

Neil Bryant  
Eng. 5314  
Dr. Libby Allison  
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## **Becoming a Texas Naturalist:**

### **A Narrative Critique of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Website**

*"There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. ...Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech." -Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac*

So, what does it mean to be a Texas Naturalist, to experience all of the scenic beauty and variety that Texas has to offer? Perhaps aspiring Naturalists can see themselves navigating the rocky crevices and dusty peaks of the Caprock Canyonlands in the Panhandle, or trudging through the cypress swamps of East Texas's Caddo Lake State Park. If they long for a mountaintop view, then a backpacked hike through the Davis ranges of West Texas should easily satisfy. While one person may prefer one kind of environment to another, true Texas Naturalists submerge themselves in all of their state's geographic diversity and everything "natural, wild and free." But there's a catch. As the above quotation from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Master Naturalist homepage seems to imply, more goes into being a Naturalist than simply spending quality time with Nature; there is a political bent, a willingness to sacrifice "standard of living" for the sake of preserving the natural environment. Here, the hardcore naturalist is separated from the mere 'nature enthusiast.' By no means is there any definitive 'Naturalist' criterion, but a

look into the literary works of established Naturalist authors such as Ed Abbey, Frederick Gehlbach, and Dan Flores can certainly give aspiring Texas Naturalists a place to start.

### **Characterizing the Naturalist**

While some of the more renowned nature writers such as Ed Abbey or Texas's own Roy Bedichek may sound familiar, there are many more who have gone largely unnoticed. Putting their varying levels of popularity and differing styles and approaches to this literary genre aside, they all find themselves united by a great empathy for the natural environment, or the shared feeling that Nature's loss is also their loss. This empathy pushes them out of their warm, comfortable homes and into the Wild, beyond the protection of city walls. This empathy replaces political complacency with an awareness of Nature's plight and the desire to do something about it. So, as the following literature review will hopefully show, assuming the role of a Texas Naturalist is about more than just visiting state parks and wildlife preserves; it's about more than just "roughing" it out-of-doors for a weekend; it requires political activism and a role in the fight to maintain balance between humankind's needs and environmental preservation.

To achieve such empathy, however, one must first experience Nature in a meaningful way. Of course, the term 'meaningful' is a completely subjective one and means different things to different people. To many Naturalist authors, a meaningful experience requires much dedicated exploration of a habitat. Ed Abbey spent three seasons serving as a park ranger at Arches National Monument near Moab, Utah compiling data to write Desert Solitaire. And, while Arches is not in Texas, Abbey's experiences can still shed light on what becoming a true Naturalist entails. In the intro to Desert Solitaire Abbey states,

“You can’t see anything from a car; you’ve got to get out of the contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you’ll see something maybe. Probably not.” (xii)

Abbey believes that a true experience only occurs when people remove themselves from the trappings of human society and venture out into the Wild, free of any artificial constructs. People must leave the air conditioned comfort of their SUV, abandon the safety of the nature trail or the fenced scenic overlook, and navigate the rocky overhangs and crevices on their hands and feet, or trudge through the swampy marshes in mud boots and coveralls.

Taking a similar approach in Caprock Canyonlands, Dan Flores submerses himself in one West Texas natural habitat to capture what he calls the ‘spirit of place.’ To do this, one must become native to a place, learning as much about its geography, geology and history as is possible. Flores intertwines this scientific information with his own personal experiences and other culturally relevant themes throughout his book. Each chapter explores how these story elements play out in Caprock’s different canyon regions.

Roy Bedichek’s work, Adventures with a Texas Naturalist, encompasses more than sixty years of life experience on the part of the author. Unlike the previous two Naturalists, Bedichek approaches his topic from a holistic and thematic standpoint. Instead of concentrating on one region or a specific geographic feature, he takes the more prominent elements (both natural and artificial) of Texas’s wildlife and landscape and examines their affects in a variety of ways. The first two chapters, for example, explore the positive and negative environmental implications of fences. Chapter nine, *Denatured Chickens*, shines a critical light on the corporate farm and their questionable rearing practices of chickens meant for mass consumption.

The above examples are only meant to provide some idea of what constitutes a meaningful experience with the natural environment. Unfortunately, most people do not have three years to spend secluded in a desert, much less sixty years to explore every geologic nook and cranny of Texas. So back to the original question, how will we, aspiring Texas Naturalists, know when we have had a meaningful experience? If these authors are any indication, you will know when Nature touches you on a personal level, when you come to a realization of its importance to you, personally. For Abbey, Nature was a mirror into the human soul, a means by which people could separate themselves from human-made constructs and all things social in order to find some fundamental truth of existence,

“I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us all.” (7)

Chapter six of Caprock Canyonlands, *Visions of Palo Duro*, Flores writes at length about great landscape artists such as Georgia O’Keefe who Caprock’s many canyons have inspired. He laments the fact that one such canyon, Palo Duro, has not been the subject of more artistic endeavors, “Culturally it’s explainable but still disappointing that bold, bright, surprising Palo Duro Canyon has not inspired more musical or literary art” (116).

Once aspiring Naturalists have come to understand on a personal level why nature should be protected and preserved, the need for political action on its behalf becomes all the more obvious. To bring a new book and author into the fray, Frederick Gehlbach’s Mountain Island and Desert Seas gives his account of the environmental happenings along the U.S./Mexico Borderlands and relays possible avenues of political action that might protect this habitat, “I advocate expanded tourism and wildlands recreation to counter the quick water loss that

accompanies expanding agriculture and urban-industrial systems... Why not training in land ethics as a public-school requirement” (277)? Like Gehlbach, Flores often alludes to a need for state parks and other government protection of natural habitats, “Texas Parks and Wildlife current six-year plan calls for the acquisition of 72,000 acres of new parkland... [Tule Canyon] begs for privately funded Nature Conservancy tracts protecting rare and threatened species” (172-173). These two authors clearly advocate the state park and wildlife refuge systems as a means of environmental protection and, taking a cue from them, aspiring Naturalists have an idea where opportunities to experience Texas’s natural environments might present themselves—through the Texas Parks and Wildlife department. Their website could provide a means to explore and protect the environment.

### **Texas Parks and Wildlife Website: Facilitator or Foil to Aspiring Texas Naturalists**

As Killingsworth and Jacobsen show in their article, *The Rhetorical Construction of Environmental Risk Narratives in Government and Activist Websites: A Critique*, trying to get activist information from websites that are supposed to facilitate environmental action can not only be a difficult process but one that is counterproductive to the movement. Some might argue that Texas Parks and Wildlife as a government agency need not concern itself with activism, but there are two arguments against this point. First, these agencies would not enjoy their current prominence without the concerted efforts of Naturalist and second, Texas Parks and Wildlife offers programs meant specifically for aspiring Naturalists both young and old, Master Texas Naturalists and Junior Naturalists. So, if the education and development of Naturalists is truly one of their goals, the website should provide information along two lines: a means to experience and learn about nature, and avenues for political action on behalf of its preservation. The

following will evaluate how well the TPW (Texas Parks and Wildlife) website facilitates developing Texas Naturalists/activists using the Killingsworth/Jacobsen article criteria, identifying the potential gains and pitfalls of using the site.

Killingsworth and Jacobsen state that often times “the sites of government agencies and activist organizations most directly connected with environmental policy formation actually increase the distance between site users, decision making and action” (169). The authors trace this tendency back to what they have deemed a “kernel narrative,” an inherent base statement of intent from the website’s creators. In effect, if the website’s purpose was to report some action performed by its creators, the kernel narrative would be, “we did this;” if, however, the intent of the website is to get its audience politically active, the kernel narrative would then be, “do this.” The subjects of these simple kernel sentences will always be those who are meant to perform the action in question. As agents of education and activism, environmental websites should try to incorporate the latter of the kernel narratives above. Unfortunately, many do not, concerning themselves more with self-promotion than getting people involved. As a consequence, many website users and potential activist get quickly lost among a hypertext barrage and many, many links that seemingly go nowhere (or at least nowhere near the desired information); they leave feeling frustrated. Other users are intimidated by the exploits of the organization and leave feeling that they have nothing to offer. The end result is thus: a self-promotional approach actually hinders the movement towards environmental awareness and activism in the public-at-large (Killingsworth and Jacobsen, 168-169). Aspiring Texas Naturalists can use Killingsworth and Jacobsen’s notion of the kernel narrative to assess how much help TPW’s site can give their quest to become full-fledged Naturalists. They will first want to know how well the site facilitates experiences in Nature, the point being to learn about and develop empathy for the

environment. These experiences need not be relegated to hiking alone through the wilderness (though this is an important aspect); they can also be nature education or environmental programs offered by TPW. Even though these programs might not take place out-of-doors, they still provide a means to experience Nature, whether it be through hunting, fishing or simply seeing conservation in action.

One of the most prominent features of TPW's homepage is a link entitled, *Find a Park or Historic Site—Start your exploration here*. The subjects of this kernel sentence and therefore the doers of the action are the site's users, meaning that the primary concern is to get users out-of-doors. Clicking on the link brings up a page containing a pull down menu of alphabetically arranged state parks from which to choose. Upon selecting one, the user is taken to another page containing extensive information on that park's facilities (campsites, indoor facilities, etc.) and activities (hiking, biking, climbing, etc.) The site also provides park directories, TPW regulations, and other pertinent park information as well as various free downloadable brochures. All in all, the information is easily accessible and inviting, providing aspiring Texas Naturalists with many opportunities for natural experiences.

Because this critique intends to analyze the effectiveness of the TPW website rather than the agency itself, a list of different nature education and environmental awareness programs attained from the agency to compare against those listed in the website would be helpful. An email questionnaire was sent to elicit such information:

“Attached are a list of programs offered by our ‘Education and Outreach’ branch -- many teach aspects of environmental awareness such as hunter, boater and aquatic education which all teach conservation, responsible use of the outdoors and environmental issues related to their use of the outdoors. There are also many other TPWD programs that teach environmental awareness; many in our wildlife division/wildlife

diversity branch. Perhaps the single best environmental awareness curriculum at the national and state level is Project WILD:

- Used in Texas since 1985
- Used in all states
- Adopted by the State Board of Education Certifications/Texas Environmental Education Advisory Committee (legislatively-appointed)
- Integrated into all school disciplines
- Cross-referenced to the state school standards (TEKS/TAKS)
- Teaches *how to think* about environmental/wildlife/aquatic issues
- Partnered with Project Learning Tree (Forest Service) and Project WET
- Aquatic/School Habitat and Spanish-speaking curricula
- Extensions into service/community projects and partners (beyond the schools).” (Parish)

At the top of the homepage is an *education* link, which leads to a list of all the programs listed in the email, including the highly touted “Project WILD.” Once again, the information is easily accessed and presented so that it places the user as the actor. Unfortunately, the links containing information for the Texas Master Naturalists and Junior Naturalists programs are located at the very bottom of the homepage, making them difficult to find. This is disappointing because potential activists could miss the opportunity to join these organizations and to assist various habitat projects open to the public.

Now that aspiring Naturalists have found many opportunities for interaction with Nature, they will want to know how well the site facilitates political activism. In this respect, the hands of Texas Parks and Wildlife are somewhat tied, as the email questionnaire will show. It posed the following question: *Obviously, the job of Texas Parks and Wildlife is to protect the natural environment by acquiring land, enforcing environmental legislation, etc. Does Texas Parks and*

*Wildlife sponsor any programs to get citizens active on the political front? If so, what?* They replied,

“No. State law prohibits any state agency or employee from lobbying for or against any legislation. If we were to “sponsor” some kind of action campaign even if it was for informational purposes, it could be perceived as a violation of this law. We try to stay as neutral as we can on any and all legislation. Many of the conservation groups such as Nature Conservancy, Trust for public Land, Coastal Conservation Association, Sierra Club, do undertake efforts to engage their constituents and members in the political process.” (Parish)

This is not to say that they cannot encourage action in more subtle ways. After all, the email reply does list several non-profit environmental groups who do try to get their members active in the political process. One possible avenue to facilitate activism while not endorsing it openly is simply to provide links to the other sites listed in the email, which Texas Parks and Wildlife does through a homepage link marked *Related Sites*. However, *Coastal Conversation*, an organization geared for fisherman, is the only common site between those listed in the email and those that can be accessed through this link. In fact, all of the related links are designed solely for sportsman of some sort, generally meaning fishermen or game hunters. While these groups are actively conservationist, its generally only for the sake of hunting, a state of affairs that tends to exclude purist Naturalists whom hunting might not interest.

Language is another means to support activism. Language that puts aspiring Naturalists in the driver’s seat, so to speak, is more likely to incite action than language that is self-promotional. A link marked *About TPWD* on the TPW homepage leads to a page with a department overview section, under which is a *Mission Statement* link. The Mission Statement itself contains very self-promotional material and makes little attempt to encourage anyone from outside the agency to become environmentally active. The last sentence of the Mission Statement

reads, “Providing outdoor experiences, whereby young minds form values, will be our greatest contribution to the future” (Texas Parks and Wildlife). The statement never incorporates these young minds that have formed values, these developing Texas Naturalists, into activist roles.

## **Conclusion**

For aspiring Texas Naturalists, the TPW site is a mixed bag, containing both the opportunity for growth and the self-promotional language that can so stunt activist endeavors. One might describe it as the starting point on journey. The lands that TPW maintains and the opportunities that such lands give for natural experiences cannot be seen as any trite gift. And, while the opportunities for legitimate political activism are few and far between, the site does give its users the opportunity to preserve the environment in less radical ways such as trash pickups and other clean-up activities (Parish). Aspiring Texas Naturalists should use the site as a means to get out-of-doors, and once they have developed their own sense of empathy, they will grow into using the non-profit organizations like the Sierra club, which do engage in activism.

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