



PHOTO: Sandra Ramos/NPCA

Big Thicket National Preserve

A Biological Crossroads of the Southeast

Spanning seven counties and nine ecosystems, not far from the Texas-Louisiana border, Big Thicket National Preserve weaves together internationally renowned biological diversity with the rich history of many generations of people who have relied on this land for safety and survival. Early European settlers referred to the area as “the Big Thicket” because of its lush, dense forest and canopies. But the region had been utilized for thousands of years prior by the Atakapa-Ishak, and later the Alabama-Coushatta people, who migrated westward in the late 1700’s and established this area as their homeland.

With the rapid expansion of railroads across the southern United States in the late 1800’s came logging and oil industries into the region, each with their own advantages and challenges. As populations grew, rapidly depleting natural resources threatened an already delicate ecosystem. In 1927 R.E. Jackson, a railroad conductor whose route brought him frequently to the Big Thicket, recognized the toll logging had on the region.

Jackson created the first regional conservation group

to protect a portion of the landscape - the East Texas Big Thicket Association. For the next fifty years, a struggle ensued to protect the area, culminating in 27 congressional bills and final passage of Big Thicket National Preserve legislation in 1974, and signed into law by a former National park ranger, President Gerald Ford.

Protecting over 100,000 acres of wilderness, this region teems with a delicate tapestry of wildlife and has been called “The Biological Crossroads of America.” Four of the five carnivorous plants in the United States are just a few of over 1,000 plant species that can be found here. Bluebirds from the east coast come to cavort with the roadrunners of the southwest among the 85 tree species and 60 shrubs in the region.

The northern border of Big Thicket follows along the Old San Antonio Road, more commonly known as El Camino Real de los Tejas. This trail from Natchitoches, Louisiana through central Texas, and on to Mexico City, had been an access route during the Spanish colonial era and considered instrumental in the settlement of Texas. Today, the **El Camino Real de los Tejas National**

Historic Trail, also managed by the National Park Service, retraces the cultural landscape of this significant trail from western Louisiana down to Laredo, Texas.

Along this blended edge of the bayou, The Big Thicket has served as a source of climate resiliency in the region for generations. As the population of the surrounding area grows, so do the increased threats to this delicate preserve and adjacent landscapes. Not only does additional water run-off need a path to recede to prevent flooding, but long-term strategies for stormwater control need to happen quickly.

The National Parks Conservation Association is a leader in building a more resilient Big Thicket, investing time and resources alongside local organizations and community stakeholders to restore, revive and renew this unique region.

Quick Facts

Established date	October 11, 1974
Size	113,122 acres
Jobs Created	211
Visitor numbers for 2019	255,926
Economic numbers for 2019	\$16,698,000

https://www.nps.gov/nature/customcf/NPS_Data_Visualization/docs/NPS_2019_Visitor_Spending_Effects.pdf



Scenes of the Big Thicket

“...This area had its own very special qualities, but that you have to refocus your vision a little. It’s not a matter of geysers or mountains or waterfalls or anything like that. It’s a matter of looking at what you have and determining what’s interesting about this.” - Maxine Johnston

Upper left: Maxine Johnston, “Godmother of the Big Thicket” and NPCA-Texas Associate Executive Director Erika Pelletier. Upper right: Volunteers lending a hand at the annual Longleaf Pine planting in 2020. Lower left: Saw palmetto among the cypress in the Lance Rosier unit. Lower right: hikers enjoy a gorgeous day among the trees in the Big Sandy



NPCA's Work at Big Thicket

BRINGING PEOPLE AND PARKS TOGETHER

The "Gateway to the Big Thicket," is an expansion of the existing highway alongside the park. NPCA and partners are working with the Texas Department of Transportation and local officials to retain the region's natural character throughout the park while providing safe transportation corridors and new

recreational opportunities in the area. Extending hike and bike trails will connect the Preserve with cities in the region and enhance the regional economy. This work is focused on engaging local tourism organizations to promote Big Thicket as a recreational, historical and ecotourism destination.



PHOTO: Sandra Ramos/NPCA

DEFENDING WILDLIFE



A **Keystone Species** is a species which other species in an ecosystem largely depend, such that if it were removed the ecosystem would change drastically.

PHOTO: Erika Pelletier/NPCA

The endangered Red Cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW) have not been seen in the Big Thicket National Preserve since the early 1990s. NPCA is actively working with the Preserve and regional scientists to bring back important components of the bird's habitat to the park, with a plan to reintroduce this keystone species. RCWs are a 'keystone' species because use of the tree cavities created by

these animals contributes to the species' richness of the pine forest. A recent survey for suitable habitat for the RCW indicated this reintroduction effort could be accomplished sooner than expected. With the support of park advocates and enhanced habitat management and coordination with conservation partners, the Big Thicket can be a thriving home for these threatened species.

RESTORING OUR WATERS

Frequently battered by hurricanes and floods due to the changing climate, the Big Thicket serves as the protector of this region. The river basin system and diverse lands that wind through the Thicket offers a natural solution to reducing impacts of these devastating

storms. NPCA is coordinating with local community leaders to engage in a new regional and state flood planning process to create a flood management plan for the region, with the Thicket and surrounding lands as a vital component for regional resiliency.



PHOTO: Sandra Ramos/NPCA

About the National Parks Conservation Association: Since 1919, the nonpartisan National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) has been the leading voice in safeguarding our national parks. NPCA and its more than 1.5 million members and supporters work together to protect and preserve our nation's most iconic and inspirational places for future generations.

For more information, visit www.npca.org.

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PROTECTING NATURAL WONDERS

For over a decade, in collaboration with local organizations and community stakeholders, NPCA has hosted an annual longleaf pine planting event to restore the western edge of the longleaf pine savannah. This labor of love project began with just 20 volunteers and has grown to over 200 in 2019, planting almost 200,000 longleaf pine trees in the process. Not only has this project benefited the ecology of this protected area but brings a sense

of pride to the families who return each year, watching the new forest flourish.

NPCA encourages regional education about the Thicket's designation as a Man and Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This overlay of international recognition, which blankets an area larger than park boundaries, wraps an additional layer of protection to this sensitive region

The narrow, disconnected configuration of the river's corridor protected within the park leaves the Big Thicket's future even more vulnerable to these impacts. Connecting the stand-alone protected sections among the Big Thicket region is crucial to stemming the loss of wildlife and native habitat and increasing the climate resiliency of this special place.

An additional component is acquiring adjacent and outlying areas and bringing them into management by the park through expansion of the park boundaries. Conserving this additional land will increase the region's natural abilities to filter and protect water quality, provide habitat for keystone species, and retain the cultural heritage of the region.

as well as a wider audience to attract to the area.

As the region experiences more intense storms and sea level rises, the park's water and landscapes are threatened.

What is a National Preserve?

This category is established primarily for the protection of certain resources. Activities like hunting and fishing or the extraction of minerals and fuels may be permitted if they do not jeopardize the natural values. Big Thicket was the first National Park site with this unique designation.



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STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

Protecting the Big Thicket also includes engaging and retaining a sufficient number of park rangers and staff for a longer-term basis. This requires the investment of adequate park funding and staff housing, a challenging prospect for a remote park such as this.

NPCA is invested in making Big Thicket more attractive to the daily stewards of this park, as well as ensuring a quality visitor experience and increasing the recognition of the Big Thicket region.



PHOTO: Sandra Ramos/NPCA