

# Trekking Back in Time

**Proposed trail to teach people about different cultures, natural resources.**

*--Yolanda Lukaszewski, Agricultural Communications*



**Texas A&M researchers have proposed a plan to create a living history museum along a five-mile stretch of land along the Medina River. The proposed project would help the public learn about how people from the Americas used the land in the past, as well as appreciate the diverse plant and wildlife in the area.**

For hundreds of years, people traveled the Camino Real, or the King's Highway, between Mexico City and the Mississippi Valley. The Camino Real and its network of roads merged in San Antonio, making the city a cultural, political, economic and religious hub for colonial Spain.

It might eventually be possible to see what life was like for Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics and European immigrants who traveled on or lived near the Camino Real. Researchers from Texas A&M University have proposed a plan to create a living history museum on a tract of land southwest of San Antonio. The five-mile-long trail would run along the Medina River, between Highway 16 and Laredo Road, and could provide opportunities for people to learn about different cultures and to enjoy the natural resources of the area.

"The proposed Land Heritage Institute of the Americas would allow us to look at how people from the Americas used the land and made their living in South Texas," said Alston Thoms, director of the Center for Ecological Archaeology at Texas A&M University and a coordinator of the Land Heritage Institute of the Americas (LHIA) assessment project.

The LHIA project was proposed after the Applewhite Reservoir Project, located on the Medina River in San Antonio, was canceled. Texas A&M had been involved in assessing this Medina River property since 1989, when the Center for Ecological Archaeology was contracted to survey the site for archaeological or cultural remains. After the reservoir project was canceled, the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) gave citizens a chance to voice their ideas on what should be done with the 2,000 acres of land originally acquired for the

reservoir. Building upon this citizen input, Texas A&M presented a proposal to SAWS for a LHIA as a way for the property to be used. Texas A&M assessed the cultural and natural resources of the property, which SAWS funded, and recommended how to use the resources if SAWS decided to move forward with the LHIA project.

The Center for Ecological Archaeology headed the teams assessing the proposed LHIA project site and involved researchers from the Institute for Science, Technology and Public Policy in the George Bush School of Government and Public Service, the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station and the departments of architecture, wildlife and fisheries sciences, rangeland ecology and management, recreation, park and tourism sciences and agricultural engineering.

"The impact of a project like this could go beyond Texas," said Dale Whittaker, associate department head of agricultural engineering and coordinator of the team recommending educational facilities for the proposed LHIA. In its fullest extent, he said, the project could have meaning for Mexico and the southern part of the United States because the public would be able to learn about the cultures of immigrants, slaves, cash-crop farmers and Spanish ranchers. This could be done through formal programs such as heirloom gardening, cultural festivals and living history demonstrations, as well as through interpretive trails.

Ninety-one sites with archaeological artifacts were discovered on the Medina River property, many of which were discovered by the Center for Ecological Archaeology. Thirty-six of those sites were found on the proposed LHIA site: six ranching and farming sites, 16 Native American hunting and gathering sites and 14 farming-ranching/hunting-gathering sites. The sites include the Presnall-Watson House, built in 1853, which could serve as the initial visitor's center, and the Applewhite home ruin from the middle 1800s, which illustrates antebellum and sharecropper lifestyles.

Four biogeographic areas of Texas -- the Blackland Prairie, Edwards Plateau, South Texas brush country and the Post Oak Savanna -- come together in San Antonio, bringing together plants and animals from those regions, said Fred Smeins, professor of rangeland ecology who worked on the natural resources section of the project.

This convergence of different regions, along with the river running through the area and the topographic and soil diversity, yield high plant and animal diversity, he said. Alligators, wild turkeys, javelina hogs, whitetail deer and more than 150 species of game and songbirds are found along the Medina River.

"It's a unique area biologically, with archaeological diversity from thousands of years ago happening all in one place," Smeins said.

The plan would involve buying the land between the sites Texas A&M inventoried and the Highway 16 site that the San Antonio City Parks and Recreation Department wants to develop for a LHIA. Such a purchase would create a five-mile stretch of land that the A&M team recommends making into a greenway. This trail could provide opportunities for hiking and access to camping and fishing. A shorter, interpretive trail could loop around the Presnall-Watson house.

With Texas A&M's assessment, SAWS can decide how to proceed in turning this section of property into a living museum for the community.

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