

GUEST COLUMN: Thanks to all who helped make refuge possible



Richard Donovan

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While Texas Forest Country is still basking in the glow of the Supreme Court's validation of the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge, I congratulate all of you who helped make the wildlife sanctuary possible.

The refuge truly is a gift East Texans have given themselves. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledged their office received more letters, faxes, and phone calls in support of this refuge than any other ever established.

East Texans are recognizing the unique beauty, wildness, historical significance, and economic potential of the hardwood forest corridor that towers above the river as it meanders its way toward the Gulf. The wood ducks, mallards, eagles, songbirds, bobcats, deer, otters, beavers, alligators, bass, catfish, and almost-unending lists of birds and animals that show us that God made this wild/watery corridor of life one of the most unique ecosystems in North America.

Not long before his untimely death, Charlie Wilson called to express his thanks for the efforts to protect the Neches and its wildlife. The congressman realized the untapped economic potential of this exceptional, natural place in today's world of technology and speed. He cautioned us not to falter and added, "You truly are doing the Lord's work." I totally agree with Charlie. We grew up on the phrase, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." What better way can that love be expressed than to bequeath a priceless treasure, virtually as God created it, to today's children and their children's children? Give that some thought, as you consider Gary Cartwright's statement in Texas Parks and Wildlife

magazine, "Every two minutes another acre of Texas farm land or open space becomes a subdivision or mall or road," Like everything God gives us, even our lives, we have the option of being good stewards, or we can squander our gifts.

With your kind permission, I would like to acquaint you with the Texas Conservation Alliance, without whose dedicated commitment this refuge would never have become a reality. Texas Conservation Alliance is an organization that devotes its energies to conserving pockets of nature, primarily in East Texas, for us to enjoy and learn about the trees, plants, birds and animals that inhabit the region. Existing solely on voluntary donations, with only two paid employees and an occasional contract worker, the Alliance achieves most of its accomplishments through the work of dedicated volunteers.

Texas Conservation Alliance is building support for a study of the Neches as a Wild and Scenic River. Designating the Neches as a Wild and Scenic River would protect it from dams and pumping that plan to deliver 80 percent of the marketable water to other parts of the state. The resulting diminished water flows could spell disastrous consequences for the Big Thicket and other wildlife habitat down river. All types of wildlife will suffer as hardwood bottomlands shrink, sloughs and old lakes dry up, and the increased salinity of the Sabine Estuary destroys or diminishes the oyster and commercial and recreational fishing, so valuable to the Beaumont area. Citizen support is crucial to convince congressmen up and down the river that the last wild, free flowing river in the state should remain wild and free flowing.

Anyone wishing to contribute to this effective organization, dedicated to the future children of East Texas, may mail a contribution (no amount is too small) to TCA, P.O. Box 6295, Tyler, Texas 75711-6295 or donate online at TCAtexas.org. Your donation will help tomorrow's youth see, feel and hear the natural world and better understand how nature is designed to function.

Thanks, East Texas, you and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have left a rich heritage to generations to follow.

East Texas native and conservationist Richard Donovan is the author of "Paddling the Wild Neches." He is the president of the Friends of the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas.