

# National Wetlands Awards Past-Recipient Spotlight: John Bunker Sands

John Bunker Sands, the 1996 National Wetlands Awards winner for land stewardship and conservation, continues to have a strong influence over land management practices. He was recognized for his efforts in restoring wetlands on his family's property, Rosewood Ranches. Bunker had successfully converted 2,000 acres of his cattle ranch into a holistic ranch. His work provided essential nesting and wintering areas for migratory birds, in addition to conserving water. This unique approach to land management was based on a holistic method that takes into account the impacts on land, people, and economics.

Although he passed away in 2003, the legacy of Bunker Sands still permeates the North Texas region. "There was this feeling that his work was left undone. This work was just not finished," recalled the John Bunker Sands Wetland Center's director, John DeFillipo.

A partnership was formed in 2004 between Bunker's family and the North Texas Municipal Water District (NTMWD) to build a new concept of water recycling using the wetlands that he had created. This produced the East Fork Wetland Project, a system that uses the wetlands as a tertiary treatment system to meet an increasing demand for water in the region. This system uses the same types of native plants that Bunker had planted previously in order to filter the water. Some of these plants include spikerush, flatsedges, crowfoot sedge, swamp smartweed, and softstem bulrush. This past sum-

mer, the project pumped through 60 million gallons of water per day and effectively prevented the need for the NTMWD to build a new reservoir. The collaboration between Bunker's

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family and the NTWMD created a "new legacy of water—production of water, recycling of water, reuse of

water, and the education of how this research can promote more conservation," John explained, "Wetland and water conservation have now become synonymous with each other." The success of the partnership demonstrates how the Sands family was able to maximize the use of their property and contribute to the community's benefit as a result.

Bunker's family later decided to expand his legacy further by building a nature center on the property in his name. In 2010, the John Bunker Sands Wetland Center was founded to reflect and extend Bunker's vision of conservation. The Wetland Center builds upon his environmental stewardship with a mission that focuses on education and research, wetland systems, water systems, and wildlife



Image 1: Boardwalk reflections at the John Bunker Sands Wetland Center. Photo provided courtesy of the JBS Wetland Center.



Image 2: High school field study at the John Bunker Sands Wetland Center. Photo provided courtesy of JBS Wetland Center.

management. The Center offers a variety of educational programs and research opportunities that move beyond a traditional classroom. This unique field studies program splits into five categories: wetland ecology; water conservation; plant ecology; bird adaptation; and wildlife management. It aims to create an environment of not just learning, but one of exploration and observation, as well. Students are able to discover the wetland and collect field samples to conduct water quality tests. John pointed out an advantage of the field studies program by explaining that it “opens up that window in the

students’ minds and they think of something as a career that they never thought about before.” By exposing students to hands-on field exploration, the education program teaches them the importance of wetlands and fosters an interest for conservation as well. John explained that his primary goal for the education program was for students to leave knowing three things, “What is a wetland? Why is it important to conserve wetlands and water? Who is John Bunker Sands?”

As a unique and biologically diverse environment, the wetlands act as a living laboratory that provides numerous opportunities for

research. Graduate students from local universities have already begun taking advantage of the diverse range of research opportunities available. Research projects conducted at the wetlands include studies on evaporation, metal accumulation in sediment, and a survey on baseline wildlife. John hopes that the Center’s research programs will continue to grow through long-term partnerships with local universities and organizations that wish to utilize the wetlands as a laboratory.

The growth of education and research opportunities works to expand Bunker’s original principles of conservation and land stewardship. Its activities continue to expand Bunker’s legacy through increased research and education efforts designed to benefit the community. A goal is that the education programs will serve as a template for other regions by leading the effort to incorporate hands-on field studies into schools. The Center plans to reevaluate its programs each year in order to remain adaptable to future environmental issues that will arise. John emphasized that the partnership between Bunker’s family and the NTMWD took on the legacy of when he was alive and extended it in a way that he probably never conceived. “I think Bunker would have been very proud to establish these education and research programs that do what he loved so much, which was conservation.” ■

— Tiffany Ngo