

Ecological Restoration Brief

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The Mindful Conservationist

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In this essay, I hope to share some lessons about restoration that we, as new landowners in Llano County, have learned over the past 6 years. In our efforts to help our land recover and improve, we have tried to combine science-based strategies with personal "place making" efforts that provide satisfaction in the short term, and fuel commitment over the long haul.

Overview: The rigorous structure of scientific inquiry offers guidance to the average landowner, but I have found that outcomes are more successful when protocols take into consideration the personal experience of working on the land. Many new landowners discover that they are more successful when they plan their projects within a psychological framework that continuously connects them to what inspired them to buy their property in the first place. Typically it's some aspect of scenic beauty such as a high vista, live water, or other appealing landscape feature that draws people into land ownership.

Yet after the deed is signed it's not long before questions arise: "What am I seeing? What is it supposed to look like? Where do I start first? What is the best tool and method? How long does it take, what does it cost, and what are reasonable expectations for success? "

First, Do No Harm: The most powerful tool a landowner can employ is patience. Taking time to learn one's property, to develop an intimate relationship over several climate cycles, to devote time to just being present in the landscape will offer owners knowledge beyond price. Patience helps landowners avoid common mistakes such as hasty extensive clearing or wasteful spending on "beautification" projects that yield few ecological benefits. Investing



Onward through the fog with pick ax in hand.
Photo Credit: Stanley Farrar

time to slowly observe changes in the land will help landowners refine their questions and goals, essential for successful planning.



Seed Islands. Photo Credit: Stanley Farrar

Foster Place Attachment: I'm often amazed by landowners who, when showing me a fantastic feature such as a steep box canyon, don't have even a rough trail to reach it by foot. It may be obvious, but making even temporary paths help develop a sense of scale and a way to recognize landmarks, to easily notice seasonal changes, and to monitor results of different projects such as seeding or clearing. Engaging the family to designate place names on aerial maps is another simple but powerful tool to encourage exploration, discovery, and deep

knowledge of place. Access to "sweet spots" such as a riparian corridor or wooded lot can offer relatively easy initial "low hanging fruit" projects such as removing juniper from beneath the canopies of a few large trees. These kinds of small-scale projects are good ways to begin to get a feeling for the work involved while also providing the instant satisfaction of seeing positive change after a few hours.

Your Teachers Are Waiting: I've also been amazed by the abundance of experts, aficionados, and agencies that are out there to help landowners seeking information and advice. If folks remain curious and open-minded, they will discover plenty of experienced people eager to answer questions in ways the Internet alone could never match.

Set Reasonable Goals: Its easy to get overwhelmed and distracted by the innumerable projects needing attention on ones property, but setting clear goals will help the landowner more effectively distribute resources of time, effort, and money. Examples proposed in this simple planning exercise below may help some articulate their values and intentions, whether they are doing the work themselves or hiring help.

I. **Objectives:** Identify those higher aims that reflect the larger landscape and your stewardship legacy.



Jill and Jack Nokes, with 4-footed friends, inspect a Cedar Elm enclosure. Photo credit: Stanley Farrar

Example: To assist in the recovery and enhancement of the landscape in a steady, incremental way that encourages greater diversity of wildlife and plants, increased resiliency during drought cycles, and higher functioning of natural systems.

II. Goals: Aspirations specific to your property

Example:

1. The recovery and enhanced diversity of native grasslands.
2. Improvement of woodland habitat, especially along riparian corridor.

III. Strategies: Going about the plan by following integrated steps

Example:

1. Efforts will be focused on a series of discrete zones, each over a three to five year period. Results will be evaluated each year before expanding to a new area.
2. White brush, prickly pear, Mexican persimmon, and tasajillo will be selectively removed where they encroach and compete with the high value hardwoods along the riparian corridor. Certain areas will remain untouched for wildlife cover.



Jill and the burn pile. Photo Credit: Stanley Farrar

IV. Tactics: Add as many specific details as needed. For example, seed lists, chemical names, dates, etc. Provide a timeline, and decide how you are going to decide if your methods have been effective.

Example:

1. Use tractor, chemical, and hand clearing to reduce prickly pear coverage. Compare results.
2. Re-sprouting mesquite and lotebush will be controlled with herbicide.

Having a plan on hand will help the landowner focus attention and resources on smaller, discrete areas and also provide opportunities for "course corrections" if the strategy or climate cycle has affected outcomes. It will also help when a sister-in-law asks if she can bring over her unwanted llamas or geriatric donkeys because "you have so much room." If conservation-minded owners have articulated the objectives for their precious piece of earth, they will quickly recognize which actions serve the land – and them – best.

The Society for Ecological Restoration, Texas Chapter promotes ecological restoration as a means of sustaining the diversity of life on Earth and re-establishing an ecologically healthy relationship between nature and culture.

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