

# Ecological Restoration Brief

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## Wimberley Flood: Compassionate Restoration

Katherine Crosthwaite  
Ecologist, HDR Environmental, Operations & Construction, Inc.,  
Spring Branch, Texas

The Blanco River flood on May 23, 2015 was traumatic - for the people, animals, infrastructure, and the Blanco River Valley itself. There are many reports, interviews, photographs, videos, and facts that very clearly described the damage to anything within sight of the Blanco River Valley that night. Well before the flood waters receded, people were descending upon the area to help. Wimberley residents, businesses, organizations, and churches all jumped to contribute - and the result was a very impressively organized small town of recovery - and restoration.

The Wimberley Ace Hardware was particularly organized which allowed for anyone to arrive, receive an address, and be outfitted with donated supplies within minutes of stepping out of their car. That is how I ended up at a home on the Blanco River in my town of Wimberley. The owner's family was shoveling everything from the house - the 'throw away' pile was enormous while the 'keep' pile was comprised of a small nest of items. The owner was clearly exhausted, traumatized, and overwhelmed. Who could blame her? She was worried about her neighbors. Her belongings and memories were strewn 20 miles downriver, her few remaining belongings were ruined, the house needed to be taken down to the studs after the inches of muck were shoveled off of the floors; then, long discussions with FEMA or the insurance agent.



**Centuries-old trees torn up by their roots & debris scattered across the riverbanks.**  
Photo credit: Katherine Crosthwaite

By the time the first volunteer with a skid steer arrived, we were all exhausted and covered with sweat and pollution-contaminated river muck. The presence of this skid steer meant that we did not have to manually haul the tons of water logged furniture, household items, and dry wall several hundred meters to the main road. So, when a second skid steer showed up, we were happy to see it. However, with approval from the landowner, this operator drove past the house and into the backyard that sloped down to the river and began piling the woody flood debris into neat piles. In addition to removing coarse woody debris from this yard, the skid steer was significantly compacting and rutting the water-soaked soil along the river banks. It was also removing trees that may have had an opportunity to re-sprout, if not provide protection to the banks from future floods and protection to seedlings from inevitable browsing.



**Compaction & rutting of the water-soaked soil.  
Photo credit: Katherine Crosthwaite**

Amidst the trauma of an event such as this, when do you begin talking about ecological restoration?

The resounding answer to that is before the event happens. The same week this flood scoured centuries-old trees from their roots and removed many miles of riverbank, a [Texas Riparian and Stream Ecosystem Workshop](#) was held in this very community. During this free workshop, attendees learned about the role of riparian vegetation in properly functioning riparian systems. Days later these citizens began to apply what they had learned at this workshop to the events they were experiencing first

hand in their own community. They began to compassionately and delicately communicate to their friends and neighbors about the importance of leaving some of the debris in place in order to allow for the riverbanks a chance to naturally recover – and in many cases, it worked.

Within two days of the flood, a group called the [Blanco River Valley Restoration Project](#) was developed by a Wimberley resident and the first meeting was held within a week of the flood. This organization has served as a valuable resource with which to share the many efforts of communication, education, and restoration that have been developed in order to begin the long restoration process of the Blanco River Valley. Trained professionals from many agencies have been consulted and have begun projects to restore the Valley. These projects will be very interesting for those of us who are connected to the theme of ecological restoration and many lessons and valuable research will result. However, the most important and lasting lesson I will take from this experience is how far compassionately communicated restoration from informed friends and neighbors can reach – from one home to the next.

**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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