Texas Parks and Wildlife Meets A Changing State Population, with Ted Hollingsworth (Ep. 19)

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Nivien Saleh: Is the Texas population losing its desire to hunt? And how does that affect the bottom line of Texas Parks and Wildlife?

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Nivien Saleh: I'm Nivien Saleh with Houston and Nature.

In this third of a three-part interview, we are back with Ted Hollingsworth of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Perhaps by now you have tried to google him and come up empty. Or perhaps you have searched for the Land Conservation Program and not found it. Trust me, Ted is real. He's just not into personal branding.

In this episode Ted and I will look at demographics. You may know that Texas is adding population at a fast rate, especially in the triangle that's made up of Dallas/Fort Worth in the North, Houston in the South-East, and the San-Antonio/Austin corridor in the South West. Of course El Paso is growing too.

That has implications for the ways in which the Department interacts with Texans, for its staffing, and for its revenue stream. Let's find out what they are!

Population changes

Nivien Saleh: Moving on so changing climate is one thing, but there's another kind of change that you're dealing with and that is population change, population increase, especially in the urban area.

I think the rural areas tend to lose population, and the urban areas tend to get more population. The Land and Water Plan states that the population of Texas is expanding rapidly, which brings incredible pressure to bear on all of the state's natural resources, especially water. I believe that water in Texas generally is oversubscribed. Permits to get water have been granted to more entities or people than there is water. How is Texas Parks and Wildlife dealing with the water situation?

Ted Hollingsworth: Of course we're not the agency that's responsible for water policy or water management. We do what we can to work closely with our sister agency TCEQ, the GLO. We work with the Governor's Office and so forth to

Nivien Saleh: Commission for

fund

Ted Hollingsworth: Environment Quality,

Nivien Saleh: Texas Land

Ted Hollingsworth: Office.

General Land Office. Yes. I'm such a creature of acronymal habit.

But you're right in that the yield, the amount of water that's available at the surface and in a number of our rivers has been allocated beyond ... Or water rights to use water have been allocated beyond the yield of that system, especially of course in dry years.

And while we don't deal very directly with the policy and the statutory governance of water and so forth, one of the things that we can do and we do is educate landowners about best management practices to protect both the quality and quantity of that water. Just as an example: The Land Conservation Program manages the Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program, which was created by the Legislature in 2005 and then was moved into the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 2015. The Legislature appropriates us a certain amount of money each biennium. Then we turn around and make grants to primarily land trusts. Those grants pay for conservation easements on private lands. And those conservation easements then ensure that the land is not going to be fragmented, that certain best management practices are going to be in place in perpetuity on that land.

Then we have the Institute of Natural Resources at Texas A&M and a professor there, Roel Lopez, who looks at the lands we've conserved each biennium through this program. In the last three biennia we've provided money to place conservation easements on, I believe about 35,000 acres.

So he looks at those lands in those counties, and he looks at the difference in yield between poorly managed land and well-managed land. And he can say because of this investment of $5 million over the last six years, Texas is conserving 220,000 acre feet of water that otherwise we would have to suck out of the ground or draw out of a river that's already over- allocated and treat.

So we can quantify to some extent the advantages to water by good stewardship of land. We're kind of on the upstream end of that process, but it's critical. Was it Aldo Leopold who said that water conservation begins ... No, it was LBJ, wasn't it?

Who said water conservation begins where that drop of water strikes the ground. So we're kind of on that end of the spectrum, as opposed to the policy and water allocation end of the spectrum.

How is TPWD approaching the increasing diversity among Texans?

Nivien Saleh: Makes sense. Yeah. And nice proverb. The Land and Water Plan looks at expanding populations also in another way. It says, "Demographers predict that by 2040, more than 53% of the Texas population will be Hispanic. Engaging diverse audiences will become even more important in the years to come."

I wonder what exactly does that mean? Does engaging a diverse audience look different from engaging an audience that is less diverse? Does it mean there are more translations or more varied restaurant offerings at park facilities or more historical exhibits?

Ted Hollingsworth: Nivien, the timing for the question is just terrific. From my perspective, For a long, long time, we've been content to do things as we've always done things. We've been content to manage the wildlife management areas for wildlife and to open the gates of the state park and to keep the restrooms clean and the facilities working and the trails clear.

What we've become acutely aware of, especially in the last few years, is that there are large demographics, there are large bodies of the population who either have not been exposed to outdoor activities other than maybe playing basketball or baseball or tennis or something.

But there's also a large demographic of people who - right or wrong - feel like they are not welcome in our facilities.

Nivien Saleh: I have seen videos that showed that there was a conservation movement that traditionally has excluded black people.

Ted Hollingsworth: And that's true. That's certainly true. I don't think that is - at least not in the last few decades - I don't think it's been overt or systematic in Texas. Nonetheless, I've talked to a lot of nonwhite people who I respect absolutely. And they have told me that either they have gone to a state park and everybody else in the park was white. And so they, it made them uncomfortable or - worse - they pulled up to the booth, and the white person that was there taking their money, giving them a day pass, treated them a little differently. And whether it was because that person had a prejudice or because it was like, wow, we don't see a lot of Hispanics, we don't see a lot of Black, we don't see a lot of Asian people in whatever it was, it just made them feel like "we're being seen differently." We've become extremely aware of that. And there's several components, several facets to what we're trying to do to change that. I mean, the fact is: If we get 20 or 30 years from now and white people are a minority in Texas and the people who are not white don't support the mission of the agency, that's a big problem.

That's a big problem for all these species we've been talking about trying to conserve. That's a big problem for putting all this public acreage on the ground for people to recreate in that we've been talking about. So it starts with educating our own people. I know a lot of people

in this agency. I've been here for 27 years, and what the Land Conservation Program does touches almost every single division.

I know a lot of people. And I'd be lying if I said, I didn't know anybody who I felt like had some innate inherent prejudices. Having said that: The vast majority of people at Texas Parks and Wildlife, I think, really don't want to see a park full of people that look just like them.

They really don't. Educating our staffs about what we do without even thinking about it that signals to others, whether it's just looking at them differently or speaking to them differently or whatever it is, that's a component. Educating the public, making sure that the public knows that everybody's welcome and there are a lot of ways to do that.

I can remember when I was young that it seems like all of the park brochures that had a ranger or a greeter, or a park visitor, or that had somebody holding a fishing pole, had white people. And again, it wasn't sinister. It was that 95% of our audience was white people. Now if you look at our brochures, you'll see all sorts of people. You'll see little children, you'll see old people, men, women, families, nonwhites. I would also say, as you go into our parks, especially the parks we talked about in the Houston area, for example, you'll see more and more people realizing that, "Hey, I really am welcome here. I really am welcome. I really do like to fish. And I really would like to be able to fish at Brazos Bend. So I went, and sure enough, nobody even noticed I was there. I mean, I fit right in with everybody else." So there's that.

The other issue is that - and this is just a simple fact, this is not a judgmental - is that, is that very few nonwhite people go to school and get degrees in wildlife science and get degrees in parks and rec. Now more and more are. But we are actively going into high schools, into college recruitment programs. We're actively saying Look, the last thing we need 30 years from now is for all of our biologists, park rangers, park managers to look like me. That's the last thing we need and we really want you to seriously consider whether or not you wouldn't enjoy a career in wildlife management, park management, a career as a game warden. And it really is showing up in our game warden classes, for example. Our game warden classes are very diverse. We have more African-Americans, Mexican Americans, more women in our game warden classes and our cadre of game wardens than we do in the Department at large. But we've actively gone and said, "You know what? Being a game warden is a great career. If you have any interest in law enforcement, in wildlife, in being big important player in your community, consider being a game warden. We've targeted potential game wardens, and it shows. So there are several facets where we're trying to keep up with the changes.

The impact of population change on department revenue

Nivien Saleh: Thank you. As the Texas population changes, my guess is that has also an impact on hunting and fishing. I believe there is a strong heritage in Texas of hunting and fishing, and it contributes money to Texas Parks and Wildlife. Now with the influx of new people, do you still see that they have an attachment to those traditions? And if not, does it impact your revenue negatively going forward?

Ted Hollingsworth: You're right. A lot of that hunting and fishing ethic is tied to demographics. People born on the land or people who had fathers or grandfathers that took them fishing are a whole lot more likely to become people who like to fish themselves. Having said that, we were looking at, if I'm not mistaken, a slow but incremental decline in the sale of hunting licenses more than fishing licenses. COVID has changed that. The last two years, the numbers of hunting and fishing licenses sold has gone up 5% annually. I think two things are going on. One is that people are going stir-crazy and want something to do outside. And a lot of people who fish and a lot of people who hunt are like I am. I do like to catch a fish. But what's important is that I'm outside, I have a reason to be outside. I'm watching the waves or the seagulls. If I catch a fish, that's great. But what's important is that I have a reason to be outside. I'm not just wandering aimlessly.

The same goes for hunting. I know a lot of people who are like, I am. They will buy a hunting license. They will go find a place to hunt. They'll tuck themselves up under a bush. They'll lay that gun across their lap and hope that nothing shows up, really.

Nivien Saleh: That is funny. I would not have thought that.

Ted Hollingsworth: I know a lot of people like that. The gun gives me a reason to be there. But now that I'm here, I'm hearing owls, turkey in the distance. If I shoot something, I got to stop what I'm doing, I've got to string it up, skin it. I've got to gut it. I've got to deal with it.

Now there are people who hunt because they really are waiting for that trophy of a lifetime to come along. As far as I'm concerned, that's a legitimate reason to hunt. There are growing number, a rapidly growing number of people who don't want to go into Walmart and buy hamburger meat off the shelf because they don't know what kinds of hormones, what kind of chemicals. They just don't know. They don't know what got ground up to make that hamburger. They don't know what conditions, what kind of humane or inhumane conditions that cow was raised under. They want to shoot something that they know is organic, and they want to put that meat in their refrigerator.

Nivien Saleh: As you know, I'm vegetarian, so I wouldn't hunt. But honestly, I agree with these concerns about people shopping at Walmart. Animals that end up at most grocery shelves have had a very bad life. If you go hunting and do you have for dinner an animal that had a good life, that seems to me a little more humane than the other way around. So yeah.

Ted Hollingsworth: We have well-respected hunters who are now really focusing on what constitutes ethical hunting.

Nivien Saleh: That is

Ted Hollingsworth: great.

And it doesn't just mean making a clean, painless kill. It means not wasting what you've shot.

Nivien Saleh: So important. Yes. If you hunt something, you should use everything.

Ted Hollingsworth: And in Texas, it's the law. Wasting an edible portion of a game animal is against the law in Texas.

Nivien Saleh: Great.

Ted Hollingsworth: And every year our game wardens will find that somebody left the camp, they've taken the trophy and left the rest of the deer behind and we'll fly and we'll file charges.

Nivien Saleh: That is awful. Yes. Good for you.

Ted Hollingsworth: So to get to your original question, the number of people hunting and fishing has gone up during COVID. I don't know that the number of animals being killed is going up, but the number of people that are buying the licenses is going up, which is a good thing. Because those revenues directly support the operations of our Department. The flip side of that is that as we see this fragmentation that you and I have been talking about, it's becoming increasingly important that we identify those places that have that kind of recreation potential, and that we figure out how to conserve some of those places. It's clearly spelled out as several objectives in our Land and Water Plan. And we have people who spend their careers looking for ways to improve your ability and my ability to get down to the river and fish.

It's a huge challenge. It's one that we take very seriously, but it's certainly one of the core challenges for our agency.

The most remarkable achievements over 60 years

Nivien Saleh: Texas Parks and Wildlife was formed in 1963 when the Texas Game and Fish Commission and the Texas State Parks Board were combined into one agency. That means in 2023, the agency will be 60 years old. What are the most remarkable achievements of the agency in your view?

Ted Hollingsworth: In my view the most remarkable achievement of the agency is the legitimacy that we have brought to the population at large for wildlife management, wildlife protection, hunting, fishing, enforcing game laws and in spite of an exploding population trying to live with and to conserve wild and green places.

I think we've been instrumental in making the public more conscious across the board of the importance of those species and those habitats we talked about. And the reason I say that is because I can meet somebody and they will say, "What do you do?"

I say, "I work for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department." It's instant respect, and they say, "Really, really. I think the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is the neatest department. What do you do?" And I can enter the conversation, because they're so interested, and they have a story: "I was fishing, had just landed this under-sized fish and let it go. There was a game warden watching, came up and talked to me. And they were so respectful. It's one of the experiences I remember from fishing of all experiences." Whatever impression they have of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, it's positive.

I have a world of respect for my federal counterparts in the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the federal fish and wildlife agency in Texas, but because they are federal and because of the way their bureaucracy is structured, when I talk to land owners, the public impression is very different. I will have landowners say, "If you're with Texas Parks and Wildlife, sit down, let's work together, I'll talk to you. If you're with the feds, get back in your truck and go back where you came from." Literally.

And it's not that the Fish and Wildlife Service is evil or that they've done anything to hurt anybody. And it's not that I'm the State, because it's if you're from the Governor's office, you can keep going. Or if you're from the TCEQ, you can keep going.

It's Texas Parks and Wildlife. Because we have earned a reputation for being pro-landowner, pro-private-lands, pro-good-stewardship. We've made it very clear that we're not anti-cattle. We're not anti-corn. We're not anti-gasoline. We're not anti-electricity. We are pro-fish-and-wildlife. That has been our message for so long that people know that now. I think in some ways that's our greatest achievement.

The fact that we've managed to acquire for public ownership and management 1.4 million acres is not nearly enough. But the fact that we've done that of the lack of resources for land acquisition in a state that's 95% privately owned with buy-in from the Governor's Office, from the Legislature, from the private land owners who have sold us their land or donated us their land, from our neighbors, from county governments.

If I acquire a significant piece of land now, somebody from my agency will go talk to the county judge and say, "Please understand. We're proposing to acquire a 6,000 acre ranch that comes off the tax rolls." And there are a couple of rare ex ... exceptions across the state, but most of the time, it's, "Awesome! That's awesome. Y'all realize that you have a wildlife management area over here, and we know because of our survey work that our hotel motel tax is up. Our local sales is up because of people coming to hunt, fish. Please, what can we do to help?" is, is the attitude. I really credit that with the integrity of our agency and the effort that we've gone to, to communicate those values and to do it in a nonjudgmental way.

I have to deal with pipeline operators high line operators. They look at a map, they see a big green area on the map and they say, " We put the pipeline right through there." When I sit down and talk to them, we could end up, we could do, we could just be really adversarial, "I hate pipelines. Pipelines destroy wildlife."

No. I drive to work. Pipelines are important to me, so is fish and wildlife. So let's work together and figure out how to get your pipeline where it needs to go without having to go through the wildlife management area or the State Park. That has been so consistently our message and our genuine attitude.

Nivien Saleh: It seems you try to meet people where they are. You pay very close attention to what their concerns are, and you address them to the extent you can and respond positively before then saying, "But you still can put the pipeline through our park."

Ted Hollingsworth: Right. And for me, Ted, I assume that everybody's mission is legitimate. I don't think to myself, "Our mission is more important than your mission," or "It's our mission versus your mission."

The fact is, I'm not going to change population growth. I am not going to change climate change. What I can do is add lands to our state park system or wildlife system, to protect those lands, to educate our neighbors, to encourage good stewardship on private lands.

Those are the things I can do. And I can do it more effectively if I go into a situation respecting your mission as much as I respect my mission. You need to get your gas from your gas field to your refinery. That mission is absolutely legitimate. Let me help you do that. Let me help you do that while we respect my mission, which is to minimize impacts to fish and wildlife resources.

Inspirational John Magera of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Nivien Saleh: Yeah. I didn't know about the image problem of US Fish and Wildlife Service. And it may just be because their bureaucracy is structured differently without the people having any more ill will towards the general public than you guys are. And I would like to point out that I did an interview with John Magera of the US Fish and Wildlife Service a few episodes ago, which is absolutely inspirational.

In fact, you listened to it ...

Ted Hollingsworth: I did.

Nivien Saleh: ... And you loved it too, right?

Ted Hollingsworth: Yes. Let me be clear. US Fish and Wildlife Service in Texas in particular has done a very good job of working hard to bring down barriers. And there are areas in the

state where the Fish and Wildlife Service is very highly respected. There are still areas of the state where as far as that landowner's concerned, those are the feds. I don't see very many areas in the state where the attitude towards Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is, "Oh that's the State." In fact, in most cases, it's, "You know what? Because Texas Parks and Wildlife Department have a game warden in my county, I don't have near as many people trying to poach deer on my ranch as I would otherwise have."

So it's not that the public across the board has a bad impression of US Fish and Wildlife Service. It's just that there are still large areas where they are associated with the federal government. And that's just the reality.

Connection to Texas Master Naturalist

Nivien Saleh: Then I wanted to say also that you guys connect to conservationists through your connection to the Texas Master Naturalist Program. I'm a Texas Master Naturalist, and we in Houston had this great, I think urban biologist, Kelly Norrid, who come to our classes and give these great lectures about turtles and other wildlife.

Ted Hollingsworth: The Master Naturalist is maybe one of the best examples, but we have an entire branch of folks who watch for opportunities to interact with the private sector to promote conservation. Master Naturalist is a great program.

I don't do social media, but I know we have an active Twitter presence?

I think we have a Twitter presence, a Facebook, there we go. We have a Facebook presence, not wanting to overlook any opportunities to engage every audience.

Nivien Saleh: Are there other thoughts that you would like to leave our listeners with?

Ted Hollingsworth: I cannot think of a better day job on the planet than being the director of the Land Conservation Program at Texas Parks and Wildlife. College kids will call me and they say, "Would you recommend a career at Texas Parks and Wildlife?" And my answer is, "Absolutely, unless you're just, unless you're just terrified of grass, unless you, unless you're so averse to the outdoors."

It's been a delightful career, a wonderful agency to work for. And I would encourage everybody to either consider a career at Parks and Wildlife or to look at the way every one of us has an impact on fish and wildlife.

We have an impact on our environment. Whether it's using less plastic or driving less or buying a hunting and fishing license. And we'll be inspired to do just that much more to to help our fish and wildlife survive mankind.

Nivien Saleh: Thank you so much, Ted.

Ted Hollingsworth: You're very welcome, Nivien. Thank you.

Nivien Saleh: This is it for today. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is a real asset for Texans. I wish them good luck as they work to protect our plants and animals and preserve this state's natural beauty for future generations.

Shifting g ears, I've got some important news for you. As you may remember, Episode 5 of this podcast covered the danger Houston is facing from hurricane storm surge in the Ship Channel. Well, today the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists published a story about that issue. And that story comes with an interactive map that tells you exactly what chemicals each Ship Channel company contains and its risk from flooding-slash-storm surge. This gives our decision makers in the county government, the state and the federal government all the information they need to evaluate the threat we are facing. No more excuses!

To find a link to the Bulletin article and the other resources for today's episodes, go to HoustonNature.com/19. That's HoustonNature.com, a slash, and the number 19 for episode 19. And if you've enjoyed this interview, please tell a friend!

For Houston and Nature, I'm Nivien Saleh.