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What You Can Do to Keep Riparian Areas Natural and Native

When people think of protecting the Guadalupe River, or rivers in general, pollution is often the first threat that comes to mind. There is no arguing that keeping our waterways free of trash, pet waste, and hazardous materials is important. However, there are additional factors that play large roles in the health of a river. The condition of the land along a river or creek is an important aspect of river health. This land is called the riparian area and it is a transition zone that creates a buffer between the water and upland areas.

Riparian areas provide many benefits including bank stabilization, flood control, groundwater recharge, and runoff filtration. A properly functioning riparian area creates crucial habitat for plants and animals and improves water quality and quantity. There are a few simple steps landowners can take to maintain healthy riparian areas. If native vegetation is already present, simply letting nature take its course may be the best option. Streamside areas full of lush, native vegetation help stabilize banks by preventing erosion. Much like concrete needing rebar for added stability, the roots of native riparian plants anchor the soil in place. Streams adjacent to healthy riparian areas serve as valuable fish habitat and great opportunities for anglers. When native plants are allowed to grow, they provide shade, sediment filtration, and a home for the critters fish love to eat. All these factors can bring in the fish!

Most people owning streamside properties also want to have easy access to the cool, clear water, and thick buffers of vegetation can hinder that access. Although it may be tempting to clear native vegetation and replace it with turf grass, that is not the healthiest option for the river. Consider a balanced approach that will protect the riparian areas while still providing access to the river. This can be achieved by creating a small, maintained recreational space and leaving the rest of your riverfront to nature. In doing so, we can access the river for recreation while also preserving much of the vegetation and its function to protect the river we love.

Another way landowners can protect their riparian areas is by keeping them native. There are several invasive plant species that invade our riverbanks. Some of the most common are giant cane, Chinaberry, and Chinese tallow. These invaders can alter soil and water chemistry, use lots of water, and crowd out more desirable native plants. Removing well-established Chinaberry and Chinese tallow takes a lot of effort, but if you can find them as saplings, pulling them out by the roots can be an effective control method. When it comes to giant cane, there is good news! UGRA collaborates with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and landowners to treat giant cane along waterways in Kerr County. Getting rid of giant cane creates space for native plants to take root and thrive which improves riparian area health. For more information on this collaboration, visit www.ugra.org/major-initiatives/healthy-creeks-initiative.

Properly functioning riparian areas are essential to a healthy Guadalupe River, and support of healthy riparian areas is a valuable component of land stewardship. For more information on riparian areas, visit www.ugra.org/public-information/education#riparian-areas. In addition, UGRA supplies a riparian plant field guide to Kerr County residents interested in learning more about riparian areas and the vegetation they support. Please contact me to obtain your free copy today.

Let's Keep Our River Clean

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