

Interpretive Guide to:

GOVERNMENT CANYON

STATE NATURAL AREA



IT'S ALL ABOUT WATER AT GOVERNMENT CANYON STATE NATURAL AREA. AS A KARST PRESERVE, WE'RE HELPING PROTECT THE QUALITY AND SUPPLY OF FRESH WATER FOR CENTRAL TEXAS. AS A STATE NATURAL AREA, OUR MISSION IS PRESERVING THIS KARST ENVIRONMENT AS WELL AS MANY OTHER NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES FOUND HERE, INCLUDING ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT, DINOSAUR TRACKS, AND MANY HISTORIC SITES.



As a State Natural Area, our primary mission at Government Canyon is protection of our natural and cultural resources, including the Recharge Zone and accompanying karst landscape, wildlife habitat, native plants, sensitive archeological areas, ancient dinosaur tracks, and more.

We encourage you to get to know our site. Attend an interpretive program, go on one of our many hikes, join our family of volunteers or simply stop a staff member and have a chat! You'll gain a greater appreciation of your natural area and you may even want to get involved in some of the ways we're working to make a difference for all Texans at Government Canyon.

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Karst features of the Recharge Zone do not filter the water, making the aquifer vulnerable to pollution and contamination.

WHAT IS KARST?

In San Antonio, most of our fresh water comes from only one source: the Edwards Aquifer. Rain recharges this aquifer when it falls on a karst landscape. “Karst” describes a landscape where rainwater dissolves a type of limestone, forming connected cavities. These passageways allow for the movement and subterranean storage of that same rainwater. Karst helps rainwater find its way underground.

The Edwards Aquifer has three zones: the Contributing, Recharge, and Artesian zones. The Contributing Zone catches rain falling on the canyons and plateaus and moves it downhill to the Recharge Zone. There, karst features like cracks and caves swallow vast amounts of water, allowing for rapid recharge of the aquifer. Underground water flows to the Artesian Zone through a series of connected spaces, ranging from tiny pores to large caverns. Finally, the rainwater discharges as a natural spring, or is removed through man-made wells.

Government Canyon State Natural Area protects thousands of acres of Recharge Zone, as well as portions of Contributing and Artesian zones.

View toward the San Antonio skyline from Chula Vista Overlook.

IT'S ALL ABOUT WATER

Water has shaped the stories of this landscape from the beginning. Around 110 million years ago, during the Cretaceous Period, water brought dinosaurs here. Two kinds of ancient giants left their tracks along what was a beach, remnants of the Gulf of Mexico's early reaches. Today, you can take a strenuous hike to a creek bed to see the tracks of theropods, carnivorous dinosaurs that walked on two legs, and the much-larger sauro-pods, who walked on four column-like legs.

Much later, Native Americans passed through the canyon, temporarily camping near springs. By the 1700s, European immigrants began exploring the canyon's floodplain area, looking for minerals and farmland. In the early 1850s, government surveyors established a military supply route through this area. The locals' nickname for the project—the “government road” that was being built through the “government's canyon”—stuck, and we call it Government Canyon to this day.

The clear springs, fertile floodplains and lush grasslands attracted and supported farming and ranching in this area from 1860 until relatively recently. Families like the Hoffmanns, Kallisons and Zizelmanns depended on the supply of fresh water to support their livelihood.

Growing awareness of San Antonio's dependence on the aquifer's fresh water caused concern about development over the Recharge Zone in the 1980s. Water started connecting people through common causes. Civic and environmental groups formed the Government Canyon Coalition in 1991, hoping to purchase this property and protect a section of rapidly disappearing Recharge Zone from further development. A State Natural Area was about to be born.



PARTNERS IN PRESERVATION

Government Canyon State Natural Area is a model for the future of public lands in Texas. A collaboration between the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, local community, and government entities set aside thousands of acres of sensitive Recharge Zone, endangered species habitat and important historic and cultural sites.

In 1991, 45 civic and environmental organizations, called the Government Canyon Coalition, partnered with the Trust for Public Land to preserve this area. Working together and pooling their resources, the Coalition and its community partners acquired 4,717 acres in 1993, setting the stage for what would eventually become one of our nation's largest metropolitan wilderness areas. This collaboration has continued, expanding the Natural Area to over 12,000 acres by 2017.

THANK YOU, PARTNERS

*Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Government Canyon Coalition
San Antonio Water System
Edwards Aquifer Authority
Trust for Public Land
City of San Antonio
Bexar County*

