

# GEORGE COFER

**Hill Country Conservancy**  
Executive Director

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Photo Credit: Laura Skelding

Shudde (Fath) said, “Well come with me to a meeting that’s Save Barton Creek Association.” And that was quite an eye-opener that there were people involved—actively involved, passionately involved—in protecting Barton Creek where I’d grown up swimming and fishing and kayaking and did not know it needed protecting. I was a little behind in the community conversation.

This was all in the early 1990s. Save Barton Creek Association started in 1979 and predated the Save Our Springs by thirteen years. I learned quickly from good people: former Mayor Frank Cooksey, Jackie Goodman, Jack Goodman, Shudde Fath, Mary Arnold, Bert Cromack, folks from Earth First! They were meeting weekly, talking about what we can do to protect the environment in Austin, Texas.

It was very intense in the 1990s. Monday night: Save Barton Creek Association. Tuesday night: Planning. Wednesday night: Environmental Board. Thursday night: Council. Friday night: beer drinking. And there were two to three hundred people in Austin going to those meetings and advocating for greater protection of the environment and particularly Barton Springs and the Edwards Aquifer. That was our lives.

I have a different perspective today all these thirty years later, but we truly believed that the only tool we had was to stop some of the growth in the watersheds. The city ordinances certainly would not stop the growth. And so we thought that activism—stronger ordinances—trying to educate developers, although we should have done a better job on that front—would be a good way to have less development over the Edwards Aquifer and therefore, less pollution from human activities.

**Hill Country Conservancy**  
**Executive Director 1999-Present**

**Violet Crown Trail**  
**Co-Envisioner**

**Earth Share**  
**Founding Chair 1992**

**Save Barton Creek Association**  
**1990-1993**

# GEORGE COFER CONT'D

We began to host kayaking trips down Barton Creek. And we would take City Council members, state representatives, legislative representatives, developers, and they did not realize how beautiful and unique it was. And they would all say, "We had no idea." I've had elected officials back then say, "George, I now understand why y'all are so crazy about this." And we gained a little respect there I think because, for the first time, they understood why we were proud environmental wackos. And we began then to be able to talk, once they could see our perspective. We would say, "Okay, now educate us about why you feel the need to have that kind of building there. What is driving that site selection?" And, at the end of the day, it's all about site selection. Do you really have to build that close to the creek? Why can't you move back five hundred feet and have that natural vegetative buffer at least help filter some of the runoff that's going to happen from that parking lot? So that's an example of where we began to have what I would call "common ground." The developers understood why we cared so deeply about the environment and about our positions and why we were willing to fight for them.

And we began to understand that they were willing to be more sensitive in where they put their buildings and build a greener product. But at the end of the day, the investors want a return on investment. And that was hard for us to have to acknowledge that, whether we liked it or not, they were in it for a profit and we weren't. And that was the big tension there.

We thought less development was our only recourse. And we won some battles, lost some battles. And it was very litigious. It was personal. It pretty much consumed the community of Austin, Texas for at least six or seven years. So it's hard to articulate that entire six-year story succinctly, but what I took away from that six years of activism is that I needed to be on a different path. I'll forever be grateful to Bill (Bunch) and others for starting that conversation. I don't think we were having a conversation in Austin, in my opinion, about what it was really going to take to protect the natural treasures of Central Texas. We were talking about different regulatory approaches that weren't working.

We had what we referred to as the "peace talks." I remember vividly Gary Valdez, who was then with the Chair of the Chamber of Commerce. Gary was going to facilitate the peace talks. We started with the proverbial big, white board—a big white piece of paper, you know, the flipchart. And Gary said, "Okay, let's put down what we do agree about." And it was quiet for an hour. There was nothing we agreed about. To tell this story properly, one has to understand the severe distrust. We didn't even like being in a room together. Bill Bunch got up and left. He was physically unable to be in the room with those folks. We'd been fighting that long and it had gotten real personal.

And so we had a second meeting and Gary said, "Let's try again. There's got to be something we agree on." And as simple as it sounds, we agreed that preserving more of the Hill Country, the scenic vista, the springs, the creeks, the wildlife, it's good for the environment and the economy. I know that sounds so basic now, but those peace talks led to the Peace Treaty. And we called it that. I know it sounds like a Hollywood story but the peace talks never made the press. The powers that be kept that story, kept the fact that we were meeting, out of the press.

It may sound disrespectful but it's not meant to be: I excommunicated myself from Save Our Springs over some philosophical differences, not that I thought they were doing anything wrong. It was just not what I wanted to do. I joined the Chamber of Commerce, I think in 1993. I had no idea what a Chamber of Commerce was. The Real Estate Council of Austin was just being created by then, and I wasn't joining to join an organization. I wanted to meet the developers, the bankers and the real estate attorneys.

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I just knew my friends in the development community—I could talk to them. So I went, “Okay guys, why are you doing this in the aquifer? Let’s talk about going elsewhere and how does your math work? Can you cut density and still come out economically okay?” So there were still a lot of things I had to learn about the development world.

It just seemed like something I wanted to do, to get to know all those people, figure out what they’re interests were and then figure out, okay, is there a way forward where everybody can get what they want? That sounds a little naïve but that was my thinking.

As a dear friend of mine who will go unnamed, one of the brain trusts of the SOS Alliance, he said, “George, we can’t tell if you’re an ambassador or a traitorous son-of-a-bitch, but just stay at it, you know? I think my friends recognized that I was on a different path, but with the same interests in mind. I was still protecting the environment. So I think the way I was able, and the reason I created those friendships, was so that when something difficult came along, I could pick up the phone. And others were doing it. I was not out there by myself. Craig Smith and Mary Ann Neely and John Beal and Mary Arnold—we all had to learn how to go and talk with developers. It couldn’t be just fight, fight, fight all the time.

We’ve got to have developers who realize that green building and protecting the environment is good for the bottom line. And so I think that was where the U. S. Green Building Council came in and began to play that role. And people who truly understood that a developer could put a product on the ground and not have as severe an impact on the environment.

So we thought, let’s start a non-profit “the common ground land trust”. Thankfully, EnviroMedia, a company here in town said, “George, that’s a really beautiful story, but let’s call it something else.” Great story. You can talk about the common ground land trust, but, thankfully, they steered us to a name “Hill Country Conservancy” with more lasting value, with a little better shelf life than “the common ground land trust.”

We had Mary Arnold, Susan Reiff, Robin Rather, Mary Afaller, and some other folks. Oh and our ringer, Nikelle Meade. I knew that Nikelle, a real estate lawyer, who permits a lot of projects, but also represents neighborhoods. And I knew Nikelle was on the City of Austin Parks Board. So she was my secret green vote and worked hard to get her chosen as one of the six business people so that we could count on Nikelle as the tie-breaker, but it was very consensus-based. David Armbrust, Pete Winstead was the founding board member, Paul Bury, Kirk Rudy from Endeavor. So a good group of smart people who had developed trust through the peace talks, and finally able, not only to be in a room and be friendly, but to really work on creating a great non-profit called the Hill Country Conservancy.

What we’re doing is purchasing development rights. Families need money to run their ranches. They got to keep the buildings repaired. They’ve got to keep the fences up. They’ve got to pay taxes. So what we often find ourselves doing is on a property that is appraised—it’s a very strict appraisal process—maybe it’s a 30 million dollar deal—we’ll wind up giving the family 10 million dollars, but they get to keep the ranch. So it takes a lot of money. When I say the community has invested 300 million dollars, it’s a big number, but, again, matter of public record—more than one of these deals have been north of ten million dollars—the very complex real estate deals. And I loved learning all that stuff.

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What we're appraising is the development potential. There are only a few appraisers who do that kind of work well. A lot of real estate appraisers can go out and say here's what the ranch is worth, to be a master planned community or to be a hunting ranch with a fancy lodge. There are not a lot of appraisers who can say and here's what the family could make off the development rights. Properties have water rights. They have hunting rights, recreational rights, they have mineral rights—especially in Texas, they have mineral rights—and they have development rights.

I've said I was eternally grateful to Bill Bunch and Save Our Springs and Earth First! because somebody staking out that hard position on the left, so to speak, does make it a whole lot easier to have the conversation in the middle, whether that be a policy conversation or a regulatory conversation. And that's where I found, I believe, I'm most effective.

*-excerpted from an oral history as told to David Todd in November 2018*

**BARTON CREEK**  
  
**TIME STREAM**