

David Baker Receives the Texas Environmental Excellence Award

David Baker has been recognized by the for his leadership in conservation of the well-loved natural landmark known as Jacob's Well by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. He is the state winner in the Individual category for their 2011 Texas Environmental Excellence Awards.

The Texas Environmental Excellence Awards celebrate the bold efforts of citizens, communities, businesses, and organizations to preserve and protect the Texas environment.

Although Jacob's Well flowed freely during the 1950's drought-of-record, it tragically stopped for the first time in the summer of 2000. With a predicted local growth rate of 419% by 2050, impending legislation allowing for a 30-foot drawdown of the Trinity Aquifer, and a newly permitted golf course development, the spring is in extreme peril. "Water from Jacob's Well is being mined at rates that can't be sustained. Land protection, water conservation, and sustainable water policy have all become imperative to the future Jacob's Well, and for all of our states water resources," states Baker. His vision and level of commitment to saving Jacob's Well are extraordinary. If David Baker didn't exist, Jacob's Well would have gone the way of the other 63 historically significant springs in Texas – that is, "altogether failed". (*Larry McKinney, The State of the Springs, TPWD Magazines. July 2008*)

Jacob's Well emerges from one of the longest underground caves in Texas and is the sole source of the Cypress Creek that flows through Wimberley. Historically, the spring gushed up several feet high, and was the life-blood to indigenous peoples. It powered the original Wimberley-Winters Mill that fueled the town. Currently, the well is the home of rare aquatic species and a source of water for local wildlife. To the community, it is a natural heritage site of magnificent proportions - a gathering site for weddings, memorials, countless hours of enjoyment, and moments of introspection. Time spent at Jacob's Well has been transformative in many people's lives.

David and his family purchased the land around the well, which included two rock houses and a portion of Jacob's Well, in the 1980's. David's son was nine months old when they moved to the property, and coincidentally named Jacob. His daughter Jessie was born and raised in the little rock house above the spring. The family opened the Dancing Waters Inn to share David's artwork and the beauty of the spring with the public. "I knew something had to be done to insure that Jessie and Jake's children and grandchildren would still be able to enjoy swimming in the crystal clear spring water of Jacob's Well."

Evidence showed that the spring had been flowing for thousands of years, but as aquifer pumping became more expansive, pollution and bacterial levels continued to rise. The great spring was becoming severely degraded. Being too painful to watch, David set out on a journey not only filled with great joy and reward, but also heartbreak, stress, and sleepless nights.

In 1996 he partnered with landowners and community leaders to form the non-profit Wimberley Valley Watershed Association. Their first task was a successful effort to stop the local utility company from discharging sewage into Cypress Creek. The second was to negotiate with the 120 landowners and raise the funds necessary to purchase the 46 acres surrounding the well. Handed difficult negotiations, lawsuits, and funding challenges, Baker held onto the vision of a clean, clear, and flowing Jacob's Well.

With the help of Hays County Commissioners and The Nature Conservancy, David and the WVWA next purchased the neighboring 50 acres. This not only protected the sensitive recharge area, but also halted the development of 65 condos and a hotel. As part of the effort to consolidate the property into a single preserve, David made the difficult choice to give up ownership of the home that he had built to the WVWA.

Besides being a visionary, David is exceptionally collaborative with dozens of partner organizations, resource agencies and local stakeholder groups, believing that the management of water and land is best handled by engaging with the local community.

Currently, he is the Vice-President of the Hays Trinity Groundwater Conservation District, and serves as Vice President of the Hill Country Alliance. He leads the WVWA in developing expansive research programs, and is working to develop a Watershed Protection Plan for Cypress Creek. Throughout, he has been a strong advocate for community education, conservation incentives, and sustainable water management policies – an extremely challenging task for an already over appropriated aquifer in one of the fastest growing Counties in Texas.

David has been instrumental in developing outreach programs such as weekly public tours of the well, school programs, and community events. He initiated a volunteer program to support these efforts, which has attracted a group of inspiring and dedicated individuals and organizations that help deliver the message of conservation.

Jacob's Well has now stopped flowing three times in the last decade, making his work undeniably critical. Often working under enormous pressure, David has devoted himself to bringing together contentious factions across the region to plan for aquifer management solutions that balance the impacts of growth. "Even though the future of water and the aquifer feels tenuous at best, the reality of diminished spring flows is undisputable." David says, "When I sit down to negotiate with those who have opposing viewpoints I feel that the wisdom of our shared humanity will ultimately lead us to cooperate and work together, hopefully before the well runs dry."

In the face of seemingly impossible tasks, his dedication and commitment to connect to a higher purpose remains clear. The future of water in this state still remains a question but one thing is certain: David Baker will be remembered as hero for generations to come, and today he has earned deep gratitude from the people of Texas.