

Dynamic Learning Institute: Why Hill Country ecology matters

Jeff Anderson | Special to The Times | Saturday April 7, 2018

What are the natural aspects of the Hill Country you enjoy most? As a former city-slicker, I find my utopia within the Hill Country's rocky hills, limestone canyon walls, natural flowing springs, headwater rivers framed by cypress trees, clear water rapids, stately oak trees, lush grasses, spring flowers, expanses of cedar and the vast variety of native and exotic animals.

My wife, Barbara, and I have simply fallen in love with the unique beauty of the Hill Country. We look forward to days when we can breakaway to enjoy driving a picturesque Hill Country road.

Perhaps it's this enjoyment of the beauty of our area that's also given us a sense of curiosity to understand the sustainability of the Hill Country's fragile ecological habitat balance.

Baba Dioum said it this way: "In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught."

Jim Stanley has enjoyed a lifelong love for nature. Upon retiring to the Hill Country, he immersed himself in understanding the ecological factors of Kerr, Gillespie and the surrounding counties. Eventually, he dedicated himself to the pursuit of helping others learn to appreciate their native Hill Country habitat "in the hope that landowners will steward their land in ways that create healthy, sustainable, diverse, productive and beautiful landscapes."



Jim Stanley, Hill Country Naturalist

Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of three books: "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He is also a weekly columnist for The Kerrville Daily Times.

Stanley believes the conditions of our Hill Country habitat should matter to everyone, whether it be a rancher, a small landowner or a city dweller.

On April 19, Stanley will lead a Dynamic Learning Institute presentation, "Hill Country Ecology — Why it Matters," which will discuss Hill Country plant, animal, water and land stewardship. This DLI presentation is for everyone who loves the beauty of our area and wants to better understand how to sustain what we love.

Join the DLI from 6 p.m to 7:30 p.m. at the Dietert Center to enjoy Stanley's class. Students — whether city dwellers or rural

landowners — will learn what, why and how we can protect and preserve this special place we call home. The DLI Class hosts will be Barbara and Jeff Anderson. Cost to attend the class is \$20 per person. To register, call 792-4044 Monday through Friday, or register online at www.clubed.net.

Stanley will discuss best management practices for Hill Country land and why they are important. He is guided by this thought from Aldo Leopold: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may use it with love and respect. Seeing that land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but understanding that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.”

European settlers changed the nature of the Hill Country Landscape to be less healthy and less productive, yet Stanley teaches that we can also significantly change it back.

What is the most important thing on your land? Stanley says it is not the animals or the trees or the grass —it’s the dirt. Without soil, you can’t grow anything and without plants you can’t raise any livestock or wildlife. Nothing grows on rocks (except lichen). Once lost, it will take centuries, if ever, for soil to be replaced. Therefore, efforts at erosion control should always be given serious consideration.

What caused the significant soil loss in the Hill Country in the last 50 years? “Erosion becomes greater as the slope increases and/or the amount of grass decreases,” Stanley said. “Erosion can remove the soil from under trees and bushes and a good stand of native grasses is the best thing you can have to prevent erosion.”

Despite rumors to the contrary, Stanley says Ashe juniper, which we call cedar, is native to the Hill Country. Cedar used to be confined to steep slopes and some draws.

As settlers arrived, cedar was allowed to take over pastureland, which then shaded out and stole moisture from other woody plants, forbs and, finally, grasses. The soil was then left with nothing to hold it in place. The result is cedar breaks with nothing but rocks on the surface under the bushes — essentially worthless land.

Stanley gives this example: The Kerr Wildlife Management Area high-fenced a 96-acre section of savanna covered with grass 40 years ago and left it to let nature take its course. There were no animals inside the enclosure, and nothing was done by man. The area is now a complete cedar brake, no grass, with mostly rocks covering the ground.

This might lead some to conclude that removal of cedar is the right thing to do. Stanley will delve into this and many other interesting aspects. For example, did you know that today we have more hardwood trees growing in most of the Hill Country than were here 150 years ago? Yet, it is unlikely future generations will enjoy more trees 20, 30 or 50 years from now.

DLI Chairman Jeff Anderson is servant pastor of SERV Kerrville, a nonprofit collaborating with community partners to empower lifelong learning.