

Riparian Notes

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Steve Nelle, NRCS, San Angelo, Texas

Response to “Water Catchments”

The previous edition of ***Riparian Notes***, focused on the terminology and the concept of “water catchments” instead of “watersheds”. Even though these two terms can mean the exact same thing when it comes to a grammatical definition, they can also be interpreted to mean exactly the opposite of each other when it comes to the functioning of the water cycle. You may recall that Note Number 6 was based on a quote from Plato regarding his observations of the land and water in ancient Greece. The note resulted in some thoughtful responses from a variety of people that I want to share with you.

A retired Forest Service worker asked the following question: “If Plato, 2400 years ago, knew the interaction of vegetative cover, watershed function and the results of mismanagement, then why are we repeating the same mistakes today?” Darn good question.

A rancher, with large multi-generation holdings in west Texas, recounted that his mother and his grandfather used to “chase bobcats through tall grass with dogs for a mile before they could find a tree to run the cat up”. Now the same land has much less grass and is covered in brush. He asked this question: “What caused the decline noted by Plato and what caused the decline on his ranch – Greed? Lack of knowledge? Or both?” Such honest introspection is sometimes necessary in order to discover what went wrong.

An ecologist and landscape architect noted how William Bray saw the Texas Hill Country in 1904. She responded, “Bray suggested that we manage the woodlands of the eastern Edwards Plateau as a part of a giant reservoir - a reservoir where the water is held back and distributed in even flow, not from a lake, but from the face of the country itself to protect water supplies and decrease flood damage”. Bray also noted that if the trees are removed from these woodlands, then reservoirs would have to be constructed to store the rainwater. How true that prediction has become. Unfortunately, reservoirs are neither as efficient nor as sustainable in storing water as properly vegetated water catchments.

A bureaucrat from a federal land management agency replied that we should not change our terminology from watershed to water catchment because that would force his agency to re-write their entire Watershed Management Handbook. No comment.

The briefest and possibly the most meaningful response was received from a ranch manager in the dry part of the Edwards Plateau: “It is true that we paint pictures in our minds with our words, and ***catchment*** certainly is the picture I want for what is happening to water on my land.”

In summary:

- Let us be careful not to keep repeating the same mistakes of the past.
- Let us search for honest answers, even if it hurts.
- Let us seek sustainable long term solutions, not quick fixes.
- Let us not allow traditional thinking to get in the way of improved concepts.
- Let us manage land to catch the water, not shed the water.