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Riparian Areas Protect the River

A riparian area is the place where the land and water meet and can be recognized by the unique combination of plants and animals that live there. This distinct habitat is the site of many interactions between river and bank that are vital to maintaining a variety of species. Riparian areas also provide numerous beneficial functions that support a healthy environment. Preserving and enhancing these important ecological features is a crucial land stewardship activity.

Riparian areas provide a variety of functions including filtering and reducing pollution into streams, reducing erosion, providing wildlife habitat, and creating shade to control water temperature. The distinct soil and vegetation form a network of roots and ground cover that intercepts runoff from upland areas and stabilizes the riverbank. Riparian areas also capture rushing flood waters and slow them down so contaminants can be filtered out and water can be absorbed into the soil.

Given all these benefits, why don't we see more riparian areas preserved in a natural state? The very features that make these zones so beneficial to the environment are the same ones that make them vulnerable to development. People have long relied on riparian areas for the abundant food, water, and materials they supplied. Riparian areas also provided transportation corridors for travel by boat and were often the only flat land areas suitable for building roads, farms and cities. For these reasons, riparian areas are often adjacent to densely populated urban regions. Not to mention, the monetary value of businesses and homes greatly increases if you can claim a “waterfront view.” However, there are practices that landowners can implement to manage riparian areas that will benefit the entire watershed.

If you are lucky enough to own land beside a lake, river, or creek, consider leaving a buffer strip of “natural area” along the waterway. This strategy is called establishing a “grow zone” and it is a great first step to preserving your riparian area. Manicured lawns that contain closely cropped carpet grass up to the water's edge may give you an unobstructed view, but these plants do not provide any of the benefits of a healthy and functioning riparian area. Consider reserving a portion of waterfront for traditional landscape and establishing a grow zone elsewhere to promote a properly functioning riparian area. If you own a farm, or even a hobby farm, try to keep your animals from trampling the riparian vegetation. One way to protect the riparian zone from animals is by installing fences or providing alternate watering facilities.

Riverfront landowners have an opportunity to protect and restore their riparian areas to gain the benefits associated with them. We also encourage landowners to be cognizant of impacts to the river or creeks when doing work on their property as well as of regulations that may apply. Waterways in Texas that flow consistently or are wider than 30 ft from bank to bank, are almost always considered State-owned waterways. This generally includes the whole Guadalupe River and many parts of its tributaries. Modifications to the bed or bank of a State-owned waterway, even if it is currently dry, must be permitted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and will potentially require coordination with other entities. Even if you are not working in the river itself, most clearing, grading, or construction activities in the floodplain also require a permit from Kerr County. A useful resource to see how much of your property is in the floodplain is the FEMA Flood Map (msc.fema.gov/portal/home). Please reach out to UGRA if you would like additional information or if you are concerned about activities happening in or around the river.

Let's Keep Our River Clean

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