

## **East Foundation and the Future of Land Stewardship**

**By Maria Regueiro**

*East Foundation*

At Texan by Nature, we believe that every Texan has a role in conservation, and we're proud to uplift partners like **East Foundation** that protect rangeland and our agricultural heritage. As an Agricultural Research Organization (ARO), East Foundation works with academic institutions, corporate sponsors, and conservation partners to create innovative efforts that benefit entire communities. Across their six ranches in South Texas, East Foundation has conserved 217,000 acres that serve as a living lab of sustainable management practices and land stewardship.



### **Tell us about East Foundation and its mission.**

East Foundation promotes the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education. We manage more than 217,000 acres of native South Texas rangeland, operated as six separate ranches in Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, and Willacy counties. Our land is a working laboratory where scientists and managers address challenges important to wildlife management, rangeland health, and ranch productivity. We ensure that ranching and wildlife management work together to conserve healthy rangelands.

### **How do you see East Foundation shaping the future of Texas conservation?**

At East Foundation, we are shaping the future of land stewardship in three key ways, beginning with our role as cattle ranchers managing native rangelands in South Texas, where we implement and document management practices for ourselves and as a demonstration to other land stewards. Our science program works alongside our ranching operation to discover mechanisms that support landscape function for livestock and wildlife populations, develop management solutions, and document outcomes — ultimately enabling better decisions for better future outcomes. Our most visible

contribution comes through our education program, where we foster awareness of working lands' importance to society and develop informed future professionals and leaders by creating meaningful experiences for students from fifth grade through high school and beyond.

**East Foundation stands as a truly one-of-a-kind organization that integrates ranching, science, and education to create a powerful synergy. What sets us apart is our ability to implement land stewardship practices firsthand, rigorously test them through scientific inquiry, and then share those experiences and outcomes with others.**

**— Tina Buford, Director of Education**

**What do you think is the most pressing challenge facing land stewardship today, and how can organizations like yours lead the way in addressing it?**

Perhaps the most pressing challenge facing land stewardship today is the loss of working lands and the conservation value they create for society. East Foundation addresses this challenge by enhancing the sustainability of working lands stewardship, reducing the economic pressures that lead to land fragmentation and conversion. We also work to increase societal knowledge and awareness of these landscapes' importance, helping people understand how working lands contribute to their daily lives through ecosystem services, food production, and cultural heritage. By demonstrating viable models of sustainable land management backed by science, we provide a pathway for preserving these vital landscapes for future generations.

**What's one piece of advice you would give to others looking to create meaningful change in this field?**

Be a mentor and an advocate — the future is bright so long as we can enable those that come after us to be better than ourselves. While this approach is playing a “long game,” our most significant impacts are often through those we have taught, enabled, and inspired through genuine engagement and care. Creating opportunities for the next generation of land stewards starts by cultivating a passion and commitment that will sustain our working lands for generations to come.



*Ranch in South Texas. Photo by Knox Kronenberg.*

**What are some examples of your projects or programs?**

Our “Behind the Gates” education programs offer experiences through classroom learning, field lessons on our working cattle ranches, and virtual interactions. These multifaceted educational initiatives connect students directly to the land while teaching them about ranching, wildlife, and land stewardship — ultimately sparking interest in conservation and their South Texas communities. Simultaneously, our holistic research that directly advances sustainable management practices that balance ecological function, wildlife conservation, and livestock productivity is exemplified in our Coloraditas Grazing Research and Demonstration program. We work to integrate our education and science-based approaches, with the goal of building a strong foundation and passion that’s needed to sustain working lands for generations to come.

**What emerging opportunities or technologies do you see having the biggest potential to advance your mission?**

We can’t manage what we can’t measure — and flawed metrics can lead to bad decisions in land stewardship. Emerging technologies that combine remote or low-touch data gathering with advanced computational methods like machine learning and AI will allow us to process very large datasets and dramatically improve our decision-making and stewardship practices. Perhaps even more importantly, these technologies can lead to better and clearer communication with public stakeholders about the value and impact of conservation efforts in meaningful and reliable ways. By leveraging these technological advances, we can bridge the gap between scientific understanding and public appreciation of working lands’ contributions to society.



*Conservation education with a school in South Texas. Photo by Jonathan Vail.*

**How can individuals or businesses best support the kind of work your organization is doing?**

To best support our work, we encourage individuals to actively share information about our programs with individuals who could benefit from our work. We also encourage engaging with our literature and sharing our resources within your networks to help spread awareness and build a community of informed advocates who understand the importance of our land stewardship mission. Additionally, we value strategic partnerships and sponsorships — we couldn't accomplish near the magnitude that we're able to without the help of our valued supporters. Finally, those with specialized knowledge or industry connections can inquire about volunteering as mentors or guest speakers, offering students real-world insights and valuable professional relationships that extend beyond the classroom.

At Texan by Nature, **our vision is a future where every business, every Texan, participates in conservation.** Supporting partners like East Foundation helps make this vision a reality – for people, prosperity, and our natural resources.