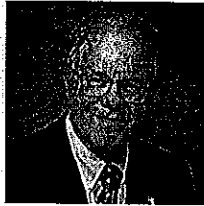


From bluegills to redfish, fresh water matters

By Andrew Sansom
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It's hard for me to cast my fly at a tailing redfish without feeling good about how far we have come in coastal conservation in Texas. Every time I see a little nervous water, I thank CCA and the game wardens and biologists of Texas Parks and Wildlife for one of America's most successful fisheries management stories and one which has helped put us in the top two angling states in the country.

As a result of intense efforts over the past twenty years or so, we no longer have any commercial fishing pressure on our primary nearshore game species. We have a hatchery system that is second to none and we have the best scientific coastal data collection system in the United States.

In fact, it has gotten so good that, standing in the flats, it is hard to not think about most of the incredible pleasures of being in saltwater for both the beauty and the sport, and forget that these experiences would not be possible without continued supplies of freshwater flowing down our rivers to the coast.

Fresh water is the essential element of bay health. We coastal anglers tend to ignore the looming threats to it in Texas at peril of destroying both the places and pastime that has brought us and our families so much through the years.

The most serious natural resource challenge facing us in Texas today is to find a way to continue to supply freshwater to a growing population, while not completely exhausting the water flowing down our rivers and streams to the most spectacular system of bays and estuaries in the hemisphere. The bottom line is that our population in Texas is expected to double in the next thirty years and we have already granted permission for more water to be withdrawn from many of our rivers than is actually in them.

At the same time, we have no system of watershed management in a state largely

consisting of private property, and these critical features of the landscape are responsible for recharging our aquifers and catching the runoff which fills our rivers and reservoirs with clean water.

We've not built any new reservoirs in a generation and the Texas Water Development Board has projected the need for a staggering \$31 Billion to meet the water infrastructure needs of the next one. As water is plentiful in Eastern Texas, pressure is mounting now to move large amounts of it to Central and South Texas where the population is growing.

Many of these growing areas have depended on groundwater which has largely been unregulated in Texas in the face of a growing understanding that it is the same water which emerges from springs to become a substantial part of the flow in our rivers and streams, and thus to our bays and estuaries.

For the longer term, in spite of the fact that virtually all credible scientists now agree that the climate is warming, State water planners have affirmatively downplayed any potential impact that circumstance may have on our future water supplies. This in a state where we are largely dependent on more than 200

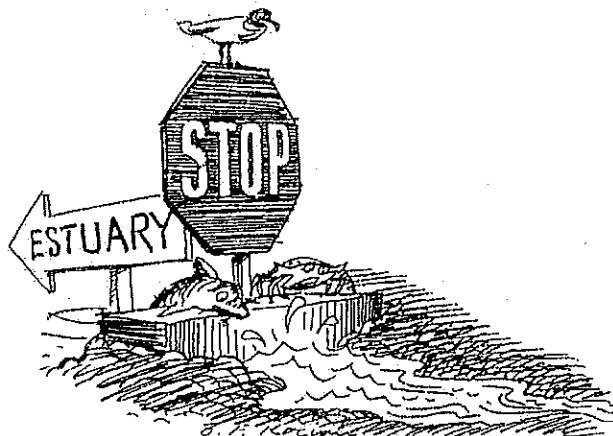


Illustration by Ben Kocinn

major reservoirs and our leading climatologist, Dr. Gerald North of Texas A&M College Station has indicated that evaporation in Texas is expected to increase by 25% in normal conditions and an astonishing 85% in drought conditions.

We treat freshwater in most parts of Texas as if it will last forever. We waste too much. While cities like San Antonio and El Paso have lowered water consumption by as much as 40% per capita, in other major metropolitan areas of the state, per capita water consumption is still growing.

All of these factors and more indicate that for those of us for whom fishing is important, we have a fight on our hands in the years ahead that will dwarf the previous battles that have brought us so far.

Although the last session of the Legislature, with support of CCA, enacted Senate Bill 3 which for the first time provides a means of protecting "environmental flows" in our rivers and bays. To date, the science necessary for determining what those flow needs are has been poorly funded and it is unlikely that environmental and angling interests will have

meaningful access to the stakeholder process designed to set flow requirements for each bay and basin.

To meet this challenge, we must redouble our efforts to be involved in this process and make sure the process is funded adequately to get the job done. We should engage in any effort to provide legislative funding for the purchase of the existing water rights to be dedicated to environmental flows, new water infrastructure, and insist that funding be also provided for necessary scientific work to determine environmental flow needs, better groundwater information and for purchase of development rights from willing landowners to protect our watersheds and aquifer recharge areas.

There will be growing pressure to move water westward in Texas from where it is plentiful to where it is needed. Such transfers must not be allowed unless environmental flows are protected. Ironically, securing adequate environmental flows from large-scale interbasin transfers of water may be the only way to guarantee flows to bays and estuaries where freshwater has already been allocated for other purposes. However, there is currently no interbasin water transfer legally available for the environment.

We will have to become more efficient in our use of water and, frankly, this is not rocket science, most domestic use of water goes to landscape watering which is not essential for survival and large amounts of water can be saved by cities which make the effort to repair aging water mains where leakage is chronic. While the Legislature has enabled groundwater districts to form across the state for the purpose of managing our aquifers, they are without much power, almost no science and little money. Steps must be taken to strengthen them and to ensure that there is greater understanding and acknowledgement in the law of the linkage between groundwater and surface water.

It is essential that we understand and prepare for the probability that things could get worse in our climate and these conditions threaten our water supply and demand greater consideration in water planning.

Finally, each of us can help meet this challenge in a way that provides multiple benefits. As Texas continues to urbanize and diversify in its population, we are in danger of losing ground due to the fact that fewer of our kids are learning to fish, to kayak, to sail and to use our lakes, bays, and rivers for recreation. This is potentially the greatest crisis of all as we cannot afford to raise a new generation of Texans who do not understand or care what great joy there is in the outdoors and what must be done to protect it. Nothing is more important to our sport than to introduce kids to the great pleasures it affords and to the responsibilities preserving it demands.

We actually have sufficient water in Texas to meet our needs for the next couple of generations, but managing it so that we continue to prosper and protect the environment will require the support of all the new anglers we can put on the water and more.