



The Conservation Legacy Effect

Featuring Steve C. Lewis

Article by LORIE A. WOODWARD
Photo courtesy of CONSERVATION LEGACY

A L.A.N.D.S. Intensive Field Investigation Day hosted on Steve Lewis' Spring Creek Ranch outside of Boerne, Texas.

More than three decades ago, Steve C. Lewis picked up the mantle of conservation education and took on the challenge of educating young Texans about the state's vast natural resources.

"If the preponderance of the state's population doesn't value the outdoors and the benefit of open space, why should they vote in support of it, conserve it, protect it—or even leave their houses to look at it?" asked Lewis, a banker who lives in San Antonio and ranches in the Hill Country and West Texas. "Plus, it's just a sad state of affairs when the population doesn't know where the components of their hamburgers come from or mistakenly believe that H-E-B produces milk and their city governments are the source of water. Most people have no grasp of the role open space land plays in their daily lives."

Through the years, Lewis, former president of both TWA and TWAF, has been involved in every aspect of Conservation Legacy from serving on the initial steering committee that founded the effort to continuing to raise funds today to supporting the program as a philanthropist, an event volunteer and an event host for L.A.N.D.S. Intensive field days and TYHP hunts.

"I can't speak specifically to what other organizations do when it comes to conservation education, because the programs I've been invested in are TWA's," Lewis said. "From my perspective, though, there's no such thing as a bad program that is aimed at Texans between the ages of 4 and 24 with the goal of educating them about natural resources. If that's the goal, I'm all in."

As a long-time leader at TWA, Lewis has seen the impact Conservation

Legacy has had on Texas—and on the organization itself.

"Because of Conservation Legacy, we have a deep need for Master Naturalists, teachers and anyone who has interest in educating young people about Texas' natural resources," said Lewis, noting the program could not have succeeded without the committed support of staff, volunteers, teachers and donors. "These people may or may not be hunters, and they may not look like the original TWA members from 1986 but I'm okay with that. I'm proud of who we were then and I'm equally proud of the organization that we've evolved into."

With the passage of time, the benefits of Mother Nature's classroom have become more obvious to more people.

"Over time, the outside learning movement has gained strength," Lewis said. "As the benefits of getting young people in nature have become more widely recognized, we've got some tail wind—some momentum—moving us forward that we didn't have when we started TWA's Education Committee in 1988 back in our infancy. We've come a long way since then, but we can always do more."

A Q&A WITH STEVE C. LEWIS
In the pantheon of issues facing TWA and Texas landowners, where does natural resource education rank on the list and why?

SL: "Natural resource education ranks high on the list. Standing against natural resource illiteracy is a never-ending battle that is costly. TWA dedicates a large portion of its budget to conservation education. It's a very worthwhile investment that sets us apart and allows us to pitch a much bigger tent supported by a broad base of volunteers and financial supporters.

While TWA won't solve this issue by itself, we can lead by example and provide a model for similar souls. Each year, we're delivering 600,000 – 800,000 impacts. Some are deep and others are brief, but they all plant seeds of knowledge and potential change.

Through our programs, our staff, our volunteers and our educational and financial partners, we're affecting a lot of people in Texas. Let me make it clear; we couldn't have accomplished what we have without these incredible people who have been called to this mission. I hope our efforts resonate with other like-minded organizations that value the outdoors and inspire them to decide now is the time to help reduce natural resource illiteracy.

While, as organizations, there may be issues where we have to stubbornly agree to disagree, conservation education shouldn't be one of them. The more we can do to help young people value the outdoors, the better off Texas will be."

When would you consider the work of Conservation Legacy to be complete?

SL: "By definition, this work will never be complete. As long as there is a birth rate, we will never have every young Texan knowledgeable enough to deeply appreciate Texas and her natural resources. BUT...we can damn sure get it better than it is today.

We need more open gates and more open hearts. We—all of us—need to actively invite other Texans, especially those who don't normally get invited outdoors, to venues—whether it's to a ranch, a museum, a city park, a zoo—where they can learn to appreciate wild critters and wild places. Again, the more we can do to help young people value the outdoors, the better off Texas will be." ☺