

Big Thicket Reporter - #98

Mar-Apr 2009

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The Conservation Fund Acquired 3,600 Acres Along Village Creek

Beaumont, TX (March 25, 2009)—One of the most diverse landscapes in America gained further protection with The Conservation Fund's purchase of 3,600 acres in Hardin, Tyler and Polk counties from the Hancock Timber Resource Group. The land (partly authorized in the 1993 Addition Act) eventually will become part of Big Thicket National Preserve. The purchase establishes a continuous conservation corridor along Village Creek that provides habitat for migratory waterfowl and song birds and serves as a floodplain that would benefit the communities along Village Creek and the Neches River.

Packed with an impressive amount of wildlife and plant species, the dense wilderness of the Big Thicket region in southeast Texas consists of important river corridors, productive wetlands, tall forests, open plains, pine savannas and dry sandhills. Big Thicket National Preserve—the nation's first national preserve—protects the heart of the region and provides visitors with opportunities for backpacking, hiking, camping, canoeing, kayaking and wildlife viewing.

“The Hancock Timber Resource Group and The Conservation Fund have a long history of working together to protect environmentally sensitive land,” said Mike Wolf, director of North American Forest Operations, Hancock Timber Resource Group. “We are very pleased to be able to work with The Conservation Fund once again to protect land in the Village Creek watershed.” Through its Sensitive Lands Program, the Hancock Timber Resource Group has helped preserve and protect nearly 400,000 acres of environmentally sensitive lands across the United States.

The Conservation Fund has helped preserve nearly 137,000 acres in Texas, including 32,000 acres at Big Thicket National Preserve. In addition, the Fund launched an ecotourism and economic development program for the region called the Pineywoods Experience (TexasPineywoodsExperience.org) and established Texas’ largest wetlands mitigation bank, the Pineywoods Mitigation Bank (PineywoodsBank.com).

COURT UPHOLDS NECHES RIVER N.W.R.

Janice Bezanson, Executive Director, Texas Conservation Alliance

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the July 2008 decision in favor of the Neches River NWR.

The ruling involved the City of Dallas and the Texas Water Development Board suit to overturn creation of the Refuge and to make way for a proposed Fastrill Dam and reservoir Dallas predicts might be needed in fifty years. Judge Jorge A. Solis upheld the USF&W's 2006 creation of the Refuge and denied motions by Dallas and TWDB to require a more detailed environmental study. A three-judge panel affirmed the lower court ruling.

Biologists say the land within the boundaries of the Neches River NWR is some of the least disturbed and highest-quality bottomland hardwood forests left in Texas, rated Priority 1 for acquisition by USF&WS. The waters of the Neches River sustain the exceptional habitat of the Big Thicket National Preserve, the Davy Crockett and Angelina National Forests, various state parks and wildlife management areas, and the Sabine Lake estuary.

WETLANDS PROTECTED:

On April 15 The Conservation Fund and BP America, Inc. will celebrate the preservation of 6,600 acres of wetlands to be donated to the Big Thicket National Preserve. The event convenes at Riverfront Park in Beaumont and includes a tour of the property.

Big Thicket folks owe The Fund BIG TIME for its continuing efforts for preservation of Big Thicket woodlands and wetlands. Not only have they acquired the Addition Act Lands in behalf of the Preserve, they further identify and purchase adjoining lands through corporate and non-profit partnerships as well as mitigation funding.

DIVERSITY DISPATCH

GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY CONFERENCE:

Sharing Advances in Protected Area Research and Resource Management

Report by Linda Brindle, Executive Director, BTA Consortium

The George Wright Society held its conference March 2-6, 2009 in Portland, Oregon. The Society encourages dialogue and information exchange to promote conservation, from historians to biologists, managers to researchers, public agencies to private organizations, academics to field personnel. The conference brings people together to share problems and information, hear new perspectives, and contemplate critical questions about the future of protected areas.

This year the BTA sent Dale Kruse (president, Thicket of Diversity) and Linda Brindle (BTA Executive Director) to represent the Big Thicket Association and the Thicket of Diversity project. Brindle participated in a 4-person panel discussion entitled "Bridging the Gap" and gave a short presentation about the Thicket of Diversity project. Three posters demonstrating the Thicket of Diversity project were grouped with other NPS posters in the ATBI section. In addition, Dr. Carl Knight attended the conference and presented a power-point about Eastfield's Summer Research Institute at the Big Thicket.

EAST TEXAS MISCELLANY

WILDERNESS POW WOW

Texas Conservation Alliance has scheduled the 30th annual Wilderness Pow Wow for April 25 and Ratcliff Lake Recreation Area, Davy Crockett National Forest. This year events are planned only for one day, but campsites are available as usual @ \$10 per day or for sites with electrical hookups @ \$15 per day. Car entry fee is \$3.00.

The Canoe trip leaves at 7:30 AM. You can bring your own or reserve one at \$15 per person by calling 903-592-0909 or e-mail to Alliance@TCATexas.org by April 21. Nature walks are available morning and afternoon. The program begins at 3:00 PM.

"LIFE ON THE NECHES" PHOTO EXHIBITION

The Museum of East Texas in Lufkin and Texas Conservation Alliance invited photographers to submit images of "Life on the Neches," that capture its history, forests and wildlife, and the people. The results will be exhibited from March 21-May 29 at the Museum. A special program will be held Sunday, April 19 at 2:00 PM. After May 29, the exhibition will tour East Texas.

CONSERVATION OUTLOOK

CAMPAIGN FOR NECHES SCENIC RIVER



Excerpts from Questions and Answers Fact Sheet

A Wild and Scenic River is a free-flowing river, or river segment, with “outstandingly remarkable values” – scenic, recreational, historic, cultural, geologic, or fish and wildlife – that has been designated as a part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Before a river can be included in the National Wild and Scenic River System, the U.S. Congress passes a bill authorizing a thorough study of the river’s **eligibility** and **suitability**. In the case of the Neches River, the study is expected to be conducted jointly by the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service.

Designation does not open private lands to public access. Laws by which landowners protect and use their land would continue as before. Ongoing regular uses of private lands would not be affected. Normal activities, such as timber harvesting and agriculture, would continue as before.

The proposal to designate the Neches as part of the Rivers System is *not a land acquisition project*. Land acquisition has only rarely occurred under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. If the local people who help design the management plan call for land acquisition in the management plan, and if funds are appropriated by Congress, the federal government *could* acquire land from *willing sellers*, as could local or state governments or non-government organizations.

After a thorough study, and if the study results in a recommendation that the Neches be designated as a Wild and Scenic River, Congress must pass a second bill before the designation is official.

Comments: Three reservoir projects proposed for the Neches – Fastrill Reservoir, Rockland Dam, and raising Dam B, which forms B.A. Steinhagen Reservoir – together would flood 175,000 acres of bottomland. Designating the Neches as a Wild and Scenic River would prohibit projects, such as reservoirs, that require a federal permit and would harm the river.

The 354-mile riverbed belongs to the State, and 278 of those miles [79 percent] include state and federal lands.

ACTION: You can help: Texas conservationists are working diligently to protect the Neches as a Scenic River. Ask your representatives to support the initiative. The Neches Scenic River is in Congressional districts represented by Congressmen Louis Gohmert, Ted Poe, Jeb Hensarling, Joe Barton, and Kevin Brady. We also need resolutions of support from Chambers of Commerce and civic and professional groups. For additional information contact: Texas Conservation Alliance, 903-592-0909 or Alliance@TCAtexas.org.

TRINITY RIVER N.W.R. NEWS

by Stuart Marcus, Refuge Manager

"Project Habitat" Award for Responsible Vegetation Management

Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge, based in Liberty, Texas, is a winner in the 2008 **QVM Project Habitat Awards**, announced at the third annual awards banquet held recently in Austin, Texas. The awards program honors quality vegetation management programs across the U.S. Entrants competed in six categories, including Forestry, Utility, Roadside, Invasive Vegetation Management, Aquatic and Specialty. Submissions were judged on criteria including a description of their vegetation management problem, the solution and the results of their application.

“Trinity River stands out as a leader in responsible environmental stewardship because of their commitment to the highest industry principles and practices,” said Kim Dorman, Communications Specialist for BASF Professional Vegetation Management. “The commitment they have made helps sustain healthy vegetation and wildlife ecosystems.”

Trinity River NWR must deal with both native and non-native aquatic weeds including alligator weed, floating pennywort, frogbit and water hyacinth in their lakes and ponds.

BUTTERFLY GARDEN: The 5,000 sq ft Butterfly Garden located at the Trinity River Refuge's Champion Lake Public Use Area at the end of CR 417 was spruced up a bit on March 7th. A total of 14 volunteers and members of the Friends of Trinity River Refuge spent over three hours weeding, planting, and mulching the entire garden. The pathway was also paved making it more accessible to everyone.

"TEAMING WITH WILDLIFE"

TWW is a twenty-year-old coalition of approximately 5,900 organizations across the country-- both for-profit businesses, non-profits and some government agencies. Texas has a growing number of about 100 organizations. All have an interest in preserving wildlife.

The group supports a Teaming with Wildlife Act to provide \$350 million annual funding (estimated \$12 million for Texas) for six years for wildlife conservation, and also supports funding for the Climate Change legislation enacted this year. TP&W developed a comprehensive State Wildlife Action Plan in response to the 2001 Congress mandated legislation.

Participants included 96 from 30 states. The Texas delegation was led by David Braun and included representatives of Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, Houston Audubon, Plateau Land and Wildlife, TP&W, Sierra Club, and Wildlife Habitat Federation. BTA President Bruce Drury represented TCA and BTA.

B.T.A. NEWS

MEETINGS: The weekend of April 17-18 is choc-a-bloc with meetings (see Events) -- all to be held at the Field Research Station. Check the schedule under "Events."

The BTA board meeting April 18 will hear updates from the Preserve, the Thicket of Diversity Executive Council, state parks, and the proposed Neches Scenic River. Todd Stephens, aide to

Cong. Kevin Brady, may be present to report on Brady's Preserve CPR" bill -- Connect, Preserve, Revitalize.

The Canyonlands-Round Lake field trip on March 23 was led by **D.W. Ivans**, BTNP Fire Specialist, through canyons, magnificent-humongous-picturesque swamps, Neches River overlooks -- all decorated with spring-green, dogwoods, fringe trees, buckeyes. Member James Caccioppo and Maxine Johnston couldn't resist taking pictures of the scene below



Contest, Anyone? If this feature were on any trail in a much-visited park, it would have a name --to wit: Yellowstone's Morning Glory Pool, Yosemite's Bridal Falls, etc. We think this anomaly deserves a name. So the Reporter Editor offers a prize for the best name submitted -- a copy of the Sitton and Hunt book, *Big Thicket People*. The judges are Ivans, Caccioppo, and Johnston. Submit entries by e-mail to johnmx@quik.com.

Silky Camellias and Pyramid Magnolias on May 16: Don't miss this opportunity to visit these rare species that occur only in Newton County in Texas. The trip will be led by our friend Robert Wilson to properties managed by the Campbell Group.

Check in with Maxine Johnston at johnmx@quik.com if you plan to attend.

PRESERVE OVERVIEW

by Ann Roberts

B.T.N.P GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN MEETINGS

The GMP session convened March 17-18 at the Preserve's Field Research Station in Saratoga with Denver planners Erin Flanagan and Christina Miller presiding. A previous workshop held July 22-24, 2008 provided a basis for the discussions of a "foundation" statement. Participants considered statements of purpose, significance, fundamental resources and values, and special mandates. The general session divided into four groups for further discussion, and each group presented reports.



Erin Flanagan, team leader speaks at the GMP session.

PROJECT SCOPING

Two projects are pending that invite public comments, that can be made online at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/bith/>

1) FRS Campsites and RVs Proposed: Usage of the Field Research Station has accelerated with student groups from universities and "Thicket of Diversity" activities. The dormitories (20 beds) cannot accommodate all the users, so the Preserve proposes to add a designated camping area and 2-4 RV sites with electrical and water hookups. Comments on the proposal should be submitted by April 30.

2) Hazardous Fuel Reduction and Longleaf Pine Restoration: Alternative 2 provides for a prescribed burn and mechanical fuel reduction treatments. Target herbicide applications would be used to reduce understory brush and decrease resprouts and midstory fuels. Comments on the proposal should be submitted by April 30.

The Big Thicket Bike Ride on March 23rd had a great turnout. Passing the intersection at FM 420 on US69-287 (Visitor Center), traffic halted while at least 100 bike riders turned south. The GT Sierrans manned a rest stop for the trekkers.



EVENTS

April 17 - **9:00 AM** BT Science Conference Committee; **1:00 PM** Thicket of Diversity Executive Council @ FRS

April 18 - **9:30 AM** BTA Board meeting; **2:00 PM** Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust board meeting @ FRS

April 19 - "Life on the Neches" Photo Exhibition, Museum of East Texas, Lufkin

April 25 - Wilderness Pow Wow, Ratcliff Recreational Area, Davy Crockett NF (see story)

May 16 - Silky Camellia and Pyramid Magnolia Field Trip, led by Robert Wilson, Campbell Group

July 11 - BTA Board Meeting

