

Devils River Could Feel Impact of Hunt for Water

by **Neena Satija** November 28, 2013
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DOLAN FALLS PRESERVE — Along U.S. Highway 277 headed north from Del Rio, not far from the Mexican border, canyons flecked with green tower over the desert landscape.

The rugged country is some of the most breathtaking, and untouched, in all of Texas. Those who have studied the area say that hundreds of generations of indigenous tribespeople lived on this land, drawn to the caves that provided shelter from storms and enemies, the abundant plants and wildlife, the flint deposits in the rock that could be used for tools and weapons, and the sparkling Devils River, which snakes through the terrain.

But the peace and quiet here shouldn't fool any thrill-seeker looking to navigate the waters of the river, whose headwaters begin in the border town of Comstock and flow 60 miles south to Lake Amistad, where it joins the Rio Grande.

"It has no mercy for anybody or anything once the water flows down these canyons," said Doug Meyer, a former high school teacher who moved to the area about a year ago to serve as the Devils River project manager for the Nature Conservancy.

In part because of work done by organizations like Meyer's, which have purchased tens of thousands of acres along the river to keep developers away, and the sheer remoteness of the region, the Devils River is seen by many as one of the state's last pristine rivers. Yet even this river may now be threatened, as faraway urban parts of Texas seek new water supplies amid drought and population explosion.

"What's happening with water is really causing us to rethink whether there's been a big victory out there," Laura Huffman, the Nature Conservancy's director of Texas programs, said of the nonprofit's efforts to preserve the land, which also include selling some of the purchased land with strict contract requirements for conservation.

More than 20 years ago, when some of those preservation efforts began in earnest, the goal was to protect the river's renowned water quality, in large part by protecting the surrounding landscape. That has been a resounding success. The area's wildlife, including white-tailed deer, a variety of songbirds, mountain lions and the only known population of Mexican White Oaks in the U.S., is thriving. Even black bears are making a comeback.

It's water quantity that is now the concern. A [project](#) in the works by the Beeville-

based Val Verde Water Company seeks to pump water from the Edwards-Trinity Aquifer in Val Verde County, where Del Rio and much of the Devils River is located. The company's president, John Littlejohn, has shopped a proposal to pipe billions of gallons of the water each year to various cities across the state, saying that the aquifer has plenty of resources and that his plan would not drain nearby water supplies.

But critics of the proposal say the Devils River is a perfect example of how groundwater and surface water are interconnected and that pumping underground could affect the river's levels.

"Groundwater and surface water are essentially the same water," Huffman said. "You've got springs coming up to feed the inflows into these streams, and then they dip underground."

Littlejohn's project could take close to 50 billion gallons of water from the river's basin alone, opponents of the plan say, and there may not be enough rainfall to replace it. And unlike much of Texas, there's no entity in Val Verde County that regulates groundwater pumping, so many fear the project could be devastating for water resources in the area.

"The quantities being proposed far exceed what is available, and the result of such transport would cause severe damage to the Devils River and the underlying aquifer," David Honeycutt, founder of the Devils River Conservancy, wrote in a letter to San Antonio Water System, which is considering the project as an option to shore up the city's water supply in the coming decades.

A large group recently traveled to San Antonio to address the proposal, and the mayor of Del Rio [vowed](#) to fight the company with all the town's resources. San Antonio expects to make a decision early next year — but even if the city does not take up the offer, there are potential customers elsewhere. San Angelo is also eyeing the project.

Huffman sees the fight as a microcosm of what is happening across Texas. Cities and industries are finding themselves so strapped that they are looking to some of the most remote parts of the state for new water supplies — something no one in this country had ever dreamed of.

"I can tell you, there is a high level of concern about this issue," said Dell Dickinson, who raises sheep on a 7,000-acre ranch along the banks of the Devils River that his family has owned since 1942.

For Dickinson, it's not just the river that is at stake. "It's the country itself," he said. "To me, it's still wild country, not that different than the way it was 100, 150 years ago."

“I think everybody is entitled to water. We all need that to live,” Dickinson said.
“But I think a lot more study needs to be done.”

“Why drain us to feed somebody else?”

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