

Recreation Potential of Texas Rangelands

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Highlight: *The uniqueness of the land ownership system in Texas is largely responsible for the development of recreation opportunities on private lands in that state. It appears that rangelands, in the traditional sense, are suited to a few specialized recreational uses, hunting probably being the most widely accepted and traditional. Any or a combination of hunting arrangements may be economically profitable for private landowners. The recreation potential of private rangelands awaits development.*

Perhaps the title of this paper should have been "Recreation Potential of *Private* Rangelands in Texas," since in fact a very large percentage of Texas rangelands are privately owned. The uniqueness of the land ownership system in Texas, which few landowners realize, is largely responsible for the development of recreation opportunities on private lands in Texas. The scarcity and overcrowding of federal and state owned lands available for outdoor recreation has created a demand for opportunities to be made available on private lands. This demand probably also exists in states other than Texas. The activities presently available are limited in availability and variety. The growing demand is presently unmet; there is room for expansion and improvement. Private landowners in Texas and elsewhere are failing to collect the extra income available through their lands. Landowners in many states are presently opening their private lands to public recreation use. While in theory this is commendable and should be encouraged, in fact many landowners incur an eco-

nomical liability due to such activity. If the range resource is properly controlled and managed, it is possible to convert the present liability into economic asset. The Texas story may help to generate some ideas.

In pristine times, the rangelands of Texas were occupied only by native wildlife. The ecosystem was in balance: the range was not overpopulated and periodic natural fires kept brush from encroaching heavily. When man appeared on the scene, he probably set more fires to aid him in his hunting. The increased number of fires probably increased the extent of the rangeland and did little to detract from its quality. Early man had no domestic livestock and took relatively small numbers of native wildlife so that the system remained balanced.

The records of early Spanish missions indicate that an excellent grass cover existed: grass height varied from a foot to high enough to hide horses and sometimes even wagons (Leinweber, 1967). With the arrival of white men and their domestic animals, the bison, deer, antelope, and other wildlife were slowly replaced by cattle, sheep, and goats. The reintroduction of the horse greatly increased the efficiency of the hunting

Indians and further reduced the numbers of wild herbivores. Although a few scattered Indian tribes cultivated the land on a small scale, organized agriculture was not prominent until the arrival of the Spaniards.

Following the Civil War, the use of barbed wire and windmills became more widespread, thus restricting the movements of wild animals and concentrating domestic livestock on certain areas. The result of all this was a general deterioration of the condition of the range. With the cessation of fire came the encroachment of brush, further deteriorating the quality of the rangelands. Where rangelands became too depleted for cattle, sheep and goats were introduced, bringing range condition to a new low in many areas.

Until the mid-1930's the range remained in pitifully poor condition. Improved understanding of range management principles began to bring about improvement in range conditions. Cattle, sheep and goats are now stocked side-by-side to bring about more efficient utilization of forage. However in an environment of rising taxes and land values, and decreasing and unstable prices paid for meat, wool and mohair, many ranchmen are looking for opportunities to earn additional income (Boykin and Forrest, 1971).

The first organized group of people to recognize the additional income potential of Texas rangelands was a group of about 60 individuals who organized, in 1941, the Edwards Plateau Game and Wildlife

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Management Association (Quinn, 1969). The first recreational leasing arrangements were probably made between a hunter or group of hunters and a landowner. The fee accepted for such a lease was probably a .30-30 carbine or some other equally desirable token (Teer and Forrest, 1968). From this small beginning the leasing of lands for recreational purposes has grown to the point where in Texas today net income realized from deer leases and other rangeland recreational uses exceeds net income from all other classes of livestock in many areas (Stribling, 1972).

Most public land management agencies now recognize recreation as a resource use equal to grazing, timber, water, and wildlife in importance. It is important that private landowners and managers realize the value and potential of their lands as recreational resources, especially in Texas where over 95% of lands are privately owned. Certainly hunting is not the only recreational use of Texas rangelands. Dude ranching, camping, and second or vacation home development are just a few of the more important alternative uses of rangelands. These uses are consumptive or competitive in nature and virtually remove rangeland from "more productive" uses. Hunting, fishing, and nature photography are highly productive recreational pursuits which may be conducted compatibly with grazing.

Rangeland recreational uses other than hunting may not be desirable or financially feasible at the present time according to the four postulates set forth by Gunn (1972). He states that:

1. Tourism-recreation flow and activity depend upon *attractions*;
2. Trends are toward *large complexes* of attraction clusters;
3. All attractions are related to and need the support of *transportation* and *cities*;
4. Mass recreation is heavily influenced by *distance* from origin.

If each of these postulates are examined separately, it becomes apparent that rangelands, in the traditional sense, are suited to a few specialized recreational uses. The attractions are usually based upon some type of development. Rangelands lacking large and costly developments have little attraction for most recreationists. Large complexes of recreational opportunities must be available in order to draw large numbers of participants. These large attraction complexes must be located reasonably close

to large cities and accessible by modern means of transportation. Most rangeland resources in Texas do not meet these criteria at the present time. Thus the postulates appear to apply only to intensive tourism-recreation activities. And if, in fact, rangelands do not meet these criteria, it may well be that the criteria simply do not apply to rangeland recreational activities, which are usually extensive in nature.

Hunters appear to be a specific population who are little influenced by the postulates and criteria. To participate in their preferred form of outdoor recreation, they are willing to travel great distances, often on poorly maintained roads, to areas with no large recreation complexes and no apparent attraction at all for most people. In fact if job descriptions were written for most types of hunting, the applicants for these positions would be few indeed.

Hunting is probably rangeland's most widely accepted and traditional recreational use. It brings varying degrees of satisfaction to participants and varying levels of economic benefit to private landowners. Day hunting is probably the most flexible system used in the state and has the most potential for maximizing returns to the landowner, even though it demands more labor and investment than other arrangements (Forrest, 1968). With proper control and good judgment by the landowner, it provides the best harvest of game animals. It is easily adaptable to large and small game as well as game birds.

Season leases are better suited to ranches where labor, size, or investment potential is limited. In most instances it causes a low harvest rate, which in turn causes deer herds to increase to the point of serious competition with domestic livestock (Forrest, 1968). This usually results in depletion of forage and deterioration of the range.

Another hunting system which has become relatively popular and widespread in the last 20 years is the hunting of exotic animals for a specific fee per animal harvested. Since exotics are legally classified as livestock and because they have horns, which are not shed annually like antlers, they may be hunted on a year-round basis. This does not limit the rancher's hunting income to the traditional 45- or 50-day fall hunting season. The rearing of a trophy exotic animal may take 3 to 7 years or longer, thus the landowner must charge \$125-\$600 for the killing of a single mature ram or buck.

Also, because exotics are classed as livestock, the females and non-trophy males may be sold as brood stock to other ranchers entering the commercial game harvest business.

Other leasing arrangements utilizing advantages of several systems may be incorporated to yield proper game harvests and maximum return per input investment while maintaining or improving range condition. The initiation of such game harvest systems may be a real source of income for landowners, even in states with relatively short hunting seasons such as South Dakota (Gartner and Severson, 1972).

While it is impossible to predict with 100% accuracy the recreation future of Texas rangelands, it is not so difficult to see that until the criteria set forth by Gunn are met, the nature of rangeland recreation will not change appreciably. More and more ranches will surely continue to develop and expand the hunting opportunity. This is true for other game animals as well as deer. "It does appear that more and more lands and developed facilities will be needed in the coming years" (Gunn, 1972). The degree of impact of this need cannot be predicted, but the impact will surely be great, especially in a state where 97% of the land is privately owned. The potential is there, awaiting development.

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