

For Immediate Release

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Hill Country Leaders Gather in Dripping Springs for 2022 Hill Country Leadership Summit – Our Shared Stories: Past, Present, and Future

On Thursday, September 29th, conservation leaders from across the Texas Hill Country met at The Hall at Jester King Brewery for the Hill Country Alliance’s annual Leadership Summit. The event theme, ***Our Shared Stories: Past, Present, and Future***, brought together more than 250 attendees – both online and in-person – eager to learn about conservation strategies, discuss complex natural resource challenges and solutions, and connect with community leaders across the Hill Country. Attendees ranged from college students to professionals across the conservation, development, and county government spaces.

Morning sessions started with an inspiring panel on storytelling, bringing together Juan Martinez-Pineda from The Aspen Institute, Maria Rocha from the Indigenous Cultures Institute, Katy Baldock from Fin & Fur Films, and Vanessa Torres from The National Parks Service. This panel discussed the variety of perspectives each person brings to conservation, ways to engage new and changing audiences in the outdoors, and the intrinsic ties between the natural world and culture. Rocha, an elder of the Miakan-Garza Band of the Coahuiltecan people, spoke to this connection. “According to archaeologists, our story goes back at least 14,000 years, but according to our people it goes back to the very beginning.” Rocha shared more on “Napako,” the Coahuiltecan creation story, as well as the indigenous history behind the four great springs of Texas and reminded attendees that “We are all living on sacred lands - this Hill Country, the springs, all throughout Texas...we’re all now the stewards of that ancient story.”

The opening panel was followed by a presentation from Judge Bella Rubio of Real County. Judge Rubio raised several issues that are impacting the western, less populated, Hill Country counties, noting, “We have so much to offer, and we need to protect what we have.” Issues she highlighted included telecommunications, local business development, tourism, and rivers running low during the drought.

Keynote speaker David Buggs, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, spoke on “Different Shades of Green,” highlighting both the need to engage diverse audiences and to actively foster a sense of belonging in our state parks, environmental work, and conservation as a whole amid changing state demographics.

“Don’t do anything for me without me,” Buggs stressed, to illustrate how crucial it is to seek out new partners from historically excluded communities and to fully engage with the diversity of Texas. “We need to share the bounty of this land as well as the responsibility of its stewardship.” Buggs challenged attendees to identify one goal to bring back to their organizations, to set a timeline, and to hold

themselves accountable for getting it done – taking care to note that the answer “is not ‘Let’s talk about this some more.’”

Carolyn Chipman Evans, CEO of the [Cibolo Center for Conservation](#) and David Baker, Founder & Executive Director of the [Watershed Association](#) and [Art4Water](#) were honored with the Heart of the Hill Country Award to recognize and celebrate their work championing and stewarding the natural resources of our region. Chipman Evans and Baker have both spent decades working within their communities to preserve our region’s unique resources and to educate and inspire others to do the same. Both honorees were presented with a beautiful award, designed and crafted by Hill Country artist J.J. Priour using Cordova limestone and glass.

Afternoon sessions included a presentation on emerging research from Angelica Lopez, Ph.D. of Texas A&M University’s Natural Resource Institute. Dr. Lopez presented the Institute’s recent research into water equity in the Hill Country. Dr. Lopez noted that along with a [full report](#) released earlier this year, the Natural Resource Institute also has created a [data visualization tool](#) available on their website, which can be used to analyze multiple aspects of their research areas including land development, access to water, and demographics of the area. In-person surveys involved in the project also allowed researchers to hear the voices of people impacted by different forms of water inequity – in particular, flooding, water quality issues, and a lack of access to safe drinking water – “voices that are often left out of these kinds of conversations.”

A panel on spring flows highlighted the state of springs in the Hill Country and steps communities can take to keep their springs flowing as demand on our region’s aquifers continues to rise. This panel was moderated by Vanessa Puig-Williams of the Environmental Defense Fund (and current Chair of the Hill Country Alliance Board of Directors) and featured Dr. Robert Mace, Executive Director of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment and Mitchell Sodek, General Manager of the Central Texas Groundwater Conservation District. The panelists emphasized the importance of engaging with local Groundwater Conservation Districts (GCDs) and continuing to develop the science to better understand groundwater-surface water interactions.

A series of lightning-round talks preceded the final panel of the day - a conversation with regional elected officials, moderated by Hill Country Alliance board member David Yeates. State Representative Erin Zwiener (Hays and Blanco Counties), Kendall County Commissioner Don Durden, and Kimble County Judge-elect Hal Rose sat together, discussing their views on issues that span the Hill Country – focusing on growth, its challenges, and tools available for community planning. As Judge-elect Hal Rose of Junction stated, “It starts at a local level...no elected official is ever going to agree with you on everything, but if you don’t make your voice heard, they’ll never start.”

The event was hosted at The Hall at Jester King and Jester King Brewery served as the 2022 Summit’s signature sponsor and host. The full event was recorded and streamed live to online attendees across the Hill Country and beyond, thanks to the sponsorship of the Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation. The

first panel on storytelling is recorded and publicly available at <https://bit.ly/HCAStorytelling22>. Additional recordings will be shared through the [Hill Country Alliance YouTube Channel](#) and website.

The Hill Country Alliance is a nonprofit organization, bringing together a diverse coalition of partners to preserve the open spaces, starry night skies, clean and abundant waters, and unique character of the Texas Hill Country. Visit us at www.hillcountryalliance.org.

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