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History Shapes the Nueces Delta Preserve

by Kathryn Tunnell

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program (CBBEP) becoming a non-profit organization! As we look back through the years, it's hard not to reminisce about one of our biggest accomplishments, the acquisition and establishment of the Nueces Delta Preserve. It was the vision of CBBEP to create an area that could serve as a living laboratory where both wildlife, research, and education would flourish, and fresh water inflows from the Nueces River could be protected. Working with partners and through numerous grant awards, purchase contracts, and cooperative habitat management agreements, the property was acquired in numerous purchases over many years, and the Nueces Delta Preserve now offers over 11,000 contiguous acres of highly productive wetlands, prairies, and river and bay shorelines!



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But how did we ever get here? Where did it all start? While thinking back it occurred to us that many of our partners and friends might not know about the rich and varied history of the Nueces River Delta, and the story of the Nueces Delta Preserve's establishment, and we'd like to share it!

If you want to start at the very beginning, there is a great special publication put together for the CBBEP by Robert A. Ricklis (Texas Archeological Research Laboratory at the University of Texas at Austin). The document is titled *Prehistoric and Early Historic People and Environment in the Corpus Christi Bay Area*, and can be read in its entirety [HERE](#). This is a very comprehensive look at the use of Corpus Christi Bay Area and the Nueces River Delta by the Karankawa, early explorers and settlers, and cattle ranchers.

"The history of human settlement along the shores of Corpus Christi Bay and in the surrounding area is a story of change, both in the coastal environment, and in ways early people used the rich resources of the area's bays and lagoons"- Robert A. Ricklis.



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Photo: David Satterwhite, remnant cattle pens on the Nueces Delta Preserve.

By the late 1800's the Karankawa had been driven away and cattle operations were prospering in the Nueces River Delta, leading to the establishment of the townsites of Angelita and Coleta in the early 1900's. Angelita was located on the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway (Union Pacific Railroad today) about two miles south of Odem, near the present-day entrance to the Nueces Delta Preserve. The railroad station at Angelita provided a shipping point for agricultural products and cattle from nearby farms and ranches until 1916 when the relocation of the Post Office to Odem caused the town to decline and eventually vanish. By the 1950's sand and gravel mining had started in the Delta, and by the 1960's farming had been introduced.

The area also had historical significance in linking Coastal Bend communities. The Hearn's Ferry crossing, which was located at Nueces Town, connected communities in San Patricio County to Corpus Christi via a road and a very long bridge that crossed the Rincon Bayou.

Image compiled by Charlie Spiekerman, Photo: ©2015 DigitalGlobe, Landsat, Texas General Land Office, Texas Orthoimagery Program, U.S. Geological Survey, USDA Farm Service Agency, Map data ©2015Google.



Historically, the Nueces River flowed when it could, drought and water shortages a fact of life affecting early inhabitants and explorers of the lower Texas Gulf Coast. By the late 1800's however, with the human demand for water increasing, the City of Corpus Christi built its first dam on the Nueces River, the Calallen Diversion Dam. This was actually a dam to prevent saltwater intrusion into their newly constructed public water supply system, but it was the first in a series of impoundments on the Nueces River that would shape the future of the Nueces Estuary. Following the Calallen Diversion Dam there was the La Fruta Dam (1929) which created the Lovenskiold Reservoir, the Wesley Seal Dam (1958) which replaced the La Fruta Dam and created Lake Corpus Christi, and the most recent impoundment, Choke Canyon Reservoir (1982). These reservoir impoundments in the Nueces watershed reduced Nueces River flows to the coast by more than 50%, reducing nutrient loads and bioproductivity in the Nueces Estuary.

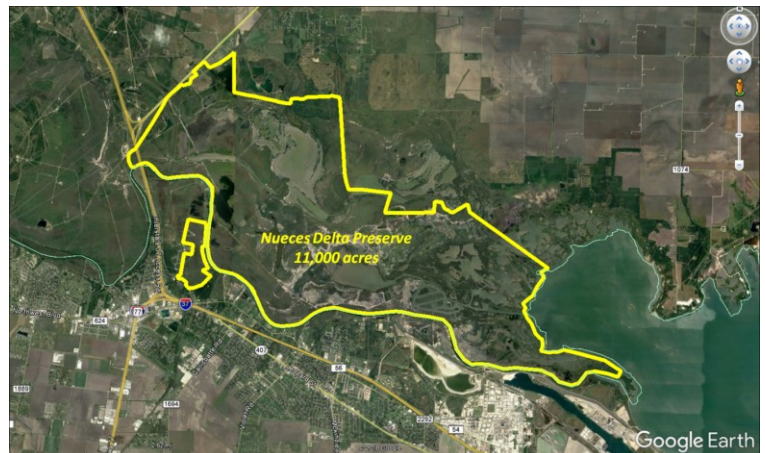
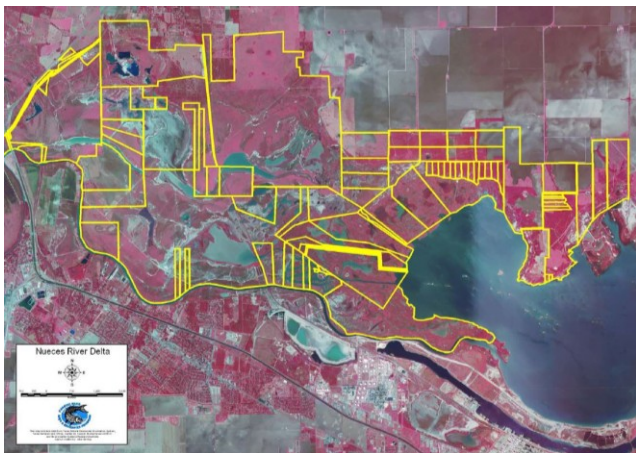
Reductions in freshwater inflows prompted state and local managers, along with scientists, to embark on a journey of ecosystem-based restoration and habitat improvement in the Nueces Estuary. As part of this effort, in 1999 CBBEP began plans to acquire land in the Nueces River Delta and create the Nueces Delta Preserve. Although this was nearly 20 years ago, Ray Allen, Executive Director for the CBBEP, remembers it well. Ray recalls:

"I remember sitting in a room with Jim Naismith (San Patricio Municipal Water District) and James Dodson (City of Corpus Christi), we were all on the Technical Advisory Committee for Freshwater Inflows, and we were discussing ways to protect freshwater inflows to the Nueces Estuary. It was then that it occurred to us that it would be much easier to protect the area if we owned the property."

Shortly after the idea surfaced Ray was driving down to the Rio Grande Valley with Carter Smith (The Nature Conservancy of Texas), when Buddy Stanley called. Buddy was with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality at the time and said there was settlement money in the amount of \$1.5 million available for restoration. The CBBEP squeezed and leveraged that money into much more over the next few years spearheading rookery island projects in Nueces Bay, assisting The Nature Conservancy with the purchase of the Cohn Preserve on Mustang Island, and buying land in the Nueces River Delta.

"We were able to accomplish a great deal with that \$1.5 million, but one of the most significant things we did was purchase our first parcel of property in the Nueces River Delta, and that's when it all began," said Ray.

The complexity of property ownership in the Nueces River Delta cannot be overstated. The Preserve had to be acquired in several purchases over many years, with the first parcel purchased in 2003 and most recent parcel in 2018. One of the more significant purchases came in 2016, when the CBBEP purchased the final piece in a multi-year effort to acquire the entire 4,737 acres of what once was the Dos Rios Division of Wyatt Ranches. At that time, the acquisition of the ranch property nearly doubled the size of the Nueces Delta Preserve.



Photos: Early planning maps showing the complexity of land ownership in the Nueces Delta (left) and the current Boundary of the Nueces Delta Preserve (right)!

Today, Indian arrowheads and middens can be found throughout the Nueces Delta Preserve, and remnants of Hearn's Ferry crossing and timber pilings from the county road are still evident, but hurricanes and floods have long ago removed many of the structures built by man. Borrow pits from sand and gravel operations are now lakes and ponds, and although the old county road connecting Nueces Town to San Patricio County no longer exists, one interesting connection remains - recycled concrete rubble from the Veteran's Memorial Coliseum demolition was used as road base at the Nueces Delta Preserve to improve access throughout portions of the property, a beautiful resting place for material from a significant landmark.

Photo: Charlie Spiekerman. It is suspected that these timber pilings are from the old county road that once crossed the Rincon Bayou and connected the communities of San Patricio County to Nueces Town.



Current management activities at the Nueces Delta Preserve focus on restoring the land to its natural state, and activities include invasive species removal, prescribed burns, native vegetation plantings, and habitat restoration and creation projects. The Nueces Delta Preserve is also home to CBBEP's environmental education program, Delta Discovery, which provides unique field-based, scientific experiences to teachers and students in grades K-12. Delta Discovery also hosts various programs throughout the year that are open to the public. The programs, classroom curriculum, and on-site activities introduce visitors in the Coastal Bend region to issues affecting the bays and estuaries as well as the local ecology of the Nueces River Delta. Thousands of visitors annually take part in the program designed to advance active wetland conservation and environmental stewardship.

Student attending Delta Discovery's Homeschool Days programming at the Nueces Delta Preserve (right).



The Nueces Delta Preserve is a tremendous conservation effort with benefits reaching far beyond its boundary. The fresh water that flows through the Nueces River Delta supports a healthy bay system that our economy thrives on, the conserved habitats provide space for endangered and threatened wildlife species, and the students, researchers, and community members that experience the Delta take with them a newfound knowledge and appreciation that they share with others. If you would like to experience the Nueces Delta Preserve you can visit www.cbbep.org or www.nuecesdeltapreserve.org/events to see upcoming programming - we'd love for you to experience it first-hand!

