

Recently, I was honored by being asked to write for The Cynthia & George Mitchell Foundation: "The Many Voices of Conservation" blog series exploring the fascinating spectrum of conservation initiatives and the human role in preserving the natural system. Each of us who were invited to participate in this blog series were asked to write from our heart about our unique conservation priorities and perspectives. The blog series will be released over the next several months on their blog page and via Twitter. Other contributors who have written blogs that are complimentary to mine include Former First Lady Laura Bush and Texas Agricultural Land Trust CEO Blair Fitzsimons. A long-time leader in the conservation community, The Foundation seeks innovative, sustainable solutions for human and environmental problems and works as an engine of change in both policy and practice in Texas, supporting high-impact projects at the nexus of environmental protection, social equity, and economic vibrancy.

Keeping open space open

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While it is easy to imagine that rural Texans and urban Texans are separated by insurmountable barriers of concrete and experience, it's simply not true. We stand on common ground. As humans, we all need the same things: healthy food, serviceable clothing, protective shelter, clean water, and productive open spaces that are not only home to our essential natural resources and processes, but also provide beautiful, natural settings that restore our collective spirit.

In the chaos of modern life, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that these essential life-giving elements come from somewhere. Food does not magically appear in supermarkets. Water does not magically appear in our taps. Open space land does not remain productive casually or by chance. These things directly result from the stewardship of hundreds of thousands of committed, resourceful people who are operating ranches and farms across the state.

In number they are few. In fact, less than two percent of our population provides food, clothes, and shelter while keeping open spaces productive and environmentally viable. Standing together, they are the thin green line of people who provide the raw materials that sustain our lives and fuel our economy. Imagine how different your life might be if you had to take time from your day to grow your own food. The amount of time that writers would have to write, teachers would have to teach, lawyers would have to litigate, physicians would have to heal, and entrepreneurs would have to deal, would be drastically reduced. Productivity, across the board, could plummet.

Other countries likely will be more than willing to produce food for us. Being our food supplier would not only help their balance of trade in the global marketplace, but could also make us dependent upon them for our foodstuffs. If our dependence on foreign oil has been considered a major national security concern, consider the implications of ceding control of our food supply to foreign powers.

From the beginnings of our country, we Americans have pinned our eyes and our hopes on the horizon believing that unlimited land and the promise of the fresh start it offers lay just beyond the sunset. In Texas, we never suspected that our famed wide-open spaces could ever become crowded. And yet the state is filling up at an unprecedented rate. By the year 2040, it is estimated that the Lone Star State will be home to more than 45.3 million residents, almost 20 million more than called Texas home in 2010. Each and every one will require food, clothing, shelter, plentiful clean water, and room to roam. And despite this burgeoning demand, Texas is losing productive open-space land faster than any other state in the nation. Unintentionally, through fragmentation, we are dismantling the very engine that produces agricultural products, renewable natural resources, and environmental benefits.

Somewhere along the way, we, as a society, lost sight of the true worth of open space land and began using attributes like location, access, development possibilities, condition, terms, investment potential, and comparables to establish marketplace values. In the process, we inadvertently created a system that encourages land to be broken up and sold in small pieces, instead of conserved, managed, and kept intact.

We are reaching a point in Texas where simply standing on common ground is not enough. The lives of urban and rural Texans are irreversibly intertwined, so we must all join forces to create and define initiatives and policies that conserve the common good, while protecting the heritage of private landowners.

Collectively, we can strengthen the lines of communication between urban and rural Texans. Collectively, we can help redefine the value of open-space land, recognizing that societal benefits such as clean water and air may trump the financial benefits of future development. Collectively, we can refine traditional solutions and explore creative ideas for addressing challenges like our state's looming water crisis.

As historical and recent droughts have proven, water is our most precious resource. Too often it is in short supply. But our open spaces offer the promise of common sense solutions. As former President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a native of the Texas Hill Country, noted, "[Saving the water and the soil must start where the first raindrop falls.](#)"

As LBJ did, we must all understand that in Texas, virtually every drop of our ground and surface water supply originates with rain that falls on the land, and is then captured by a complex, large-scale processes involving plants, soil, and animals. When these processes function optimally, floods are reduced, aquifers are replenished, and water is released more slowly and steadily into streams, rivers, lakes, and eventually our bays and estuaries. If the land is in good condition, the quality and quantity of water—both surface and underground—available to all citizens reflect that condition.

While land stewards cannot make more rain, their efforts can make more out of what we have. By managing and improving the watershed's condition, they help replenish both surface and underground water sources and ensure adequate instream and environmental flows. Their stewardship affects the water supply at its origins, not just at its destination.

Well-managed land is the greatest water supply enhancement tool on the planet. With adequate and appropriate vegetative cover, land is nature's sponge. In Texas, open space covers almost 150 million acres. When the objective is making the most of every drop that falls from the sky, a sponge of this magnitude, and the land stewards who keep it functional, are essential to our way of life, no matter where we live.

Whether our roots are planted in the soil or our foundations are built on concrete, we must come to understand that as the land goes, so goes the water—and life as we know it. Building on this shared understanding, we can manage our natural resources so that our future is both bright and sustainable.

David K. Langford is vice president emeritus of the Texas Wildlife Association, where he served as executive vice president from 1990-2002. Respected worldwide as a conservationist and a nature, wildlife and western-image photographer, he is president of Western Photography Company. The accomplished artist's work has appeared in publications such as Smithsonian, Outdoor Life, Field and Stream, Texas Highways, Country, American West, Sports Afield, Western Horseman, and Texas Monthly. He may be contacted at dkl@westernphotographycompany.com