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The Big Thicket National Park

Texas, to the unknowing, conjures up an image of monotony—cattle, sagebrush, and mesquite in a setting of unvarying vastness. But to the resident and traveler, Texas is a land of contrasts and splendor, and to the biologically alert, it is a land of many resources worth preserving.

One of the most interesting areas of the state is the sprawling semi-wilderness north of Houston and Beaumont that goes by the name of Big Thicket. A region of extraordinary botanical exuberance, the Thicket is ecologically unique not only to Texas, but to the entire North American expanse as well. Located at the crossroads between the forests of the South and East and the vegetation of the West, the Thicket includes in its pine-hardwood stands elements from all convergent zones. A wet climate and a water-storing soil combine to nurture the mixture to lushness. Fully 15 of the trees designated by the United States as "national champions" are from the Thicket, including longleaf pine, American holly, black hickory, Texas honey locust, sweet bay magnolia, Rugel sugar maple, and water tupelo. The fauna is no less impressive. Vertebrates, and particularly birds, abound in number and kind, and the diversity of arthropods is second to few that I have encountered in field work in 45 states and three other continents.

But sheer abundance or record sizes is not what matters about the Thicket. It is the way in which diversity of kind is combined with diversity of association that gives the area its special mark. Plant communities of very different types exist in contiguity or near-contiguity in the Thicket—upland communities, savannahs, beech-magnolia communities, bogs, palmetto–bald cypress–hardwood communities, floodplain forests, and several others have been recognized. Seen in worldwide ecological perspective, the Big Thicket may well be one of the most richly substructured regions in existence. For this reason alone, if not also for its magnificence, the Thicket is worth saving. It is an invaluable and irreplaceable natural resource.

Today, after years of encroachment upon the area, mostly through lumbering, only about a tenth of the original 3.5 million acres of the Thicket remains in a state that can be called wild or semiwild. But the remnant includes much of what is most valuable in the Thicket, and its preservation should be assured now. Creating a Big Thicket National Park is an obvious and immediately practicable solution, and there are welcome signs these days that legislators, lumbermen, and conservationists have begun to agree on the need for a park. But what remains unsettled is whether the park will encompass sufficient acreage to ensure its survival. The consensus among scientists who recently petitioned the government—a total of several hundred from almost 30 states, including some of the most prominent biologists in the nation—is that at least 200,000 acres will need to be set aside for the preserve. It is to be hoped that this judgment will be appropriately weighted.—THOMAS EISNER, *Division of Biological Sciences, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14850*

EDITOR'S NOTE: Prospects for the establishment of a 200,000-acre park appear virtually nil. Up until last year, Representative Bob Eckhardt (D-Tex.) was proposing a park that would embrace 191,000 acres. But political opposition to this proposal was such that Eckhardt and the Big Thicket Association (the Texas group that has been pressing for the establishment of the park) reluctantly agreed to a less ambitious alternative: a park limited to 100,000 acres that would take in the land along the several streams that traverse the Big Thicket region—the objective being to preserve the floodplains, where much of the most unusual flora and fauna are found.

On 11 January 1973, Senator Lloyd Bentsen (D–Tex.) introduced a bill that would establish a 100,000-acre park but that would allow the National Park Service to define the boundaries. The guess here is that the park as proposed by the Park Service would be made up of contiguous lands—something quite different from what Eckhardt and the Big Thicket Association have in mind. Opposition on the part of timber interests and some residents of the Big Thicket region to the establishment of a large park is sufficiently strong that, unless the park proponents can agree on a common approach, there may be no park at all.