

Hutchison: Preserving our natural wonders

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Right now, you can't miss the wildflowers, particularly the Texas bluebonnets blanketing the sides of the road. The blooms are a seasonal reminder of our state's natural beauty. But the fact is Texas' natural beauty is always in season.

I spoke recently at an Earth Day event in Dallas, attended by an enthusiastic crowd of Texans of all ages. In chatting with attendees, I was struck by their affection for and knowledge of the many natural treasures of our vast, diverse state.

Preserving Texas' natural heritage has been a priority of mine in the U.S. Senate. Working with state and local officials, on issues big and small, we've made great strides in protecting many of the state's most valuable natural wonders.

For example, I was pleased to announce recently that the U.S. Army and the Fish and Wildlife Service reached an agreement to transfer land and water rights in an area around Caddo Lake. This agreement is vital to long-term environmental stability at the lake, and I worked hard to encourage these two federal agencies to iron out the details.

Caddo Lake is our state's only natural lake, home to 216 bird, 47 mammal, and 90 reptile and amphibian species. In recent years, the lake has been under siege by an invasive, non-native plant, the giant salvinia.

I worked closely with the Caddo Lake Institute, founded by musician Don Henley, who was raised nearby, and the Texas Water Research Initiative, to obtain funding to help eradicate the giant salvinia. The lake and its diverse native plants and animals are now recovering, and future generations will be able to enjoy its pristine beauty.

Big Bend National Park, at 801,000 acres, is the largest Dark Sky Park in the world — one of only ten such parks in the world.

A Dark Sky designation means exceptionally starry skies and a nighttime habitat in which manmade light is almost zero.

Those of us who have camped out in Big Bend know the only light is the brilliant, star-filled sky. It's truly a natural wonder worth protecting against the encroachment of manmade light.

Another irreplaceable site I've worked to preserve is the Big Thicket National Preserve. It is often referred to as the "biological crossroads of North America" because of its incredible cypress swamps, forests, creeks, and bayous. Within the diverse Big Thicket, 10 distinct ecosystems have been identified, including species that originated in the Gulf Coastal Plains, Eastern Forests, and Central Plains. The Big Thicket's bald cypress swamps are a short distance from upland pine savannahs and sand hills. This is not only a Texas treasure but an American treasure.

During my time serving in the U.S. Senate, I've had the privilege of visiting all 254 counties of Texas — from the great plains to Palo Duro Canyon, from the Gulf Coast to the piney woods of East Texas to the Hill Country, from the arid expanses of west Texas to the Davis Mountains.

And I was struck by the unique and incredibly diverse flora and fauna our state has to offer. My travels have supplied inspiration for my efforts to restore and conserve our state's natural wonders for current and future generations of Texans.

Before we know it, school will be out, and another Texas summer will be here. As you consider where to take your family vacation or even a quick day trip, consider experiencing some of our state's natural wonders. We are blessed to have them.

— *Kay Bailey Hutchison, a Republican, is the senior senator from Texas.*