The topic of land stewardship has gained a great deal of increased public attention during the past decade or so. This is a good trend since it helps focus greater awareness on the importance of how the land is treated. And it helps direct positive light on the people who own and manage the land and who carry out responsible land care.

However, land stewardship to some extent has become a catch phrase – feel-good words, that are not always well understood by those who use the term.

When words and terminology become popularized, there is a risk that the true meaning may be altered or watered down. In some ways, land stewardship is becoming an over-used slogan, lacking some, if not much, of its original character.

Before a definition is offered, it is important to note some of the common misperceptions about land stewardship. The following are three ways in which the meaning of land stewardship might be compromised:

Across America, there are many organized and collective land stewardship endeavors: land stewardship projects, programs, initiatives, ventures, etc. These are probably all good efforts that hopefully promote proper care of the land. However, it is important to understand that genuine land stewardship is an individual matter. It is not a collective project or program. Especially in Texas, land stewardship is between the landowner (or land manager) and the land.
LAND STEWARDSHIP is not merely a warm emotion or lofty ideal. It should be considered the backbone of successful ranching and wildlife management.
Secondly, land stewardship is commonly discussed in context with various land stewardship awards. These award programs are generally good, and it is proper that we recognize those who exemplify the best in land stewardship. But land stewardship is not about plaques and banquetts. Land stewardship is mostly a private matter — what happens when no one is looking and no applause is to be gained. There is a deep humility associated with authentic land stewardship.

Thirdly, land stewardship is sometimes misunderstood as being synonymous with various land improvement practices. In many cases, the listing of a suite of conservation practices has become the standard measure of land stewardship. But land stewardship is not merely a list of practices. Just because a person conducts brush management, rotational grazing, prescribed fire or other land management practices, this does not necessarily equate to land stewardship. Each of these practices can be done well or done poorly, sometimes with stewardship benefits and sometimes without.

The distinction may seem minor to some, but it is important to note the difference between conservation practices and land stewardship. Land stewardship is the inner motive that generates and guides true conservation. Land stewardship is more about who you are on the inside, rather than what you have done.

The great American conservationist Aldo Leopold is often identified as the one who describes what genuine land stewardship consists of. Leopold himself was a private landowner, and he advocated that stewardship is best carried out in a private lands context. Leopold stated that "a land ethic reflects the existence of an ecological conscience . . . which in turn produces a conviction of individual responsibility . . . and a limitation of freedom of action."

Everyone has a conscience — that internal indicator of right or wrong. The land steward has a keen and sensitive conscience toward the land, and he thinks as much about his responsibilities toward the land as he does his rights as a landowner. He or she has self-imposed limitations on what can and cannot be done with the land.

Leopold also clearly described a contrast between two groups of
people who view the land in different ways: “Group A regards the land as soil and its function as commodity production.” In his own field of forestry, Leopold says that Group A “is content to grow trees, like cabbage, with cellulose as the basic forest commodity.” In the field of wildlife management, he says that “the basic commodities are sport hunting and meat, and the yardsticks of production are ciphers of take in game.” For those in Group A, “artificial propagation is acceptable as a permanent or temporary recourse.”

Group B, according to Leopold, “regards the land as a biological complex and its function as something much broader than commodity production.” Group B is “concerned about a whole host of secondary functions, including predators, exotic species, rare species, watersheds, recreation, etc. This group manages a natural environment rather than creating an artificial one.”

If Leopold were to come to Texas today, he would still see this same dichotomy in how the land is viewed. There are many conscientious landowners in Group A; but true land stewards find their home in Group B.

Genuine land stewardship may be defined as a deeply held inner conviction that motivates landowners and land managers to care for the land, not merely for personal gain, but for future generations and for the benefit of society. The motivation of caring for the land for the benefit of others is an important distinction of the land steward. There is a great deal of benevolence involved in genuine land stewardship. It involves doing the right things in the right ways for the right reasons.

Land stewards are distinctive people among the larger group of landowners. They stand out with several characteristic qualities:

Knowledge – land stewards have a working knowledge and understanding of the land, including the soil, water, plants, animals and the ecological interrelationships of these forces. Land stewards may be self taught, or educated, but they are always searching to better comprehend how the land works.

Dedication – land stewards are highly committed to the health of the land. It is a full time lifestyle, not a pastime. Their work ethic is driven by their passion.

Perseverance – the land steward realizes...
and anticipates that there will be hardships and difficulties and has the determination to keep working toward stewardship goals, no matter what.

Investment – land stewards invest themselves, their resources, and even their families in the stewardship life; and like any wise steward, they expect a return on their investment.

Big Picture – land stewards are able to look down the road and consider the long-term, wide-angle perspective. They look to solve land problems, not merely treat symptoms. They see how their decisions affect other lands and other people.

Realistic – land stewards realize they are working with Nature and, therefore, do not call all of the shots. They do not try to artificially “improve” the land beyond what its natural capabilities are. They do not look for quick fixes or simple solutions.

Integrity – the land steward is usually a person of integrity; integrity in business dealings, with employees, with family, and integrity with his or her own convictions toward the land.

Land stewardship is not a warm fuzzy emotion. Love for the land manifests itself in concrete skills, abilities and workmanship.

Stewardship lands also share some distinctions. Stewardship lands are diverse and resilient. They are balanced, functional and self-sustaining, in an ecological sense. Stewardship lands are also productive and profitable, providing tangible products and services for mankind.

Likewise, the Texas Wildlife Association is a diverse and dynamic organization, productive and profitable, with multiple important functions. The core purposes of TWA all find their greatest fulfillment and benefit when connected to the true meaning of stewardship. Let us all strive to discover and embody the very best stewardship character in ourselves and encourage it within others.