



Hill Country Land Trust

Fall-Winter 2014

Newsletter

What a Difference 15 Years Makes!

Milestone anniversaries are a good time to stop and reflect on past accomplishments while looking ahead to the future. Like a good marriage—celebrating an anniversary looks back at the miles you’ve travelled, the difficulties you’ve overcome, and the joy you get from successfully working towards a common goal.



The Hill Country Land Trust (HCLT) received our IRS non-profit status in 1999, and began the important work of conserving land in a 19-county area. Founded, and now headquartered in Fredericksburg, the land trust was the brainchild of folks concerned with the break-up of family lands and how that would affect the wildlife, water resources, scenic beauty, and traditional way of life in the Hill Country.

From the very beginning, the people involved were those with a stake in the Hill Country—generational landowners along with like-minded movers and shakers who live and work here. Early planning meetings included Lady Bird Johnson, certainly the greatest proponent of conservation and scenic beauty the Hill Country has ever seen.

The group who formed HCLT included Trudy Harris, Terry Hershey, David Baker, Jack Hollan, Bart English, John Watson, and Carolyn Vogel. They felt strongly that the conservation easement (CE) was a tool for private Hill Country landowners to save important land and they modeled HCLT on like-minded land trusts in the United States and Texas.

Much of the early foundation of HCLT was laid by Trudy Harris, a true force of nature, who was an active board member until 2003. Here’s what Trudy had to say in a 1999 HCLT presentation, “Among those of us who love the Texas Hill Country with its beauty, flowing streams, rock outcrops and abundant wild game, there is grave concern that these very assets are drawing so many people to our area that there will be no open space, flowing water, and wild game in future years . . . in short, the Texas Hill Country is so special we are loving it to death.” Most of us would agree the situation has not improved much in 15 years, and the threat to our area is greater than ever.

Add to the list of earliest supporters, Terry Hershey. Terry was a driving force behind land conservation in Texas and in the Hill Country. Terry was a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Commissioner and is known state-wide for her conservation works. Terry was such a supporter of HCLT and the conservation easement tool, she put a CE on her own 1,500 acre ranch south of Stonewall in 2009. It still remains the largest CE in the HCLT portfolio and serves as a model for other landowners considering an easement on their own property.

The early days of HCLT were not a walk in the park! The group struggled to find landowners familiar with the CE concept, and willing to place their faith in a new organization with very little



Former Board Member, Elin Elisofon, on the first HCLT site visit to the Jordan property in 1999.

experience. But in 2001, the land trust made contact with the perfect couple, Bernice and Bruce Jordan of Fredericksburg. Bruce and Bernice were passionate about their land—133 acres of hills, trees, and meadows which abuts the busy Hwy 290 E corridor across from the Wildseed Farms. They both loved the wildlife they found there and the beauty of their land. Bruce and Bernice are no longer with us, but their land will be natural habitat and a home for its wild creatures forever thanks to them. We think our first easement is a tribute not only to the Jordan’s, but to the driving passion behind why landowners decide to place a CE on their property. We will always be in their debt for placing their faith in us.

Since that first easement in 2001, HCLT has accepted 17 more donated easements, protecting over 5,700 acres of land. Some

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Hill Country Land Trust Office
320 West San Antonio Street
Fredericksburg, TX 78624

Mailing Address:

PO Box 1724

Fredericksburg, TX 78624

Phone:

830-997-0027

Email:

office@hillcountrylandtrust.org



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of the highlights of our easement portfolio include four easements around Enchanted Rock protecting the viewshed from the top of the Rock. Enchanted Rock State Natural Area continues to be a primary focus for HCLT along with the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge and the Pedernales River watershed. Each of the 19 easements in the HCLT portfolio is important to the Hill Country and benefits all of us in its own unique way.

Other highlights of the past 15 years include receiving Land Trust Accreditation in early 2013. This was a big deal—HCLT was one of the first land trusts in Texas to accomplish this goal, and is one of 254 nationally accredited land trusts. The outcome of the accreditation process is that HCLT now operates by a list of standards and practices ensuring a smooth and thorough process for our landowner-partners.

Our success can be credited to our all-volunteer board members, who do the bulk of the work – from conducting initial site visits with landowners, to working with landowners while they go through the easement process, conducting yearly monitoring visits, ensuring the financial health of the land trust, and educating the public on the benefits of land easements. Now, in 2014, we will be even more efficient and effective, as we hired Martha Zeiher as our first Executive Director.

And finally, we must acknowledge all the people to have assisted us over the years with their time, talent, and resources. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts and ask you to join us in celebrating our first 15 years—and here's to another 15!

Walking the Talk – A Land Stewardship Success Story

There is something about pausing on top of a high plateau in the Texas Hill Country that warms the soul. This experience is deepened when you are fortunate enough to admire the view with the landowners who have joyfully worked hard to restore their land. The Bergman's story describes how one family pursued a shared vision of buying some property in Gillespie County, and how acquiring a ranch changed both them—and the land—forever.

Early in their marriage, Kim and Pam Bergman knew they wanted to own a ranch in the Hill Country, even if that meant that first they would work fifteen years in Saudi Arabia to save enough money to achieve their dream. In 1992, they bought 43 acres with an old house east of Hye, and thus began their big adventure as land stewards and conservationists. Having a "base camp" allowed them to begin work immediately on improving the land. Each vacation back to the States was devoted to the strenuous task of clearing brush while also gaining intimate knowledge about every corner and hilltop.



Kim and Pam Bergman worked hard on restoring their property.

In 1996, an opportunity to obtain an additional 685 acres south of Stonewall appeared. This ranch possessed many of the aspects Pam and Kim had come to value most—dramatic topographic relief, high plateaus with views, valleys, and wooded creeks. With the acquisition of this larger parcel, the Bergmans stepped up

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the pace of work, hiring contractors to bulldoze the dense cedar brakes that had taken over old agricultural fields and the lower hillsides. They sought advice from the local NRCS agent, who taught them how to develop a progressive but conservative strategy for tackling the brush clearing on their land, and also showed them the value of continuously planting native grasses and of protecting native vegetation from over-browsing. Kim, Pam and their children did the chain sawing, stacking, burning, and planting- often for 12 hours a day, spurred on by the positive way the land was responding to their efforts.

Years later this cautious approach paid off when they learned that they had preserved precious Golden-cheeked Warbler habitat. Eventually they high fenced the 685 acres to control deer and hog populations. Other conservation management tasks included adding water wells and troughs, caging individual hardwood species, conducting prescribed burns and deer counts/culls, clipping return growth cedar from cleared areas, and adhering to strict rotational grazing and minimal stocking rates in response to lack of rainfall in order to maintain healthy grasslands.

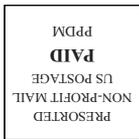
In 2004 the Bergmans were introduced to the Hill Country Land Trust through friends, and were familiar with the organization because a large property adjacent to them was put into a HCLT conservation easement. "It gave us great comfort to look across the fence and know we would never be seeing a subdivision." recalls Pam. Pam joined the HCLT board in 2012, and in 2013, she and Kim began the process of placing a conservation easement on their property. They agreed after so many years of working to restore native grass and protecting native diversity and riparian areas, they couldn't bear the thought of it being carved up and ruined.

The advice Pam and Kim would give others who are interested in becoming good land stewards is this-know your land, take your time, ask questions, and get information by reading and talking to conservation experts and other easement donors. "I am so happy about what we have done and are still working on" says Kim. "We have helped the land recover and improve, and we also know that now our land is in a CE the benefits of all our hard work will outlast us."

HCLT Happenings

Welcome Katherine Romans to the HCLT Board! Katherine is program manager for landowner outreach with the Hill Country Alliance (HCA). Her work with HCA is focused on facilitating connections between stakeholders, landowners and residents within the Pedernales River basin and more broadly throughout the Hill Country. Katherine is a recent graduate of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental studies, where she received her masters in environmental management. Prior to her studies at Yale, Katherine worked for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, planning oversight hearings and drafting legislation on national and international wildlife conservation. Katherine will sit on the Stewardship Committee, working with landowners on good management practices and conducting yearly visits to conservation easements.





Hill Country Land Trust
Post Office Box 1724
Fredericksburg, TX 78624



Genuine Land Stewardship by Steve Nelle, HCLT Board Member

The topic of land stewardship has gained a great deal of public attention during recent years. This is a good trend since it helps focus greater awareness to the importance of how the land is treated, and the people who carry out responsible land care.

However, land stewardship to some extent, has become a catchphrase; feel-good words; frequently used but seldom clearly defined. In some ways, land stewardship is becoming an over-used slogan; thus the need to clarify its true meaning and character.

Genuine land stewardship may be defined as a deeply held inner conviction that motivates landowners and land managers to care for the land. It is the ethic that generates, inspires and guides responsible and sustainable land management. Land stewardship is about who you are on the inside.

The essence of genuine stewardship is the acknowledgement that even though you legally own title to the land, your role is that of caretaker. The well-being of the land is entrusted to you for a time and you will do your utmost to be a responsible custodian during your tenure. In addition to the personal benefits of land stewardship, genuine stewardship also involves benefits to future generations and benefits to society. Conservation easements are one important tool to help insure these benefits.



Steve Nelle Leading a HCLT Walk

The land steward has a keen and sensitive conscience toward the land. Their rights as a landowner are subordinated to their self-imposed responsibilities toward the land. Land stewards have a special working relationship to the land which is demonstrated by several qualities:

Knowledge - land stewards have a working knowledge of the land, including the soil, water, plant and animals. Land stewards may be self taught, or educated, but they are always searching to better comprehend how the land works.

Dedication - land stewards are strongly committed to the health of the land. It is a full time lifestyle, not a pastime.

Big Picture - land stewards are able to look down the road and consider the long term, wide angle perspective. They look to solve land problems, not merely treat symptoms. They see how their decisions affect other lands and other people.

Realistic - land stewards realize they are working with nature and therefore do not call all of the shots. They do not try to artificially "improve" the land beyond what its natural capabilities are. They do not look for quick fixes or simple solutions.

Humility - There is a deep inner humility and reverence associated with authentic land stewardship.

Land stewardship is not a warm fuzzy emotion and is not merely a proclamation of how much we love the land. Genuine stewardship manifests itself in concrete skills, abilities and workmanship. Let us all strive to embody the very best stewardship character in ourselves and encourage it within others.