The Great Grassland Myth of the Texas Hill Country

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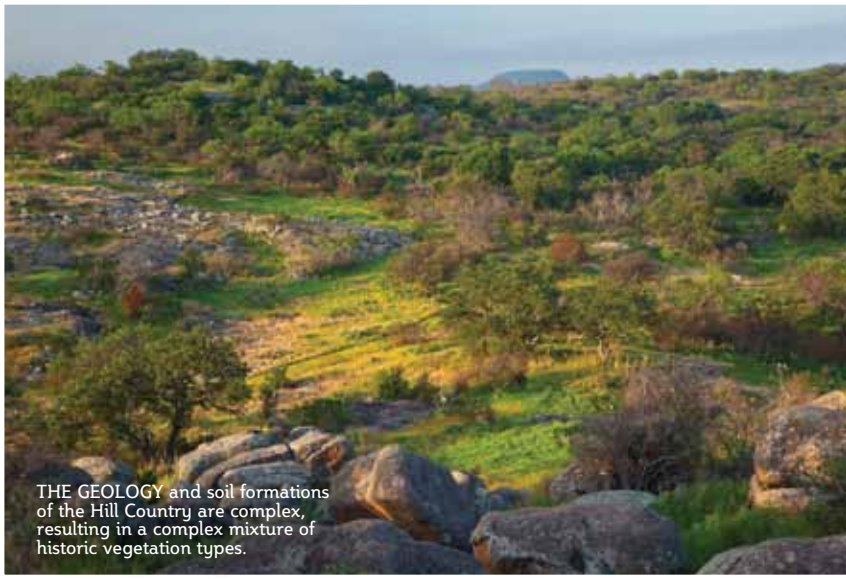
THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY is a land of diverse landscapes. The historic density of woody plants ranged from sparse to heavy.



THE GEOLOGY and soil formations of the Hill Country are complex, resulting in a complex mixture of historic vegetation types.

Myths are not necessarily totally untrue. There is often a thread of truth woven into myths. This is what makes them believable and what helps perpetuate them. In fact, there is enough truth contained in some myths that they could simply be called misperceptions.

Myths and misperceptions are common in the realm of nature and natural resource management. Some myths are harmless folklore and not really worth much debate: "Hang a dead rattlesnake on a fence, and it will rain within three days." Or, the belief that the blooming of cenizo indicates that rain will soon follow; or, the leafing out of mesquite means there will be no more freezes.

Other myths are more significant since they can affect natural resource decisions and influence public policy. Consider the implications of these three myth-misperceptions. Because there is a large annual turnover in quail numbers, hunting has no additive effect on quail mortality. Coyotes and other predators only kill weak, sick or injured livestock and wildlife that would have died anyway. Mesquite trees transpire copious volumes of water and are a primary cause of the drying of springs, creeks and aquifers. In each of these cases, there are varying amounts of fact and truth; but, in all these instances, the real issues are much more complex. The oversimplification of complex issues is one of the primary things that contribute to myths and their perpetuation.

The dispelling of myths and the untangling of misperceptions is difficult, because people often want to believe them and may get defensive when deeply held beliefs are challenged. As humans, we tend to "see" what we already believe, instead of the other way around. Myths are usually not in-

MANY EARLY Hill Country explorers noted the difficulty of traveling due to heavily wooded terrain.

MID-TO-TALL GRASS oak savanna was one of several historic vegetation types described by early settlers.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS prior to 1860 present a clear picture that much of the Hill Country was heavily wooded before European settlement. These woodlands were cut for building material and fuel by early settlers and were considered a valuable natural resource.

tentional twisting of the facts – they are sincerely believed by their proponents and often based on wishful thinking, tradition or hearsay.

Repeat a Myth Often Enough

Myths and misperceptions become ingrained into our thinking by repetition. The old adage seems to be true – "Repeat a myth often enough, and it starts to sound like fact." One of the most oft repeated myths involves the historic landscape vegetation of the Hill Country. The myth is usually presented like this: "The Hill Country was once vast open grassland with only scattered brush and trees." There are dozens of variations of this myth, with each teller adding a few twists here and there. The theme of a sparsely wooded region has been taught in university classrooms, promoted by agencies, and handed down from generation to generation of landowners and biologists.

One reason why this myth is so pervasive is that it has been repeated so many times by so many different people. Think how many times have you attended seminars, conferences or field days and heard the speakers describe the historic grasslands of the region and the corresponding lack of dense woody vegetation. How many reports have you read where this mythical open landscape is presented as if it were a well-documented fact?

Why Does it Matter?

Perhaps you are thinking, "Why does this matter; what is the big deal?" For some, it may not matter what the historic landscape looked like. However, for many conservationists, biologists and landowners, the historic landscape is important, especially if the goal is to restore the land to some degree of similarity of its former conditions. A lot of emphasis is being placed on ecological restoration and returning the land to something comparable to its previous historic likeness. The benchmark that is often used in land restoration activities and conservation projects is the historic landscape, sometimes called the climax plant community. Botanists and ecologists have gone to great lengths in an attempt to understand and describe what the land used to look like before European settlement.

A true and accurate picture of historic pre-settlement landscapes and vegetation types provides important and useful information to landowners, ranchers, wildlife managers and those who wish to understand the nature of a given region.

There are a large number of first-hand historic landscape descriptions of the Texas Hill Country. When these accounts are taken together, they paint a good image of the different kinds of landscapes seen by the early European settlers in the late 1700s through the mid 1800s.

The best and most complete collection of historic accounts of vegetation of the region was compiled by Dr. Del Weniger, who was on the faculty of Our Lady of the Lake University for 39 years prior to his death in 1999. Dr. Weniger was a combination of botanist, ecologist and historian.

THE RELATIVE HISTORIC proportion of open grasslands to wooded areas varied from place to place and was influenced by soils, topography and the influence of bison grazing and fire.

He was able to see the big picture without some of the common biases that interfere with a clear understanding. One of his books, The Explorers' Texas: The Lands and Waters, contains an excellent chapter on the Texas Hill Country. This easy-to-read, well-documented chapter provides a convincing record regarding early Hill Country vegetation. The book is out of print but is available in many libraries. The following excerpts from this chapter provide ample support that much of the Hill Country was very well-wooded prior to the disturbances and landscape alterations of early settlers. It is important to note that these accounts are prior to 1860 when the early settlers began the widespread cutting of the woodlands of the region for building material and fuel.

Eyewitness Accounts

From the Miranda Expedition in 1756, describing conditions in the Guadalupe, Blanco, San Marcos and Pedernales river basins: "In all this region, there are no commodities nor anything except good

SOME EARLY HILL COUNTRY explorers wrote of a generally wooded landscape broken here and there by pockets of open grassland.

cedar and oak timber… Crossing many swollen creeks and thickets of cedar and oak timber."

William Kennedy in 1839 wrote this general description of a large area including the canyons and uplands of the Nueces, Medina, Pedernales, Guadalupe, Llano, Colorado, San Saba, and Bosque Rivers: "The mountains… are clothed with forests of pine, oak, cedar and other trees, with a great variety of shrubbery."

Near the confluence of the San Saba and Colorado River in 1830, W. B. Dewees wrote: "…our course lay over mountains of rock and through cedar brake, which impeded our course and bewildered our guides…"

Jean Louis Berlandier described what he saw in the Guadalupe basin near present day Hunt in 1828: "The forests are very heavy. There is an abundance of cedar and various oaks scattered about in groupings…we went out… to survey the cedar forest to the east..."

In present day Bandera County in 1858, J. DeCordova wrote: "From the Medina to the Hondo… mezquite prairie fairly timbered up to the mountains, which are covered with cedar."

In 1840, George Bonnell wrote of an area northwest of Austin: "Some portions of the hills are very well timbered – others are prairie."

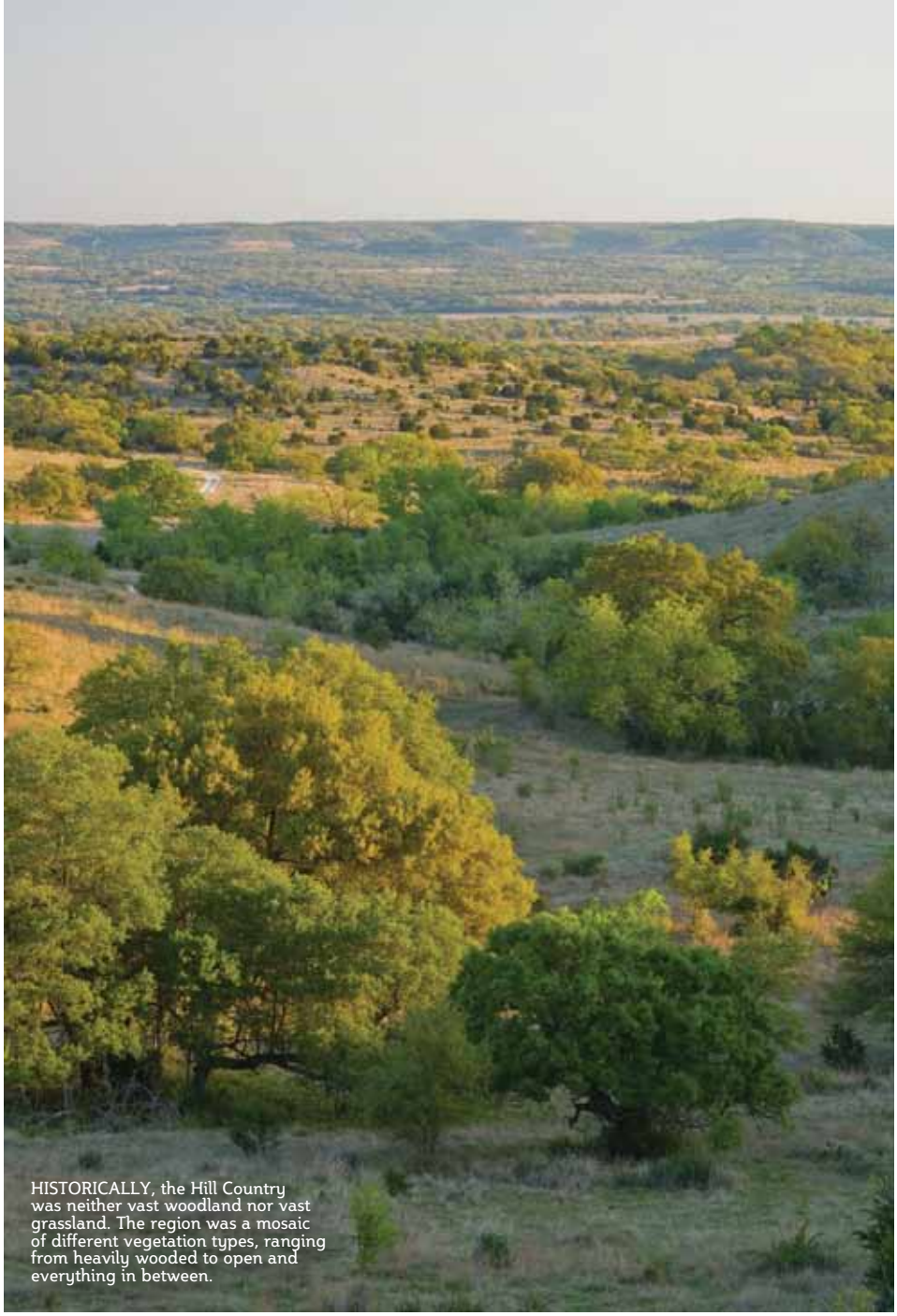
The Alarcon Expedition recorded the following description in 1718 near present day New Braunfels: "We traveled about three leagues across very rugged land owing to the heavy woods and many rocks; and at the end of the three leagues two soldiers left for upstream to reconnoiter the land. They said it could not be traveled because it is more wooded and contains more rocks. The woods consist of oaks and junipers."

From the J. W. Benedict Campaign in 1838, written from somewhere in the Guadalupe basin: "Mile after mile of the dark boding forest rose to our view…"

The Moore Expedition in 1840 described the hilly country in the San Saba River region: "dense thickets of cedar…the forests furnish vast quantities of valuable timber…"

Prince Solm's 10th Report in 1845 in the Comal River basin records: "I ascended the ridge on horseback, forcing a path through the heavy cedar thickets."

Ferdinand Roemer wrote the following description of the Comal River basin in 1845: "The cedar trees, which covered



HISTORICALLY, the Hill Country was neither vast woodland nor vast grassland. The region was a mosaic of different vegetation types, ranging from heavily wooded to open and everything in between.

JUNIPER OR CEDAR was a very common component of historic woodlands and shrublands, but it did not monopolize the landscape as it does in some areas presently.

SOME PRESENT-DAY landowners have chosen to maintain a more open landscape than was historically found. Brush management and prescribed fire are tools that are commonly used to maintain the desired balance of wooded to open terrain.

THE ABUNDANCE of cypress found along some Hill Country creeks and rivers was a treasure to early settlers. Almost all of the original cypress was logged from the region in the late 1800s. Cypress forests have grown back on most rivers where it is native.

the slopes exclusively, formed an impenetrable thicket through which a path had to be cut…The cedars here…are stately trees with straight trunks, seldom more than twenty or twenty-five feet in height and one and one-half feet thick…This cedar forest was a treasure to the colonists…"

In 1848 Victor Bracht wrote about present day Travis, Hays and Comal counties: "…dark, steep, cedar-covered mountains arise about five miles north of the city … The hills which extend all the way from Austin to New Braunfels are covered with timber"

Not a Vast Open Grassland

These and many other pre-1860 eyewitness accounts provide compelling evidence that the Hill Country of Texas was not predominantly open grassland prior to European settlement as is widely believed. The Hill Country did contain areas of open grassland, but these were in combination with large areas of savanna, shrubland, woodland and forest. The landscape was complex and diverse, not uniform or homogeneous. The arrangement of different soils and topography, mixed with the varying effects of fire, resulted in what can only be called a dynamic mosaic of many vegetation types. There is ample evidence from history that the mosaic of the Hill Country was predominantly wooded.

Present day conservationists, biologists and landowners will benefit from knowing that the historic Hill Country supported much woody vegetation, including a great deal of juniper. The untangling and clarification of some former myths will help genuine land stewards better understand and better manage the complex and dynamic ecology of the Hill Country.