



A Most Valuable Legacy

Investing in the next 100 years for Texas' state park system



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Executive Summary

As Covid-19 forced the nation to stay indoors, millions across the US realized just how much we need to be outside. From state parks to hike-and-bike trails, Texans poured out of their homes to enjoy places of peace and beauty that many once assumed they were too busy to frequent in their hectic 21st-century lives. Even as many of us return back to some semblance of normalcy, our state parks remain packed, and for good reason.

Our parks provide incredible places for us to recreate and explore. At Monahan's Sandhills State Park, visitors can ride sleds down rolling dunes of sand, looking out to the horizon, where brilliant blue sky meets the white sand and yellow sunflowers of west Texas. At Goliad State Park and Historic Site, children can try on a replica of the chain mail armor worn by conquistadors in the 1700s. At Garner, people can paddle boats on the Frio River and at Balmorhea State Park, swim in its crystal clear, spring-fed swimming pool. Bohemians and cowboys alike gather around campfires to tell tall tales and belt songs out to starry skies.

But despite the state's naturally endowed ecological beauty, Texas' parks system lags far behind where it can, and ought, to be. Texas simply has too few parks to ensure that everyone is able to enjoy them.

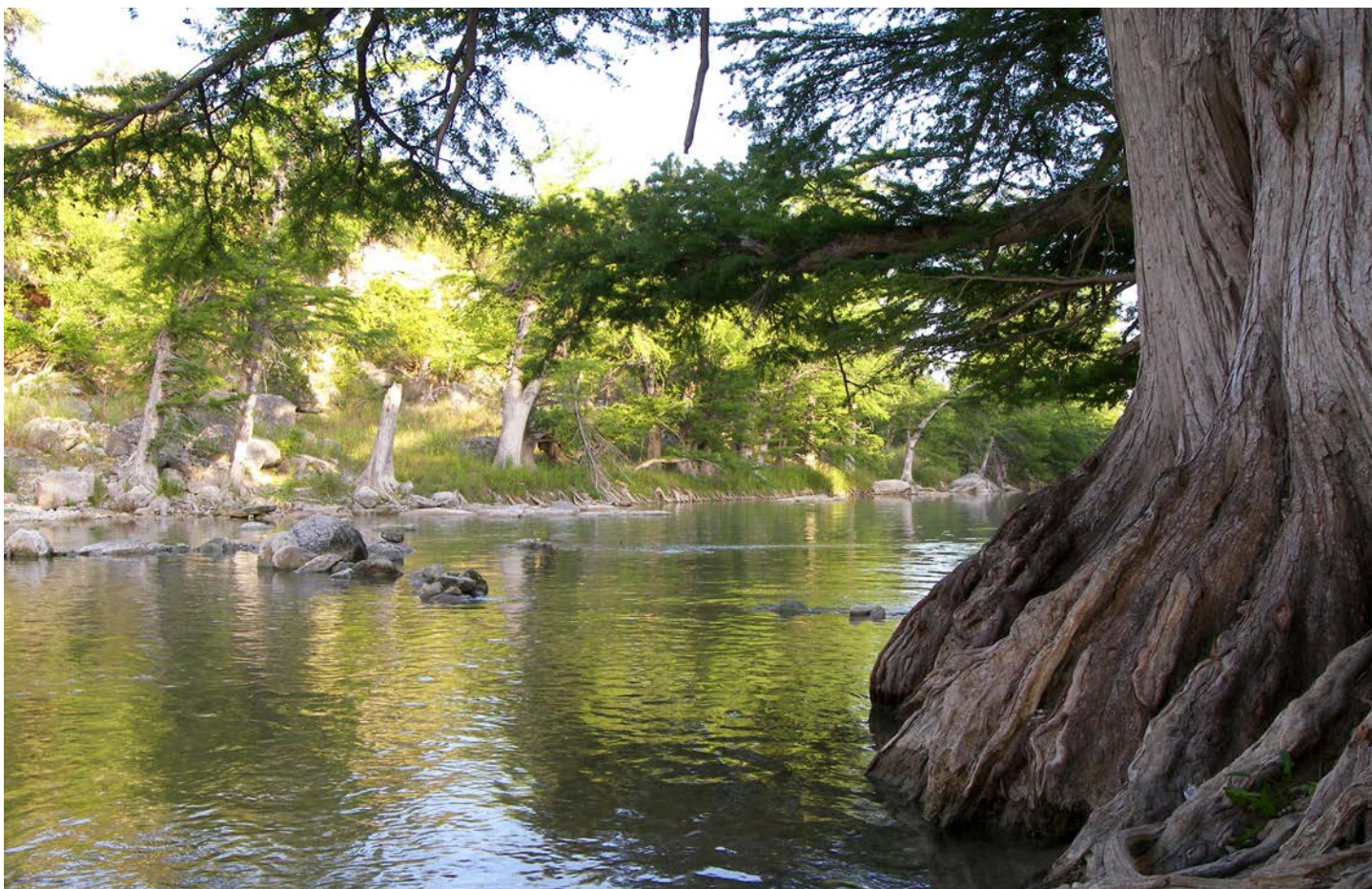
In 2023, the Texas state parks system will celebrate its 100th anniversary. But **as the state grows rapidly, our parks system is bursting at the seams** and struggling to meet public demand for recreation opportunities. Meanwhile, development continues to eat up open space, transforming the iconic rural character so many of us know and love about Texas and leaving fewer places for wildlife to live.

Our state parks provide enormous benefits to Texas

Our parks bestow numerous benefits, such as providing places to hike, camp, hunt and fish. Texas parks are some of the best in the nation, and they offer incredible opportunities to visitors.² In addition, our state parks provide habitat for wildlife, including endangered and threatened species, that may otherwise face increased destruction of habitat. Endangered and threatened Texas species, such as sea turtles, horned lizards, and Palo Duro mice all rely on state parkland to mate, feed, and roam.³

State parks also help protect drinking water sources. Honey Creek State Natural Area, for example, sits atop and protects the Trinity Aquifer, a major source of drinking water for Bexar County.⁴ Colorado Bend State Park sits upstream of the Colorado River and Austin's drinking water sources of Lake Travis and Lake Austin.

Parks also strengthen the outdoor recreation industry, which supports nearly 300,000 jobs in Texas and adds over \$30 billion to the state GDP through activities like boating, RVing and hunting.⁵ Similarly, Texas parks strengthen tourism for the towns and cities around them as families visit from across the state, nation, and even the world. For example, many of the 271,747 visitors to Enchanted Rock State Natural Area in the 2018⁶ fiscal year stopped in nearby Fredericksburg for food, gas, lodging and entertainment.



Guadalupe River State Park. Photo courtesy of Larry D Moore.¹

Texas' natural heritage is at risk

In 2019, Texas A&M Natural Resource Institute released *Texas Land Trends*, which reported that between 1997 and 2017 Texas developed more than 2.2 million acres of farms, ranches, and forests⁸—an average of approximately **12.5 acres per hour**.⁹ As rural land is developed into subdivisions and strip malls, opportunities to conserve Texas' natural beauty disappear. Existing state parks, including Brazos Bend, Enchanted Rock, Bastrop, and Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley are at risk of being surrounded by development.

When land is converted into housing and commercial property, wildlife can suffer. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) notes that as larger ranches are subdivided into smaller parcels, many are “without enough acreage by themselves to contribute meaningfully to regional conservation needs.”¹⁰ Today, almost

221 species,¹¹ including the golden-cheeked warbler and Texas blind salamander, are listed on the Texas endangered and threatened species list—plants and animals which face extinction if action is not taken to protect their habitat and populations.¹²

Millions of acres need to be preserved to protect or restore habitat for wildlife. In the Blackland Prairies ecoregion of Texas, “permanent conservation lands are desperately needed,” with scientists estimating 2.4 million acres need to be preserved in the next decade to protect high priority bird species.¹⁴ The Great Plains Restoration Council is working to conserve 100,000 acres are needed to restore the once mighty herd of bison in Texas and the Great Plains.¹⁵

Moreover, while state parks are distributed across the state, the largest state parks are found in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas, while some regions, like the High



Galveston Island State Park in the Gulf Prairies ecoregion. Photo courtesy of Yinan Chen.⁷



The Golden Cheeked Warbler, an endangered species, can be found at several state parks, including Pedernales Falls and Llano River. Credit: Isaac Sanchez¹³



Enchanted Rock State Natural Area in the Edwards Plateau ecoregion. Photo courtesy of Daniel Ziegler.¹⁷

Plains- home to the rare horned lizards, black-footed ferrets, and swift foxes- are underrepresented. To make matters worse, rural land prices- to say nothing of urban areas- have increased tremendously with the nominal price per acre doubling since 2008.¹⁶

Existing parks are too often crowded, failing to meet demand for outdoor recreation

When pandemic restrictions were lifted, Texans flocked to our parks. **The number of visitors to Texas state parks increased 37% from 2020, reaching almost 10 million in fiscal year 2021.**¹⁸

The TPWD recognizes that “in recent years parks have increasingly been faced with the prospect of reaching visitation capacity” and that “as the population of the state continues to grow, it is likely that park closures due to excessive numbers of visitors will become more common.”¹⁹

- Garner State Park, west of San Antonio, is so popular that overnight reservations normally require significantly advanced planning.²⁰

- Enchanted Rock is often forced to close its gates when it reaches capacity, “something that happens by 9 or 10 a.m. most weekends when the weather is nice”²¹. While Enchanted Rock does their best to alleviate this issue, hours-long lines force people to turn back.
- During Memorial Day weekend in 2021, multi-day overnight camping reservations at all state parks within a 200-mile radius of Austin were completely booked up²².

Texas has relatively little parkland

Compared to other states, Texas’ public land portfolio lags far behind, with only about 2.4% of land protected as state and national parks, national forests and other recreation areas²³. With only 636,000 acres of parkland for over 29 million people as of 2019, **Texas ranks 35th in the nation for state park acreage per capita.**²⁴ Florida, by comparison, has almost 8 million fewer people but 86,000 more acres of state parkland—54% more state parks per capita than Texas. While significant additional land in Texas is managed as wildlife and coastal management areas, these areas are not “managed for outdoor recreation and public visitation” and lack proper campsites and other amenities found in state parks.²⁵



Photo courtesy of Larry D. Moore.²⁷

Texas needs more state parkland

TPWD recognizes the need for more parkland, writing “additional development of new park properties is necessary in order to serve a more diverse, urban, and growing population.”²⁶

Unfortunately, for many years, due to inconsistent and insufficient funding from the Legislature, TPWD has struggled to even maintain existing parks, much less plan for the future. Proposition 5, passed by the Legislature and approved by voters in 2019, boosted and stabilized funding. By ensuring that sales tax revenues from sporting goods go towards funding state parks and historic sites, the Department has been able to plan for and prioritize the backlog of repairs and even have modest funding available for land acquisition.²⁸ In fact, the TPWD estimated in 2020 that the sporting goods tax would fund almost 60% of its state parks operating budget.²⁹ In 2021, the Legislature appropriated \$7 million for land acquisition for the current biennial budget,³⁰ and booming sales taxes allowed TPWD to direct an additional \$5.8 million this year to acquire parkland.³¹ While this was the first appropriation for land acquisition

in decades, it is insufficient to meet the state’s goals for state parks.

The upcoming opening of the 4,800-acre Palo Pinto Mountains State Park, the first new state park in twenty years, will help alleviate some of the strain. But according to Texas Tech’s Loomis Report of 2001, Texas **needs to add more than 1 million acres of state parkland by 2030**³² in order to ensure that we can preserve our state’s special places for future generations to enjoy, and to protect critical wildlife habitat. That’s going to require a significant investment from the state, including the cost to acquire land and address facility development and long-term operation and maintenance for public use and enjoyment.

Existing funding sources, including from the Great American Outdoors Act and potentially from the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act, can help, but new sources will be needed to fully leverage federal dollars. Recent polling found 61% of Texas Republicans, 69% of Texas independents, and 75% of Texas Democrats would support investing one billion dollars to “build new state parks and improve existing parks.”³³

Introduction



Forest within Mother Neff, Texas' first state park. Photo courtesy of Larry D. Moore.³⁵

In 1923, the Texas state parks board became an official state entity. Led by Governor Pat Neff, whose own donation of his mother's property would set the tone for the next 100 years, Texas state parks grew from a 259-acre ranch to hundreds of thousands of acres and 89 parks, historic sites, and management areas for all Texans to enjoy.^{36, 37}

With the Texas state parks system celebrating its centennial in 2023, we have a unique opportunity to evaluate the current state of our parks and where we want to be another 100 years from now. Indeed, House Speaker Dade Phelan has directed the Culture, Recreation and Tourism Committee to "review state efforts to preserve and develop Texas state parks and open spaces to

"The health, welfare and happiness of the people of Texas is largely enhanced by the number of places within her borders where the people in vacation and leisure periods can go for rest, recreation and relaxation..."

These primeval and picturesque places of native charm and characteristic beauty are rapidly disappearing before the onward march of cold, consuming commercialism.

By establishing a system of parks and camping places throughout the State, we will...bequeath to posterity a most valuable legacy..."³⁴

-Texas Governor Pat Neff, 1925

ensure affordable public access to outdoor recreational and educational opportunities."³⁸

At first glance, Texas appears to be a place of wide-open spaces, but a rapidly growing maze of highways, roads and fences is dividing and fragmenting our open and wild spaces. Parks greatly help wildlife, and by building additional parks, particularly parks large enough to have a meaningful impact, Texas can preserve its iconic natural heritage. Species such as the golden-cheeked warbler and Texas blind salamander are threatened by development, but parkland can protect these species—and the many other endangered and threatened species that live in Texas—to ensure that future generations of Texans will be able to enjoy them.

From wide open spaces in the west and sandy coasts of the south, to rolling central hills and dense pines in the east, Texas, in its entirety, is a unique and wonderful blend of ecosystems. Our lands connect and restore—they bring communities and families together to recreate, refresh, and discover. Texas' public spaces also guard and honor our cultural heritage, protect our waterways, and preserve iconic wildlife. As special as the lands, history, and nature they preserve, our parks provide incredible experiences to the millions that visit them every year. Scattered throughout the state, our public parks and lands grant opportunities to see the Milky Way, build towering sandcastles, discover quiet solitude along a trail, and even explore ancient dinosaur footprints.

Texans harbor a deep pride in our parks and people across the state support continued expansion and maintenance of the places they love. Sadly, despite increasing demand for public spaces, our parks are stretched thin.

Today, Texans hoping to enjoy our incredible parks too often experience overcrowding. Visitors often face long lines to enter parks and struggle to reserve a campsite without months of planning. Should a family decide to take a spontaneous road trip to their local park, gate staff may even have to turn visitors away.³⁹

In October 2000, "Taking Care of Texas," a report from then-Governor George W. Bush's task force on conservation, recognized these challenges, stating "population growth and its geographic distribution dictate the need for continued investment in public lands."⁴⁰ Taking Care of Texas highlighted another report then under development by TPWD and Texas Tech University, which promised to "help provide an objective, scientific basis for future conservation planning and programs." "Texas Parks and Wildlife for the 21st Century," released in 2001, calculated that the state needed to add 1.4 million acres of state park lands by 2030 to keep pace with development.⁴¹ As of October 2019, however, only 142,000 additional acres have been acquired or leased, with more than a million acres to go.⁴²

Looking forward to the next hundred years, Texas must choose to prioritize parks now or risk increasing costs and decreasing opportunities for land preservation in the future. This report analyzes current population growth trends, changing land markets, increasing demand for parks, and the current status of each of Texas' valuable ecoregions.

Why parks are important

Each year, Texas state parks provide countless benefits and opportunities to over 8 million visitors.⁴³ Ecologically, environmentally, and economically, our parks better our state, in addition to the numerous recreational uses they provide.

Texans love the great outdoors: hunting, fishing, hiking, swimming, biking, and camping are all popular. Every year, 2.2 million people fish in Texas, including in our state parks where fishing is free and often does not

require a license.⁴⁴ Hunting for deer, feral hogs, quail, waterfowl and other game is allowed during select dates at dozens of state parks⁴⁵. More hunting and fishing licenses are purchased each year in Texas than any other state.⁴⁶

Our parks deliver world-class options for almost all outdoor activities. Numerous trails, including handicap accessible options, fill Texas parks, providing opportunities for hiking, biking, and walking. The TPWD notes



Fishing in Galveston, within the Gulf Prairies ecoregion. Photo courtesy of Albert Herring.⁴⁸

that “trails are the pride and joy of our state parks,”⁴⁷ and the well-manicured trails of Lost Maples and Government Canyon state parks show this to be true. Texans also enjoy public boat ramps, campsites, and gathering centers at their parks.

In addition to the recreational opportunities, parks protect valuable natural resources including water. The TPWD observes that water “impacts every part” of its mission, including recreation and resource management. Protecting lakes from foreign and invasive species⁴⁹ and ensuring that above ground water sources remain pure⁵⁰ are two ways that the TPWD operates to protect both quality and quantity of water.

Conserved lands protect both the quantity and quality of water supplies. With few impervious surfaces, rain can infiltrate into the ground and recharge aquifers in parks and other conserved lands.⁵¹ And natural areas have little of the contaminated runoff common in urban areas that can be very harmful to water quality.⁵² When land is preserved on and near fragile waterways, this aids in keeping that pollution out of our water.⁵³ For example, Honey Creek State Natural Area sits atop the Trinity Aquifer⁵⁴, and plays an important role in replenishing the water supply for much of northern Bexar County.⁵⁵ By protecting land that might otherwise be developed, Colorado Bend State Park, directly upstream from the city of Austin’s sole source of drinking water - Lake Travis and Lake Austin on the Colorado River,⁵⁶ helps protect drinking water for the city of Austin.

Importantly, parks also deliver statewide economic benefits. The communities immediately near a park benefit greatly from its being there, particularly local businesses that receive the tourism spending from families who are visiting the parks. A report from Texas 2036 states that “Texas rural counties with state parks have higher GDP growth, higher population growth, and higher employment growth compared to rural counties without state parks.”⁵⁸ Filling up on gas, grabbing lunch, and buying fishing bait, to name a few, all bring money to



Native American rock art at Seminole Canyon State Park⁵⁷

the towns which host parks. In addition to state park employees, private business employees, from fishing guides to ammo shop salespeople, benefit from outdoor recreation sponsored by our parks. Before hitting the roads for an outdoor adventure people will stop at their local sporting goods store for preparatory gear, and while at the park people will go to the nearby town to eat and shop. According to a study from Texas A&M Professor John L. Crompton, Texas state parks brought in an added value of some \$426 million statewide in 2018.⁵⁹ The same report goes on to show that, for every dollar invested by the state, Texas parks return \$5.3. Outdoor recreation, an industry built on the back of accessible lands and conservation provided by the state parks, made up for some 1.8% of the state’s GDP and almost 300,000 jobs.⁶⁰ Given the significant economic value that comes with expanding state park capacity, continued investment in parks is a positive not only for tourists but for the locals and businesses around it.

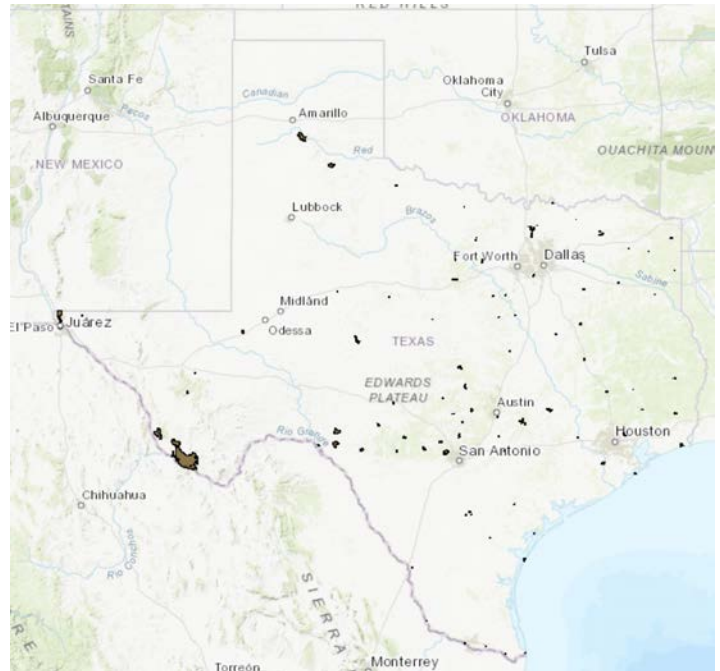
Further investment in Texas’ park system will only increase all of these benefits. More campsites, trails, and lakes mean more campers, hikers, and boaters. More preserved land brings more preserved water, habitat, and nature. An increased number of parks yields an increased number of visitors, road trippers, and vacationers. In all of this, Texas benefits.

How Texas Stands Up

Texas prides itself for numerous incredible “greats”: great views, great history, great people, and a great economy. Texas, and its residents, hold a special reputation among the other 49 states for this grandeur and accompanying boastfulness. In many respects, Texas has earned the right to boast, but in order to preserve our greatness our words need to be backed up with action.

According to data from the National Association for State Park Directors, with 0.022 acres per Texan, Texas ranks just 35th in the nation for state park acreage per capita.⁶² Florida, by comparison, has almost 8 million fewer people but 86,000 more acres of state parkland – 54% more state parks per capita than Texas. The Texas Parks and Wildlife for the 21st Century” report set a goal to have Texas achieve the 75th percentile of state park land per capita, which will take some work.

In 2020, when the data on the following page were collected, the TPWD managed 636,083 acres of state park lands.⁶⁴ To achieve our previously stated goal by 2030, Texas would need to add around an additional 1.4 million acres of public lands within the next 8 years.⁶⁵ This is something that has been done before. From 1963 to 1988 the number of Texas state parks doubled, and the acreage increased almost tenfold.⁶⁶ This was the work of dedicated individuals backed by state funding, and many of the parks purchased during this time remain the state’s most popular today.



TPWD Map of state parkland. Brown dots are state parks. Map courtesy of TPWD.⁶¹

Wildlife Management Areas, which make up some 748,768 acres,⁶⁷ help to ease the growing burden on state parks, however these areas are not “managed for outdoor recreation and public visitation” and lack proper campsites and other amenities.⁶⁸ Coastal Management Areas meanwhile, are zones protected by the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, specifically meant to foster “access to clean water and healthy ecosystems that support a vibrant coastal economy.”⁶⁹ These areas, like Wildlife Management Areas, lack many of the amenities that are readily available in our state parks.

Rank	State	Acreage	Population	Acres per capita	Percentile
1	Alaska	3,386,702.00	733,391.00	4.618	100th
2	Wyoming	200,641.00	576,851.00	0.348	98th
3	Colorado	1,560,758.00	5,773,714.00	0.270	96th
4	New York	4,323,598.00	20,201,249.00	0.214	94th
5	New Hampshire	160,373.00	1,377,529.00	0.116	92nd
6	South Carolina	102,925.00	886,667.00	0.116	90th
7	Vermont	74,155.00	643,077.00	0.115	88th
8	New Mexico	192,343.00	2,117,522.00	0.091	86th
9	New Jersey	811,906.00	9,288,994.00	0.087	84th
10	Nebraska	168,510.00	1,961,504.00	0.086	82nd
11	West Virginia	151,410.00	1,793,716.00	0.084	80th
12	Wisconsin	444,703.00	5,893,718.00	0.075	78th
13	Maine	99,142.00	1,362,359.00	0.073	76th
14	Connecticut	210,893.00	3,605,944.00	0.058	74th
15	Kansas	165,004.00	2,937,880.00	0.056	72nd
16	Massachusetts	353,889.00	7,029,917.00	0.050	70th
17	Minnesota	286,197.00	5,706,494.00	0.050	68th
18	Utah	153,717.00	3,271,616.00	0.047	66th
19	North Dakota	35,010.00	779,094.00	0.045	64th
20	California	1,648,950.00	39,538,233.00	0.042	62nd
21	Montana	44,235.00	1,084,225.00	0.041	60th
22	Iowa	116,277.00	3,190,369.00	0.036	58th
23	Florida	722,137.00	21,538,187.00	0.034	56th
24	Idaho	58,922.00	1,839,106.00	0.032	54th
25	Illinois	395,688.00	12,812,508.00	0.031	52nd
26	Tennessee	208,719.00	6,910,840.00	0.030	50th
27	Michigan	304,041.00	10,077,331.00	0.030	48th
28	Delaware	28,613.00	989,948.00	0.029	46th
29	Oregon	113,275.00	4,237,256.00	0.027	44th
30	Missouri	160,373.00	6,154,913.00	0.026	42nd
31	Indiana	171,539.00	6,785,528.00	0.025	40th
32	Pennsylvania	303,419.00	13,002,700.00	0.023	38th
33	Hawaii	33,462.00	1,455,271.00	0.023	36th
34	Maryland	140,000.00	6,177,224.00	0.023	34th
35	Texas	636,083.00	29,145,505.00	0.022	32nd
36	Arkansas	54,770.00	3,011,524.00	0.018	30th
37	South Carolina	81,906.00	5,118,425.00	0.016	28th
38	Oklahoma	61,573.00	3,959,353.00	0.016	26th
39	Ohio	174,765.00	11,799,448.00	0.015	24th
40	Washington	110,627.00	7,705,281.00	0.014	22nd
41	Kentucky	45,000.00	4,505,836.00	0.010	20th
42	Alabama	48,470.00	5,024,279.00	0.010	18th
43	Arizona	64,413.00	7,151,502.00	0.009	16th
44	Virginia	74,584.00	8,631,393.00	0.009	14th
45	Mississippi	23,620.00	2,961,279.00	0.008	12th
46	Rhode Island	8,563.00	1,097,379.00	0.008	10th
47	Georgia	83,184.00	10,711,908.00	0.008	8th
48	Nevada	23,620.00	3,104,614.00	0.008	6th
49	Louisiana	32,479.00	4,657,757.00	0.007	4th
50	North Carolina	35,010.00	10,439,388.00	0.003	2nd

Analysis based on data obtained from Lewis Ledford, National Association of State Parks Directors on January 26, 2022⁶³

Florida

Texas should consider looking to Florida for an example of a successful land conservation program. While Texas is larger in both population and land size, Florida is one of the few states that is comparable. Home to vital ecosystems like the Everglades, Florida developed the Florida Forever program as a way of helping to select and acquire land that protects vital wildlife and key natural habitat. Since 2001, Florida has protected over 869,477 acres of land⁷⁰ for “water resource protection, coastal resiliency, preservation of cultural resources, public access to outdoor recreation, and the restoration and maintenance of public lands.”⁷¹ In 2021, Florida used \$300 million of funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to acquire land to protect wildlife⁷², while Texas did not use any of the available funding for this purpose.

Growing Demand for State Parks

With pandemic restrictions increasingly being lifted, Texans are flocking to state parks. The number of visitors to Texas state parks increased 37% from 2020, reaching almost 10 million in 2021.⁷³

Whether in ecoregions hardly preserved or metropolitan parks, space is limited. The *Texas State Parks Centennial Plan* report, published by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, recognizes the challenges which arise from too little parkland for a growing population.

“In recent years parks have increasingly been faced with the prospect of reaching visitation capacity. Several sites, including Enchanted Rock [Fredericksburg], Garner [Uvalde County], Balmorhea [Toyahvale], and Hueco Tanks [El Paso], have been forced to limit the number of park visitors in order to preserve park resources and maintain an enjoyable experience for visitors. Currently, capacity limits are typically based on physical limits such as the number of available vehicle parking spaces, but in the future additional science-based factors will be included in these calculations. Enforcing visitation limits will inherently limit the ability of sites to generate revenue, but will be necessary to ensure the long-term preservation of park resources”.⁷⁴

Garner State Park, west of San Antonio, is so popular that, on most nights, overnight reservations cannot be made without scheduling over a month in advance (Things have improved slightly due to TPWD’s updated cancellation policy).⁷⁵ Enchanted Rock closes its gates when it reaches capacity, “something that happens by 9 or 10 a.m. most weekends when the weather is nice.”⁷⁶



Texas state parks often reach capacity limits and have to turn visitors away

Parks near urban areas face even more demand as they are easier for more people to access. According to the 2018 Texas Outdoor Recreation Plan, “urban metropolises have a much lower per capita allocation of recreation and conservation acreage than counties with smaller populations.” It concluded “moving forward, state and local officials will need to plan ahead to provide equitable access to conservation and recreation lands, particularly in urban areas.”⁷⁷ During Memorial Day weekend in 2021, multi-day overnight camping reservations at a state park within a 200-mile radius of Austin were completely booked up.⁷⁸ Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park meanwhile, only has 5 prim-



Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park in the South Texas Plains ecoregion. Photo courtesy of On^ste82.⁸¹

itive campsites, and it is the only park in the lower Rio Grande Valley to have campsites at all. For a region with 1.3 million people, only five state park campsites are to be found.⁷⁹

TPWD notes that “as the population of the state continues to grow, it is likely that park closures due to excessive numbers of visitors will become more common. The addition of new parks to the system and the expansion of existing parks will be necessary to enable the agency to meet the demands of the public for outdoor recreation venues, particularly in locations within a short drive time of urban population centers.”⁸⁰

While there is significant additional acreage protected by TPWD in wildlife management areas and coastal management areas, which also preserve important conservation and outdoor recreation values, parks are clearly feeling the strain.

Population Trends

Between the years of 2010 and 2019, Texas’ population grew a staggering 15.3%, representing over one-third of growth in the United States.⁸³ Between 2020 and 2021, Texas added an additional 850 residents per day on average.⁸⁴ In 2022, the population is expected to hit a staggering 30 million.⁸⁵ This growth will continue because the state boasts an excellent economy, low crime, superb schools, and expanding infrastructure—Texas is a great place to live.

This massive growth creates two distinct problems for the Parks and Wildlife Department. The first is that with more Texans comes more visitors for the parks. This is inherently a positive as our outdoor spaces are meant to be taken full advantage of. However, as we have mentioned previously, the parks are already struggling to keep up with current demand.



Development along the border of McKinney Falls State Park in Austin led TPWD to move a trail so hikers wouldn't have to see buildings (the green line marks the original trail, the yellow the new trail).⁸²

At the same time, residential and commercial development dramatically raises the price of land and expands the metropolitan area, creating a twofold challenge for park creation. People who live in urban centers must drive farther to reach a park and potential park land must beat the growth curve well in advance to remain affordable. This development has also begun encroaching on state parks. Galveston Island State Park recently had a development sold along its northern border that

was offered to TPWD but it couldn't afford, and now puts a high-density housing complex immediately adjacent to the park.⁸⁶

The rapid growth causing these challenges will not go away either. In 2019 the Texas Demographics Center released its population projections for 2050. Within thirty years, the state could easily double its population, reaching over 50 million people. Unsurprisingly, the report expects that most of these new Texans will make homes in the same urban centers currently expanding.⁸⁷ Simple math dictates that as regions, cities, and neighborhoods increase in population density without increasing park acres, the park acreage per capita decreases just as rapidly. If Texans hope to maintain the ability to go for a spontaneous fishing trip or access a well-loved bike trail, more investment in these areas must happen now.

In sum, Texas' population continues to boom. Over the past two decades the state has grown tremendously, and should this rapid rate of expansion continue, or even slightly slow, the population will nearly double within another twenty years. With these trends showing no signs of stopping, the state must move quickly to beat the curve, get out ahead of the development, and create additional parks now.

America the Beautiful

"America the Beautiful" is a federal initiative to "work collaboratively to conserve and restore the lands, waters, and wildlife that support and sustain the nation."⁸⁸ The cornerstone of the plan centers around a "locally led and voluntary nationwide conservation goal" to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. With 95% of Texas lands privately owned, a 30% goal at first appears daunting.

However, the goal includes not just "national parks, wilderness lands, and marine protected areas in the care of the government" but also "voluntary conservation efforts of farmers, ranchers, and forest

owners."⁸⁹ The exact definition of what qualifies as conserved land is still under discussion, but an assessment for the Texas Land Conservation Conference estimated that about 36.3 million acres (21% of the total land area of Texas) are currently conserved as parkland, protected under conservation easements, or managed under TPWD Wildlife Management Associations and agreements, Wildlife Use Evaluations, and NRCS programs (though many of these easements are not perpetual). While that still leaves a significant amount of land needing conservation, the assessment suggests a 30% goal is plausible for Texas.⁹⁰

Natural heritage at risk

People are not the only ones who need parks. Development destroys wildlife habitat and threatens entire species, particularly those already at risk. Habitat fragmentation resulting from highway construction kills animals trying to migrate, mate, or search for food. Green space destruction limits where animals can range and increases competition for prime real estate, driving down population sizes and endangering the future of our animals, including iconic Texan species like the horned lizard and pronghorn antelope.

Parkland helps remedy these destructive challenges. Preserving parks of all sizes, but particularly large tracts of land, provides a haven for wildlife and helps mitigate the ongoing habitat loss. Preserving land in Texas has far-reaching, national implications as well. Over 98% of the United States' migratory bird species, some 333 in total, have been recorded flying through Texas and taking pit stops in our forests, parks, and open spaces.⁹¹ Similarly, monarch butterflies rely on being able to stop in Texas during their migration season.⁹² Animals benefit from parks and need Texas to act quickly to ensure that our wildlife is here in future generations.

In order to have a substantial impact on wildlife, Texas needs to conserve millions of additional acres of undeveloped lands. In the Blackland Prairies ecoregion of Texas alone, "permanent conservation lands are desperately needed," with scientists estimating 2.4 million acres need to be preserved in the next decade to protect high priority bird species.⁹³ There is also a private push for expansion in Caprock Canyon State Park, home to Texas' only wild buffalo herd. Some 100,000 acres are being targeted to help expand rangeland and foster further growth to help return west Texas to the days when it was teeming with wildlife.⁹⁴

Texas' Ecoregions

Texas is divided into ten distinct ecoregions, each offering valuable benefits to the state and hosting different plant and animal species. Naming the different regions in Texas and comparing them allows for critical analysis of where Texas is winning and losing the preservation battle. The ten ecoregions—Piney Woods, Gulf Prairies and Marshes, Post Oak Savannah, Blackland Prairie, Cross Timbers, South Texas Plains, Edwards Plateau, Rolling Plains, High Plains, and Trans-Pecos—each bring a unique beauty to our state.

Piney Woods

The Piney Woods region consists of “rolling terrain covered with pines and oaks.” This area sits at the far east side of Texas and hosts the large pine trees which give the region its name. Some of the state’s largest and most beautiful trees are threatened by logging, and the many animals that live in the giant pines and related ecosystem, such as families of woodpeckers, need the rich forests to survive.

Gulf Prairies and Marshes

Below the Pineywoods and stretching along the coast is the Gulf Prairies and Marshes region. This fragile ecosystem consists of lowlands dissected by numerous rivers and streams which flow to the Gulf of Mexico. This region also “includes barrier islands along the coast, salt grass marshes surrounding bays and estuaries, remnant tallgrass prairies, oak parklands...and tall woodlands in the river bottomlands.” This region provides nesting grounds for sea turtles, as well as spoonbills and even alligators. Wildlife Management Areas and Coastal Management Areas provide important support in addition



Pineywoods Ecoregion, Big Thicket National Preserve. Photo courtesy of William L. Farr.⁹⁶

to parks, but establishing more parks in this incredible region would allow Texans to explore more than just the beaches and would help protect vulnerable marshland.⁹⁸



Gulf Prairies and Marshes ecoregion. Photo courtesy of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.⁹⁷

Post Oak Savannah

To the northwest of the Pineywoods and Gulf Prairies lies the Post Oak Savannah region. This area of the state is unique in that it serves as a transitional area between the eastern forests and northward plains. Consisting of gently rolling hills and mild elevations, patches of oak woodlands interrupt rolling grasslands. Many ancient post oak trees reside in this region, and wildlife like the wild turkey, whitetail deer, and songbirds make the area their home.



Post Oak Savannah. Photo courtesy of William L. Farr.⁹⁹

Blackland Prairie

Flanking the Post Oaks on both sides is the Blackland Prairie, named for the dark black soils which excel at growing crops and native plants. Originally, these soils supported a beautiful tallgrass prairie, but now the land mostly hosts farms.¹⁰¹ Indigenous grasses and plants bring immense ecological value, and further protection of this region would allow for the restoration of more grassland. Wildflowers, songbirds, and waterfowl all call this region home and rely on our efforts for further preservation, and ecological protection.



Blackland Prairie ecoregion. Photo courtesy of William L. Farr.¹⁰⁰

Cross Timbers

West of the Blackland Prairie and stationed in central Texas is the Cross Timbers region. This area features a “high density of trees and irregular plains and prairies.”¹⁰³ The bobwhite quail once called this region home, as well as fox squirrels, bobcats, and whitetail deer. Now, much of this region is used for ranching, and the trees and grasses that used to house animals were torn away to make room for farms. Additional parkland here would provide key access for urban communities in Dallas, Fort Worth, and Austin.



Cross Timbers ecoregion at Colorado Bend state park. Photo courtesy of Clairissa Simmons.¹⁰²

South Texas Plains

Much of the southern tip of Texas is made up of the South Texas Plains ecoregion. “Characterized by plains of thorny shrubs and trees and scattered patches of palms and subtropical woodlands,” this ecoregion houses numerous rare plant and animal species.¹⁰⁵ It is essential that Texas act quickly to preserve this beautiful area in order to protect the dwindling animals that reside there including the ocelot, Texas tortoise, and iconic horned lizard.



South Texas Plains ecoregion, near Goliad State Park. Photo courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith.¹⁰⁴

Edwards Plateau

In south central Texas falls the Edwards Plateau ecoregion. This region “comprises an area of central Texas commonly known as the Texas Hill Country. It is a land of many springs, stony hills, and steep canyons.” This region is home for many animal and plant species, such as the mountain lion, armadillo, badger, and javelina.¹⁰⁷



Edwards Plateau ecoregion. Photo courtesy of William L. Farr.¹⁰⁶

Rolling Plains

Stretching from central Texas to the panhandle is the Rolling Plains ecoregion. Comprising small rivers and tributaries which created the hills, this region has changed substantially in the past several hundred years.¹⁰⁹ Bobwhite and scaled quail, songbirds, the javelina and other animals, call this region home.



Bison on the Rolling Plains. Photo courtesy of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.¹⁰⁸

High Plains

The High Plains ecoregion comprises the west panhandle and is well known for its plateaus and sandy soils. Songbirds, porcupines, and raptors all populate this region, while it was once home to vast numbers of Prairie dogs and Bison,¹¹¹ numbers that are recovering slowly. The state must move quickly to ensure that this valuable piece of the state is not lost completely to development and fragmentation.

Trans-Pecos

Finally, the last ecoregion, found at the far west tip of Texas, is the Trans-Pecos region. Surprisingly, despite falling far from any of the major central metropolitan centers, this region is the most protected. Composed of cacti, succulents, shrub brush, and the Guadalupe Mountains, this region is home to a number of reptiles such as the eastern collared lizard and Trans-Pecos rat snake.¹¹³



High Plains ecoregion. Photo courtesy of Leaflet.¹¹⁰



Trans-Pecos ecoregion. Photo courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith.¹¹²

Priorities for Acquisition

In a September 2021 request for funding to the Legislature¹¹⁴ TPWD identified areas targeted for land acquisition, including proposed expansion of parks in the Edwards Plateau and Post Oak Savannah ecoregions.

In July 2022, the Legislative Budget Board reported that “rapidly changing real estate market conditions create difficulties with long term planning for land acquisition. Due to this, the agency maintains a list of locations for which land expansion could be possible and takes advantage of these opportunities when funding is available with all purchases from willing sellers only.” TPWD had identified the following state parks and natural areas “for expansion through potential land acquisitions at an unknown future date”:

Government Canyon State Natural Area, Bastrop State Park, Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, Kickapoo Caverns State Park, South Llano River State Park, Davis Hill State Park, Franklin Mountains State Park, Possum Kingdom State Park, Palo Duro Canyon State Park and Copper Breaks State Park.

Meanwhile, Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation has identified 17 parks and wildlife management areas as especially at risk of development encroaching near their borders¹¹⁵, including:

- Brazos Bend State Park (Greater Houston/Gulf Coastal Plains)
- Sheldon Lake State Park (Greater Houston/Gulf Coastal Plains) Devil’s River State Natural Area (Southwest Texas)
- Pedernales Falls State Park (Hill Country)
- Resaca de la Palma State Park (Rio Grande Valley)
- Estero Llano Grande State Park (Rio Grande Valley)
- Palo Pinto Mountains State Park (Cross Timbers)
- Lost Maples State Natural Area (Hill Country)
- Tyler State Park (Pineywoods)
- Village Creek State Park (Pineywoods)

Land Acquisition and Infrastructure Development – Expand/Improve Existing Sites

Edwards Plateau Ecoregion – Park Expansion (950 acres) - \$6 million

Post Oak Savannah Ecoregion – Purchase Leased Park (1,775 acres) - \$15 million

Edwards Plateau Ecoregion – Park Expansion (181 acres) - \$4.5 million

Edwards Plateau Ecoregion – Park Expansion (500 acres) – \$6 million

Edwards Plateau Ecoregion – Park Expansion (41 acres) - \$1 million

Rolling Plains Ecoregion – Park Expansion (7,000 acres) - \$26 million

Trans-Pecos Ecoregion – Wildlife Management Area Expansion (16,000 acres) - \$16 million

Trans-Pecos Ecoregion – Wildlife Management Area Expansion (7,000 acres) - \$5 million

Gulf Prairies and Marshes Ecoregion – UCWEP Expansion (1,000 acres) - \$3 million

Edwards Plateau Ecoregion – Wildlife Management Area Expansion (500 acres) - \$2.5 million

Edwards Plateau Ecoregion – Wildlife Management Area Expansion (500 acres) - \$2.5 million

Piney Woods Ecoregion – Wildlife Management Area Expansion (1,235 acres) - \$3.1 million

Land Acquisition – New Sites

Piney Woods Ecoregion – New Wildlife Management Area, Mitigation Bank (20,000 acres) - \$34 million

Planned Future Acquisitions for Texas State Parks. From a Texas Parks and Wildlife request for funding.

Unopened and at-risk state parks

In addition to adding new parkland, we need to develop and open sites already in the state inventory. The TPWD currently manages five state parks that are not yet open to the public. In a report, the department notes that “opening the sites for public use is dependent on the construction of the infrastructure required to accommodate public use.”¹¹⁶ These parks, the Palo Pinto Mountains, Albert and Bessie Kronkosky, Chinati Mountains, Davis Hill, and Powderhorn Ranch have been owned by the state for years, but are still not open to the public. Meanwhile, TPWD is at risk of losing one state park, Fairfield, that is currently open.

Chinati Mountains State Natural Area

At nearly 39,000 acres Chinati will be one of Texas’ largest state parks when it opens. Located in the Trans-Pecos Region of West Texas, Chinati is home to soaring mountains and wild desert and flowing grasslands.¹¹⁷ The park is located in the northern part of the Chihuahuan Desert that stretches south into Mexico. Its key feature is Sierra Parda, a 7,185-foot mountain in the heart of the park,¹¹⁸ and its partnership with Big Bend ranch to serve as an International Dark Sky Park, which makes for unparalleled stargazing. This park does not have a set open date yet but is nearly ready to start development. While the acquisition of this land is a huge boon for TPWD, what’s troubling is that almost all parks near this size are in the Trans-Pecos or Edwards Plateau regions of the state.

Palo Pinto Mountains State Park

The newest Texas state park, Palo Pinto is a 4,800-acre wilderness only an hour’s drive from Fort Worth.¹¹⁹ Still under development, the TPWD has big plans for this

much needed park. “An extensive network of multi-use trails for hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders” will provide exciting outdoor recreation opportunities close to DFW and Abilene. For hikers interested in more rugged options, other “trails will lead to remote areas of the park with expansive vistas.” The park’s Tucker Lake will give guests the chance to “fish, boat, swim and look for birds,” but “motorboats will not be allowed, to protect the park’s tranquility.” Finally, picnic sites, campgrounds, and playgrounds will allow visitors to stay the night and recreate with friends and family.¹²⁰ The park is planned to open in 2023.

Davis Hill State Park

Only 45 minutes northeast of Houston is a hidden and little-known Texas gem: the future Davis Hill state park. In 1983 Texas acquired slightly over 1,700 acres and intended to open them to the public, but almost 40 years later the park remains closed. Since the land was purchased, no plan has been published regarding how to develop it. In anticipation of development of the park, TPWD has recently authorized the acquisition of 50 acres, including the last remaining inholdings and some strategic adjacent land.^{121, 122} Moving forward in this park’s development is significant progress, as having a new park so close to Houston would provide immense value to the region.

Powderhorn State Park and Wildlife Management Area

One of the upcoming Texas parks currently under development, Powderhorn Ranch will provide unparalleled access to the beautiful Texas gulf plains. Although technically a wildlife management area in addition to a state park, Powderhorn will offer exceptional public access and opportunity. The approximately 17,000-

acre parcel of land, with some 2300 acres available for a park specifically, was purchased through a blend of conservation groups, TPWD, and Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund money resulting from criminal settlement of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. This new area will provide protected habitat for the endangered whooping crane in addition to other wildlife and provide both beach and lake access for park goers.¹²³

Albert and Bessie Kronkosky State Natural Area

The Albert and Bessie Kronkosky State Natural Area is a 3,814-acre ranch in the midst of being converted into a state park. The park will be open to hiking and camping, as well as limited Mountain Biking and Fishing. TPWD received the land as a donation from the Kronkoskys in December 2011 and is seen as conserving a crucial part of the Hill Country. TPWD has already spotted endangered species such as golden-cheeked warbler, alligator lizard, sycamore-leaf snowbell, big-toothed maple, Boerne bean and Texas spring salamander in the area, which will now be protected from development.¹²⁴

Fairfield Lake State Park

Fairfield Lake State Park, an approximately 1,821-acre park¹²⁵ on the southern part of Fairfield Lake about an hour and a half south of Dallas¹²⁶, is already a fully operational park leased by the state from Vistra Energy since 1976. In the calendar year 2019 alone Fairfield brought in some 58,533 people and over \$343,000 in state revenue.¹²⁷ However, the closure of Vistra's Big Brown Power Plant, which used the lake as a cooling source, led the company to sell the land¹²⁸. The property is now under an option for purchase and it's unclear if the new owner will renew the lease.¹²⁹ Without the park, the state could lose 15 miles of hiking trails, and access to a 2,400-acre lake.¹³⁰

Changing Land Markets

With growth comes rising costs for land and homes—increasing demand decreases supply. Rising home values—and the value of land—brings challenges for land preservation and park development.

During the pandemic, the housing market boomed. In each major metro, the DFW Metroplex, Hous-



Big Bend Ranch State Park in the Trans-Pecos ecoregion. Photo courtesy of Faungg.¹³³

ton, San Antonio, and Austin, housing prices soared between 2020 and 2022, according to the Texas A&M University's (TAMU) Texas Real Estate Research Center. The average home value in DFW rose over two hundred thousand dollars, both Houston and San Antonio rose over one hundred thousand, and Austin approached an increase of three hundred thousand dollars.¹³¹ Although these leaps resulted in part from the COVID-19 pandemic, TAMU expects the prices to settle, not reverse.

Rural land reflects the urban trend. The TAMU center reports that since 2010, rural land prices have more than doubled, spiking from \$1,751 an acre to over \$4,000.¹³²

Texas' largest state park, Big Bend Ranch, boasts 311,040 acres of rugged mountains, clear night skies, and miles of trails, rivers, and open wilderness to explore. The Ranch is truly a Texas treasure, but it almost certainly would not exist if Texas had to purchase the land today. In 1988 TPWD purchased the ranch for \$8.8 million.¹³⁴ This was certainly a large sum, but the TPWD really scored: Texas bought the land at a price per acre of only \$28. Adjusted for inflation to 2021 dollars, the purchase price would be almost \$21 million. In 1988, the nominal per-acre price of land in the Big Bend region was \$74. Today, that figure has grown twentyfold to \$1,609. If a wonderful opportunity like Big Bend Ranch appeared today, it would cost nearly \$500 million.¹³⁵

State investment in parks

Unfortunately, due to inconsistent and insufficient funding from the Legislature, TPWD for many years struggled to even maintain existing parks, much less plan for the future. Proposition 5, put forth by the Texas Legislature and approved by voters in November 2019, marked a major shift in the funding of the state parks system.¹³⁶ With sales taxes on sporting goods now constitutionally guaranteed to fund the operations of state parks and historic sites, TPWD will be much less subject to the rollercoaster of legislative appropriations. This referendum was passed with an impressive 88%¹³⁷ of the vote, a clear statement that Texans statewide want our parks to be open, extensive, and thriving.

With dedicated funding, TPWD ensures that sales tax revenues from sporting goods go towards funding state parks and historic sites. This gives the department a steady stream of funding, which gives it the stability to plan for the future.¹³⁸ In fact, the TPWD estimated in 2020 that the sporting goods tax would fund almost 60% of its state parks operating budget.¹³⁹

While the vast majority of those funds are for ongoing operation and maintenance of existing parks, the Legislature in 2021 did appropriate \$7 million for land acquisition in the 2022-2023 budget biennium. Booming sales taxes on sporting goods allowed TPWD to direct an additional \$5.8 million this year to acquire parkland.¹⁴⁰ While this was welcome as the first such appropriation in at least twenty years, the amount will only allow for a very modest acquisition of land.¹⁴¹

In September 2021, TPWD requested \$124.6 million of the state's approximately \$16 billion federal American Rescue Plan Act allocation to acquire additional parkland,¹⁴² but the request was ignored by the Legislature.¹⁴³

Recommendations

Texas must move quickly now to ensure that future generations of Texans have access to our parks and are able to enjoy them without overcrowding and overuse.

In the next several years, the state must move to prioritize funding for park land acquisition. Land acquisition, partnerships with federal and local agencies, and entrepreneurial action can all aid in organizing the funds necessary to begin approaching the 1.4-million-acre goal.

At an average price of over \$4,000 per acre, purchasing 1.4 million acres—to reach the 75th percentile discussed above—would cost nearly \$6 billion (not including the development and ongoing operations and maintenance of new parks), and this figure will only continue to rise¹⁴⁴.

A number of funding opportunities are available to the state to help:

- The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), signed into law by President Trump in 2020, is already giving Texas parks a much-needed infusion of cash.¹⁴⁵ The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which receives \$17 million annually,¹⁴⁶ is using their money to boost grants to cities for sports complexes, butterfly gardens, and trails, and to support our state parks.¹⁴⁷
- The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, officially known as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also provides an opportunity for funding. The law created a wildlife corridor pilot program which will provide \$350 million for developing land bridges, tunnels, and corridors for wildlife. These crossings can connect previously separated parcels of habitat and decrease animal mortality.¹⁴⁸ The bill also

appropriates \$75 million annually for the next five years to the Department of the Interior for land protection and restoration, creating a grant program to states and tribes being administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. In addition, \$55 million per year will be awarded through the authority of the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program for coastal land protection.¹⁴⁹

- The Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA), if passed into law by Congress, would provide over \$50 million to Texas to fund projects that protect iconic Texan species and habitats¹⁵⁰, 7.5% of which will go towards access to and participation in the outdoors.¹⁵¹ RAWA would further enable Texas to conserve iconic species that are at immediate risk of extinction or otherwise in decline.¹⁵²



Crested caracara in Colorado county within the Gulf Prairies ecoregion. Photo courtesy of William L. Farr.¹⁵³

- The Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund was set up as a result of the plea agreements made after the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill of 2010. A total of \$2.544 billion was allocated to benefit “the natural resources of the Gulf Coast that were impacted by the spill.”¹⁵⁴ Although most of this fund has been spent (including \$35 million for the purchase of the 17,351-acre Powderhorn Ranch¹⁵⁵) several million is still pending for Texas projects.¹⁵⁶
- Another legal settlement of litigation concerning the Deepwater Horizon oil spill created a multi-billion-dollar pot of funds being administered by a new federal/state agency called the RESTORE Council. An award from the Council enabled TPWD to purchase the eastern Matagorda Peninsula, and the Council recently approved \$24 million more in land conservation funds for the Texas coast. Yet another source of funds for coastal conservation and restoration is administered through the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process.¹⁵⁷
- Along similar lines, the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) shares leasing revenues amongst Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas for the express purpose of coastal restoration projects. There is an annual revenue sharing cap of \$500 million from the years 2016 until 2055. In Fiscal Year 2022 Texas has so far received some \$55,066,869 of these funds. As mentioned above this could help further our acquisitions in the Gulf Prairie region.¹⁵⁸ Many of these fund sources, however, require a state or local match. To fully leverage these opportunities and meet our conservation goals, the state will need to consider directing additional revenues to parks and conservation programs.

Budget Surplus and Rainy-Day Fund

The state Comptroller estimates Texas will have a surplus of about \$27 billion for the 2023/2024 biennium¹⁵⁹. The Economic Stabilization Fund (ESF), also known as the Rainy-Day Fund, is projected to have a \$13.6 billion fund balance. Recent Legislatures have tapped the ESF for state priorities, including water infrastructure¹⁶¹, repairs to mental health hospitals¹⁶², and flooding.¹⁶³ Appropriating \$1 billion, of either surplus or the ESF would go a long way toward meeting the state’s conservation goals.

Bonds

Bonds are a frequently used funding strategy for parkland acquisition. Bonds are a form of loan in which the state borrows money from people and companies who purchase part of the loan. They operate similarly to any other loan, such as a mortgage or car payment, and allow the bond issuer to make payments over time and purchase something the issuer would be unable to otherwise.

Long before voters passed Proposition 5 relating to sporting goods, Texas voters in 1967 passed a different Prop. 5. This ballot measure, approved by the legislature during the administration of Gov. John Connally, created the Texas Park Development Fund to provide funding for park acquisition and maintenance and issues \$75 million for the fund.¹⁶⁴ These bond funds allowed for a major expansion of the state parks system, including the acquisition of Big Bend Ranch State Park in 1988.¹⁶⁵

Real estate transfer fees

A real estate transfer fee, also known as “real property transfer taxes,” could be used to fund parks. Levied by 40 states (not including Texas), the money raised from this tax can be used for multiple purposes, but some states including Florida have required that a portion of the revenue raised be used specifically for parkland and open space preservation.¹⁶⁶ Naturally linking the improved quality of life—and the accompanying rise in property value—that comes with creation of local and state parks, the fee can be a successful tool to fund natural areas and park protection.¹⁶⁷

Offshore wind leases

The state could lease state waters for offshore wind energy, as it does for oil and gas drilling, to provide a new source of revenue for our fund parks. A recent auction by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management of lease areas in the New York Bight yielded

approximately \$4.37 billion in revenue.¹⁶⁸ Most other coastal states control the bottom of the ocean for three nautical miles offshore, with the federal government controlling waters beyond three miles. Texas, however, controls all “submerged” lands 10.35 miles out into the Gulf of Mexico, providing significant areas available for possible state leases for offshore wind energy.¹⁶⁹

Conservation Trust Fund

Whatever the source of revenue, Texas could put funds into a trust to pay out funds over time, as it has done recently with the State Water Infrastructure Fund of Texas (SWIFT) and Flood Infrastructure Fund. Michigan’s Natural Resources Trust Fund¹⁷⁰ and the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust¹⁷¹ could be models for Texas.

Conclusion

Funding opportunities exist and the state should consider capitalizing on them. Such a move would likely be popular. Texas 2036, a policy organization, determined that 68 percent of Texans, across party lines and regions, supported using \$1 billion of federal Covid relief funds for land acquisition. This consensus was bipartisan: 61 percent of Republicans and 75 percent of Democrats supported this objective.¹⁷²

To quote the great Sam Houston “Texas will again lift its head and stand among the nations. It ought to do so, for no country upon the globe can compare with it in natural advantages.”¹⁷³ These natural assets are highlighted by the beauty and majesty of our state parks. All Texans should be able to both experience and take full advantage of the natural wonders our state offers, whether it be through hiking, camping, fishing, or even just taking in our wildlife. Without these spaces Texas would lose a part of its soul, part of what makes it so unique.

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