

OUR SHARED STORIES: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

SPEAKER INFORMATION - IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE



Katherine Romans, Executive Director – Hill Country Alliance

Katherine brings a decade of nonprofit and legislative experience to the Hill Country Alliance. She worked for several years as a legislative aide for the Committee on Natural Resources within the US House of Representatives and has spearheaded programming at both local and regional conservation nonprofits. Katherine holds a Masters from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, is currently the Chair of the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network, and serves on the board of the Hill Country Land Trust.



María F. Rocha, Board of Elders – Indigenous Cultures Institute

María is an elder of the Miakan-Garza Band of the Coahuiltecan people, a state-legislature-recognized tribe of Texas. She co-founded and served as the executive director of Indigenous Cultures Institute since 2006, and retired in 2022 to serve on the Board of Elders of this nonprofit. Maria co-authored “Yana Wana’s Legend of the Bluebonnet” a play for young audiences published in 2021 by Dramatic Publishing and is working on a children’s book about the Coahuiltecan creation story to be published by A&M Press.



Juan D. Martinez-Pineda, Senior Manager, Forum for Community Solutions – The Aspen Institute

Juan is the founder of Fresh Tracks, a community-led cross-cultural revolution, rooted in the healing power of the outdoors. Prior to Fresh Tracks, he served as Vice President at the Children & Nature Network and co-founded the Natural Leaders Network. Juan was named a National Geographic Explorer in 2011 and a member of the inaugural class of The Explorers Club 50 in 2021, for his work to engage the rising generation of youth to the healing power of the outdoors and culture. He serves on the boards of Mountainfilm, Texas Children in Nature Network, and the Governing Council of The Wilderness Society.



Vanessa Torres, Program Manager for Interpretation, Education, and Community Engagement – Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park and Waco Mammoth National Monument

Vanessa currently serves as the Program Manager for Interpretation, Education and Community Engagement for Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park and Waco Mammoth National Monument. Prior to her role in Texas, Vanessa served as the Deputy Program Manager of Visitor Services at Lincoln Home National Historic Site, as the Los Angeles District Supervisor for Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, and as the Youth Program Analyst for the Department of Interior’s Youth, Partnerships and Service under the Office of the Secretary.



Katy Baldock, Producer, Deep in the Heart – Fin & Fur Films

Katy is a film producer, writer, and graphic designer based in Austin, Texas. She has a passion for conservation and visual storytelling, aiming to use creative outlets as a tool to advocate for the protection of natural environments and wildlife. She is a proud East Texas native and studied communications, journalism, and art at Texas A&M University. Katy is a Producer for the Texas natural history film Deep in the Heart, was Associate Producer for the Emmy-nominated feature documentary The River and the Wall, Produced American Ocelot, and assists with various production needs for Fin and Fur Films Productions.



Leah Cuddeback, Storytelling & Public Engagement Manager – Hill Country Alliance

Leah graduated from Texas State University in 2018 with a BS in Wildlife Biology and a passion for outreach after spending nearly a decade in science education at the Saint Louis Zoo, El Ranchito at The Shield Ranch, and The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment. Leah joined the Hill Country Alliance in October of 2018 and stepped into a full-time role as the Storytelling and Public Engagement Manager in the summer of 2021. Leah lives in Hays County and serves as the Vice-Chair for the Wimberley Parks Board.



Judge Bella Rubio — Real County

Judge Rubio is a fourth-generation resident, born and raised in Real County. She attended school at the Leakey Independent School District in Leakey, Texas from Kindergarten until she graduated in May of 1979. In 1996, she was elected the position of County and District Clerk of Real County. During her tenure as Clerk, she served on several State-wide committees until retirement in 2016. In 2015, she was selected “Clerk of the Year” for the State of Texas by her Clerk colleagues. In 2018, she was honored and humbled to be

elected as Real County’s first Hispanic and female Judge.



David Buggs, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer – Texas Parks & Wildlife Department

Mr. Buggs is the Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), an agency of the state of Texas. He earned his MBA from Baylor University in Waco, Texas and a B.S. in Marketing from Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. His role is developing and managing the execution of TPWD’s Diversity and Inclusion strategy. David is an accomplished cultural compliance and management professional with years of experience in relationship building, leadership development,

mentoring, training, and executive coaching.



Angelica Lopez, Research Scientist – Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute

Dr. Angelica Lopez joined the Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute as a research associate in 2010. Her research interests are in rural sociology and underrepresented groups, environmental and natural resource attitudes, behaviors and participation constraints, human dimensions of natural resources, borderlands and program evaluation. A native Texan, Angelica studied animal science, agricultural education, rural sociology and recreation park and tourism sciences with an emphasis on community engagement.



Vanessa Puig-Williams, Texas Water Program Director – Environmental Defense Fund

Vanessa Puig-Williams is an attorney and the Director of the Texas Water Program at the Environmental Defense Fund. Vanessa joined the Board of Directors for the Hill Country Alliance in 2017 and currently serves as the President. She also serves as a board member of the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association.



Dr. Robert Mace, Executive Director – The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University

Robert Mace is the Executive Director and Chief Water Policy Officer of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment and a Professor of Practice in the Department of Geography at Texas State University. Robert has over 30 years of experience in hydrology, hydrogeology, stakeholder processes, and water policy, mostly in Texas. Robert has a B.S. in Geophysics and an M.S. in Hydrology from the New Mexico Institute of Mining and

Technology and a Ph.D. in Hydrogeology from The University of Texas at Austin.



Mitchell Sodek, General Manager – Central Texas Groundwater Conservation District

Mitchell has been with the District since 2010, previously serving as the District Hydrologist for 7 years. As the General Manager, Mitchell performs well registrations and permitting, creation and implementation of the management plan, rule development, and well compliance. Mitchell serves as a representative on the GMA 8 and Region K boards and has a B.S. in Environmental Engineering from Tarleton State University and an M.S. in Geographic Information Systems from Penn State University.



David Bezanson, Associate Director of Land Protection – The Nature Conservancy, Texas

David is the Associate Director of Land Protection for The Nature Conservancy’s Texas Chapter, working to acquire land and conservation easements statewide. He also served as Interim Director of Government Relations from 2021-22. Prior to his work with TNC, David was formerly executive director of the Texas Land Conservancy.



Melissa Parker, Rivers Program Leader – Texas Parks & Wildlife Department

Melissa has enjoyed working alongside private landowners and other conservation partners to conserve Texas rivers, riparian areas, and watersheds for over 25 years with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. As the TPWD Rivers Program Leader, she assists the River Access and Conservation Coordinator with implementing new Texas Paddling Trails and sustainable river access sites, the River Studies Team in assessing river health and biodiversity, and the Watershed Conservation Team in implementing technical guidance and landscape initiatives to improve the health and function of creeks and rivers.



Julie Lewey, Deputy Director – Nueces River Authority

Julie Lewey is a 7th-generation Texan and lifelong river steward. She grew up on the banks of the Nueces River under the tutelage of a renowned conservation leader. She’s privileged to carry on the family legacy and efforts to protect and preserve Texas’ rivers. Julie joined both the Nueces River Authority and the HCA Board in 2022, after serving as the Executive Director of The Devils River Conservancy.



Soll Sussman, Board Member – Hays County Friends of the Night Sky

Soll Sussman is a board member of Hays County Friends of the Night Sky and Central Texas Outreach Coordinator for IDA Texas. Soll also works as a consultant developing cross-border partnerships related to energy and the environment in the United States and Mexico. Previously, he worked at the Texas General Land Office (for 21 years) specializing in sustainable energy.



April Sansom, Executive Director – Selah, Bamberger Ranch Preserve

April holds a PhD in Environment and Resources from the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Prior to her work at Selah, Bamberger Ranch Preserve, April served as Executive Director of an international community-based conservation organization based in Wisconsin. Before graduate school, April lived in the Philippines for over three years, first as a United States Peace Corps Volunteer and then as a Community Organizer for the Philippines program of Conservation International.



Zach Spector, Associate Director of Conservation Programs – Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation

Prior to joining TPWF in 2022, Zach worked for nearly a decade at Western Rivers Conservancy, a westwide conservation real estate group based in Portland, Oregon as Government Affairs & Northwest Program Director. During his tenure, Zach was responsible for conserving over 20,000 acres in both fee simple and conservation easement and helping secure tens of millions of dollars in public funding. Zach has a joint

MBA and MS from the University of Colorado at Boulder, with a focus on conservation real estate and finance, and a BA from Vanderbilt University.



David Yeates, Board Member – Hill Country Alliance

David Yeates served for seven years as Chief Executive Officer of Texas Wildlife Association, a statewide organization with approximately 10,000 members. TWA focuses on natural resource education, hunter recruitment and retention, while maintaining a robust advocacy presence at the Texas Capitol. Before his time at TWA and since, he has worked in community banking around the state and presently in New Braunfels.



Representative Erin Zwiener, Texas House District 45 – Hays and Blanco Counties

Erin Zwiener is an author, educator, and conservationist who is currently serving her second term in the Texas House of Representatives. Rep. Zwiener serves on the House Committees on Public Health, House Administration, and Appropriations, where she is the Vice Chair of the Subcommittee on Article III (Education). She is a member of the House Democratic Caucus, LGBTQ Caucus, Criminal Justice Reform Caucus, Women's Health Caucus, and IT Caucus. In January of 2021, Rep. Zwiener established the Caucus on Climate, Environment, and the Energy Industry and currently serves as its Chair.



Judge-elect Hal Rose – Kimble County

Hal Rose is running unopposed after winning the Republican primary for Kimble County judge and will take office January 1, 2023. He currently is the principal in Rose Law Office, PLLC. Hal has 32 years in legal practice with an emphasis in criminal, civil, and family law, business formation and transactions, real estate and agricultural law, mergers and acquisitions and related legal issues. Rose earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin, a J.D. from Southern Methodist University (SMU), and completed the SMU Cox School of Business Management Development Program.



Don Durden, County Commissioner Precinct 4 – Kendall County

After working for a small consulting firm for six years, Don founded Civil Engineering Consultants (CEC) and built it into one of the largest engineering and surveying firms in San Antonio. He has served as a member of the Comfort ISD school board; was appointed by Governor Perry to the Bexar Metropolitan Water District Legislative Oversight Committee; and served as Chairman of the Texas Council of Engineering Companies. He is currently the County Commissioner for Precinct 4 in Kendall County, where he is leading a countywide transportation planning effort.