

Texas needs more protected lands

Legislature is getting the message with bills to create parks and save wildlife habitat

By ANDREW SANSOM and DAVID SCHMIDLY

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As the sponsor and lead author of a 2001 Texas Tech study about wild lands in Texas, we are gratified that it is finally receiving attention for its importance, including an article in this newspaper. Our study's major conclusion was that there is a need for the state to acquire additional public land to increase access to outdoor recreation.

We are also pleased that several bills now moving through the Legislature would do exactly that, and benefit our wildlife and water resources as well. As Texas celebrates the centennial of its state park system, and approaches the 200th anniversary of its independence, it faces the prospect that the future of its incredibly diverse wildlife may well be decided in the next 100 years.

Texas is more than 95% owned by private citizens who have, over the last century, been good stewards of the land. However, today we lose rural and agricultural land faster than any other state, and the greatest single terrestrial environmental problem that we face is the continued fragmentation of family land. Thus, not only are we in desperate need for more outdoor recreation opportunities for our people, virtually all of our wildlife habitat, our watersheds and our aquifer recharge areas are threatened as well.

Our public parks and preserves not only provide outdoor recreation, they serve as living laboratories for education, scientific investigation and wildlife conservation. Although they represent only a small part of the Texas landscape, these state and local parks and preserves play an

increasingly vital role in the conservation of wildlife in Texas and the future of our water resources.

Although some Texas wildlife species are thriving due to conservation efforts and careful management, many others face increasing challenges and are in steep decline. Invasive species, emerging diseases, habitat loss and land fragmentation in concert with climate change threaten many wildlife populations at a scale inconceivable just a few decades ago.

Similar challenges face our rivers, streams and aquifers as each year Texas loses nearly 250,000 acres of land to development, placing in jeopardy the future water supplies upon which our children will depend.

But bipartisan support from our political leaders indicates that they know that Texans understand these threats. Recent polling shows that fully 83% of potential voters in our state support additional land and water conservation.

With a historic surplus, Texas legislators have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to provide funding for additional parks, conservation and natural water infrastructure.

Several bills are emerging in the final days of the legislative session that would not only secure additional state parks in their second century, but would enable creation of additional local parks in our cities and towns and assist private landowners in protecting critical wildlife habitat on working lands.

Given that wildlife and outdoor recreation contribute more than \$50 billion in annual revenue for Texas and the value of securing water supplies for our future is immeasurable, funding for these vital purposes will be an investment that will pay for itself many times over and ensure that our children and grandchildren enjoy the quality of life with which we have been blessed.

Andrew Sansom is past executive director of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and was the sponsor of the Texas Tech study. David Schmidly is past president and professor emeritus at Texas Tech University and was the lead author of that study. They wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.