The Mission of the Rusk Ranch Nature Center is to benefit the community and provide opportunities for the public, particularly young people, to appreciate the natural world and instill a sense of stewardship toward the earth and its inhabitants, and preserve and conserve nature and wildlife.

“At Rusk Ranch Nature Center we value the healing power of nature and nature’s ability to nurture creativity, to inspire a sense of belonging, and to build community by showing us our deep inter-connectedness.

We value the long term wholeness of recognizing that people and nature are inseparable. We strive to nurture whole families, multi-age groups and children.”

Rusk Ranch Nature Center is building a Nature Discovery Center with interactive hands-on exhibits, both indoor and outdoor, on the center property on Hwy 199 in Cave Junction.

Working with community and the endorsement of the Illinois Valley Community Development Organization, the center will offer visitors a close up memorable experience with nature.

Along with offering families and children wholesome outdoor recreation opportunities, the center will bring revenue into the community and create jobs.
Why a Nature Discovery Center?

#1 Increase revenue to our community.

Illinois Valley is located in one of the poorest counties in Oregon. Increased travel industry revenue for the community is a high priority, but venues to host visitors, and resources to develop those venues, are scarce. The project is a high priority because the Illinois Valley, where the center is located, suffers from high levels of unemployment and low income. Josephine County, one of the poorest counties in Oregon, has an 18% poverty rate, and Illinois Valley, where the center is located, remains an area with even higher levels of unemployment and low income with a 35% poverty rate. Children in the area are particularly hard hit by these conditions. While 39% of students overall in the state qualify with poverty status for reduced price meals at school, in Illinois Valley 78% of middle school students qualify for this basic service!

The center will create jobs, be self-sustaining and increase revenue for other local businesses. The new Nature Discovery Center will employ several individuals, as well as offer on-the-job training for Job Council employees and for College Dreams youth employees. Restaurants, gas stations, gift shops, markets and other visitor venues, will all benefit, based on data from Travel Oregon.

#2 Create understanding that nature matters to community support.

Improved awareness and comprehension of nature’s values and benefits and our interdependence with nature leads to better management of resources and increased wealth over all. Since Illinois Valley is sandwiched between two National Forests and surrounded by stunning natural beauty, this improved awareness could lead to significant benefits for valley residents. For example, with the down-turn in the logging industry, many local families are looking for place-based living wage jobs. The 9 Billion dollar travel industry in Oregon, with the majority of travelers seeking fun nature based experiences, offers a way to utilize existing natural resources in the area to bring in needed revenue to the community.

#3 Enrich learning opportunities for children and families with Hands-On experiences with nature.

Illinois Valley schools lack funding for enrichment, arts, and sports. The Oregon Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan states “Although Oregon is a state with abundant natural resources, there is growing evidence that Oregon’s youth are gravitating away from outdoor experiences and towards a virtual indoor reality.” The center seeks to address this issue and re-connect families to nature, while at the same time bringing revenue to the valley from the multi-billion dollar tourism industry in Oregon. With the down turn in resource extraction industries in our area, nature tourism is an essential part of our economic regeneration. The Nature Discovery Center will offer hands-on nature learning so children (and adults) can grasp and apply concepts learned in the classroom. This hands-on learning allows children to be better mentally equipped for real world decisions. The Nature Discovery Center will offer indoor and outdoor nature exhibits, interpretive trails, natural play areas, Butterfly Pavilion, outreach youth partnership, and a community & event center. Opportunities provided by the center, for hands-on positive experiences with nature, can peak an interest in science, support a life long appreciation for nature conservation and feed a deeper understanding of the interaction and interdependence of people and nature.

Rusk Ranch Nature Center is uniquely qualified and situated to meet these needs. The Nature Discovery Center Master Plan is based on data from Travel Oregon and the Caves National Monument. From this data we know that approximately 300,000 vehicles with 1M visitors pass by the nature center location each year. Last year 70,000 of them stopped at the Oregon Caves (a 40 minute drive off highway). The property where the Nature Discovery Center will be located is directly on Highway 199, a major artery for visitors driving into this area or going to visit the coast. Using data collected from the Oregon Caves visitor surveys, we know that most visitors are looking for fun experiences as their reason for stopping in our valley. The Highway 199 venue for the center offers an opportunity for extensive, low cost marketing of the fun family experiences desired by the majority of visitors. The first exhibit of the nature center, the Butterfly Pavilion has been overwhelmingly well received (revenue has increased by at least 20% each year for the past 4 years) and verifies this conclusion.

The organization and community have already invested heavily in this endeavor with more than 24,000+ hrs of community volunteering, numerous organization and agency partnerships and thousands of dollars in donations and resources. Everyday the lack of jobs and revenue in this community supports drug use, domestic violence and other diseases of poverty. Children in this community have an urgent need for a higher quality of life. This campaign supports the community momentum to increase quality of life in the valley and make the Nature Discovery Center a reality.

Once the facility is built the organization can offer year round nature discovery activities and be self-sustaining. By connecting the center with visitors, we can channel revenue into the services of the organization – providing nature learning and healthy physical outdoor experiences for kids and area residents with the potential to significantly increase the economic outlook of the valley.