

## Thinking Like a River

The river giveth and the river taketh away. This is the blessed and cursed truth of living near rivers. Riverside landowners have now experienced the best and the worst of the Blanco River.

After some of the shock and raw emotion has subsided, now is the time to think like a river. Now is the time to use new river knowledge, clear thinking and a new river vision to move ahead. For those who are anxious to begin riverside restoration, it is important to be patient and first consider how rivers work. One cannot properly restore or fix anything as complex as a river without having an understanding of how it works.

Rivers work according to the laws of physics and energy. Moving water generates energy. Large wood, trees, vegetation and channel roughness resists the forces of moving water. The primary natural function of the riverside-riparian area is to help dissipate the energy of floodwaters. Deep, strong, densely rooted trees, shrubs, grasses, sedges and large downed wood are nature's way of dissipating energy and stabilizing river banks and adjacent areas.

The power of water to move and destroy objects is incredible. Equally incredible is the power of densely rooted native riverside vegetation and large wood to resist the destructive forces of moving water and to stabilize banks.

River function is best and with the least amount of flood destruction when banks and floodplains are maintained in dense natural vegetation. River function is diminished when the natural vegetation is severely altered, mowed, manicured and made to look like a park or a back yard.

Along the Blanco, and especially along the highly developed portions, there will be great tension between traditional aesthetic-economic-social preferences and what a river needs to function properly. Hopefully this tension will produce responsible compromises and a balance not seen prior to the flood.

Riverside landowners will have to decide where they sit on the scale of riverside restoration options. There has been and will be a continuum between the highly manicured park-like appearance of some recreational and residential properties and the native and natural look of a healthy and functional riverside. Across the nation and along the Blanco, there are new emerging trends toward more river-friendly restoration.

Texas is proudly a private lands state with a strong tradition of property rights. We would have it no other way. Yet, a proper understanding of private property rights must also include the obligations of landowner responsibilities. Part of owning land along the river is being a good citizen and a good neighbor. The river is a shared resource. What you do on your land affects others and the condition of the upstream neighbors affects your part of the river.

Manicured landscapes cleared of stumps, snags and wood increase the speed and energy of floodwaters. This not only increases on-site damage, but also passes that increased destructive energy to downstream neighbors. The greatest vow that one can make to the Blanco River and to downstream neighbors is "first, do no harm."

The flood reset and redefined the benefits and risks of living near the river. Hopefully the flood also causes some serious and thoughtful introspection about our relationship to the river and how we can seek to enjoy the river in a different more river-friendly way.

Fortunately, signs of natural recovery can already be seen along all parts of the Blanco. Brand new seedlings of maple and pecan; new vigorous shoots of walnut re-sprouting from broken trees; large clumps of river sedge starting to grow up through newly dumped sand; small sapling cypress springing back upright with bark and limbs intact; strong rooted riparian grasses putting up new growth from undamaged root systems. The natural recovery process has begun.

Unfortunately, these signs of recovery and new life are sparse in some locations where the most powerful forces of fast water stripped everything away. Here, it will be a long time before the beauty returns.

The Blanco River, like all other Hill Country rivers is both beautiful and awful; these two conditions can be only hours apart. The Blanco River will once again be beautiful; but it will be a different kind of beautiful for many years and there will be scars to serve as reminders.

This flood was of such a rare magnitude that even many well stabilized and naturally vegetated banks were badly damaged. Thankfully, the next flood and the next flood after that will undoubtedly be smaller less powerful events. But sooner or later, another mighty flood will come down the Blanco. Riverside landowners can begin now to rethink a healthier, more functional and still beautiful river. It starts with a change of perception of what a beautiful river looks like and the determination to think like a river.

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Steve Nelle is a fifth generation descendent of early Kendall County German immigrants. He has spent the last 39 years working with private landowners across Texas and the Hill Country on conservation and management of natural resources. He resides in San Angelo.