Lower Rio Grande Valley Nature Center

TEEA 2017 Winner: Civic/Community

Valley Nature Center's influence is far reaching.

If you heard that a nature center could be a beacon for the community, you might find it hard to believe. However, once you visit the Valley Nature Center and meet the staff and volunteers who work there, you will realize how important their work is for residents, visitors, and the environment.

The VNC in Weslaco is the oldest nature center in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and the only non-profit center fully dedicated to environmental education south of San Antonio and east of Eagle Pass.

The center's newly constructed facility includes a 15,000 gallon rainwater collection system, solar panels, recycling bins, a green roof covering its outside patio, and native vegetation surrounding the entire facility. Inside, you will see interactive exhibits and animals native to the area.

The VNC park is behind the main building; at roughly six acres, it contains walking trails, wetlands and ponds, native plants, bird feeding stations, butterfly gardens, interpretive signage, and much more. The park attracts many of the valley's 500 plus species of native and migratory birds and 300 butterfly species — including several species found only in this region. This unique diversity draws visitors from the local community as well as those from far away.

The core mission of the VNC is education. Staff and volunteers use every piece of the center and park as an educational opportunity to encourage environmental stewardship, natural resource conservation, and healthy ecosystems for wildlife and people. Each year, the VNC serves about 5,000 schoolchildren and 15,000 other visitors, introducing them to the wonders of nature while fostering an appreciation of the Lower Rio Grande Valley's unique plants and animals.

To further promote environmental education, the VNC trains teachers, conducts programs and presentations for schools, and offers brochures to the public. By participating in nature festivals and community events, the center delivers its message to over 50,000 adults and children each year who may not have the opportunity to visit the center. The VNC plant nursery also promotes water conservation by selling affordable native plants to the public for landscaping.

In addition to educational services, the VNC offers an array of programs aimed to improve the social climate of their community. For example, it offers free summer camps to children with disabilities, where participants explore and learn about nature.

Because of its many educational and community programs, the VNC is transforming itself from a simple nature center to an interactive museum, community learning center, nature preserve with native gardens, research partner, leader in habitat restoration, and an influential force for economic development through ecotourism.

Using feedback and regular evaluations, the VNC continues to evolve to meet the needs of the community and local environment. The center is a great example of how one place can inspire people to appreciate nature, conserve resources, and work together to make their community a better place for residents and visitors alike.