man," but in practice tend to cater to the rich landowner with large acreages. The bottom line seldom is the issue. (In the next issue, I will present some sobering information about the economics of deer management.)

The major stumbling block to development of game ranching in Texas focuses on the only excuse opponents can muster: it damages habitat. Yet, what on Earth is habitat? Further, there seems to be the idea whitetails can only exist on our lands if they have no impact on this mythical "habitat." Deer have been impacting habitat for over a million years.

Most introductory wildlife texts define habitat as "...the place or environment where a plant or animal naturally or normally lives and grows." The key words here are a plant or an animal. There are an infinite variety of habitats, each of which carries with it a unique assemblage of animals and plants. In the last issue, I demonstrated Texas does not even resemble the land first occupied by Native Americans.

The so-called "Brush Country," is a man-made ecosystem, which through man's actions replaced the native grasslands once spreading across the state. The brush is about as artificial as you can make it.

To compound the confusion, there is an ecological process known as "succession," in which a disturbed area goes predictably through a series of stages. An example

would be a storm-damaged forest, where the resulting bare ground leads to weeds and grasses, then shrubs and young trees, then intermediate tree species and finally old growth forest. Even this last step can be short-lived, because a disturbance starts the process all over again. Ask anyone living along the Texas coast if their "habitat" changed after the last hurricane?

So, there is no such thing as "habitat," rather many types of habitats, each changing over time. Along with each habitat type, certain animal species are favored while others disappear. It is more accurate to talk about deer habitat, rabbit habitat, quail habitat or sparrow habitat. Even a poorly managed property provides habitat for some species.

We are appropriately concerned about two things: protecting undeveloped, unfragmented land and ecological diversity. Giving the landowner an economic incentive to keep his land undivided should be the real goal. Since whitetails are "keystone" species, intensive management of deer usually results in increased species diversity.

A keystone species is the one that has the greatest impact on the community. My own property of 210 acres supports one of the highest deer populations in the Pineywoods; yet, my land also exhibits the highest species diversity found anywhere in the area.

On a recent field day, an International Paper Co. biologist, charged with inventorying songbirds, exclaimed, "We have only walked a short distance and already I have logged more bird species than I ever have seen!"

By intensive game management, I am not talking about feedlots and pens. I am talking about true ecological management in which intensified management of every acre is aimed at increasing its productivity.

Small landowners can and do carry out such management because they are both economically and personally motivated to do so. Some of these folks have land that has been in their family for generations, and they truly care about their land. What they need is the tools and incentives to do so.

Next issue, we will delve into the real world economics of deer management. ♀