In the Field, Forest, and Stream activity, students will compare three different ecosystems. This can be easily accomplished in just one trip to the San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site. There, you’ll not only see three different ecosystems, but you’ll experience some Texas History too.

This great spot is located just south of Houston on the San Jacinto River and Houston Ship Channel. The address is One Monument Circle in LaPorte, Texas. You won’t have trouble finding the location — just look for the towering, 570-foot-tall monument. After exploring the different ecosystems and battle sites, you also can visit Battleship Texas, which is docked there.

The San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site plays a great role in Texas history. On April 21, 1836, the Battle of San Jacinto took place. The Mexicans fleeing from Sam Houston ran towards the marsh. This was a big mistake. They got bogged down in the marsh soil and were easy targets for Texas soldiers, all of whom were ready for a victory after suffering defeat at the Alamo.

The park has undergone many changes since Sam Houston defeated Santa Anna in the battle that won Texas its independence from Mexico. Subsidence and development has changed the face of the park. But thanks to the efforts of many different groups, the area is being restored to the way it looked in 1836. Plants and other natural features, such as the bluff along the river, contributed to Sam Houston’s victory at the Battle of San Jacinto. The features allowed Sam Houston and his army to sneak up on the Mexican Camp and take them by surprise.

Visiting the park today you will find three different habitats including one that is considered the most endangered in the United States — the Coastal Prairie.
Field, Forest, and Stream continued

The Coastal Prairie

The Coastal Prairie is endangered because of development, fire suppression, overgrazing by domestic animals, and invasive species such as the Chinese tallow tree. Normally, tall grasses — such as the little and big bluestem, switchgrass, and Indian grass — are dominant in the Coastal Prairie. Animals found in the ecosystem include rabbits, hognose, cottonmouth snakes, and a variety of birds including the meadowlark.

But one animal in particular — the Attwater’s Prairie Chicken — is near extinction due to the loss of the Coastal Prairie. Very few of these birds are left, and the species could become extinct if conservation efforts aren’t successful. The Houston Zoo, in partnership with the Johnson Space Center and a few other groups, is trying to save this species by breeding them in captivity and then releasing them in several prairie reserves.

The water at the San Jacinto Battleground has a great range in salinity. Salinity classes determine the type of wetland or marsh.

Tidal Marsh

The tidal marshes are covered with water during high tide and exposed during low tide. The lowest part of the park is where Santa Anna’s soldiers got mired down while trying to escape from battle. The tidal marsh is never the same because of the daily rise and fall of the tide, which changes the chemistry of the water, nutrients, and sediments. Smooth cord grass is the most common plant found there. The marshes are also rich in the diversity of organisms living there — with many invertebrates, microorganisms, and fish present.

The wetlands are a nursery for many species. Migratory and native birds use these marshes as a feeding ground. Other wildlife found here are turtles, otters, nutria (an invasive species), and alligators.

Riparian Hardwood Forests

Riparian Hardwood Forests — containing trees such as bald cypress, water oak, hackberry, and live oak — are found along the San Jacinto River. In the 1800s, most of these forests were cut down for home and boat building, but they were once home to many wild animals that are no longer found in Texas such as jaguars, black bears, and cougars. These animals were hunted in the forests much like the bison were hunted on the Coastal Plains. These areas are important because they provide habitat for many animals.