**2022 ~ This is our first “Annual” Update since fall of 2020!**

It has been a while! All is well, just amazingly BUSY. Since 2019 we have been dealing with the pandemic. Like others we had employees out sick for extended periods (no serious covid cases however). But in addition we have had three years in a row of early fire season - which stops the visitor flow to our area. And then this year the high gas prices also made a significant dent in visitor numbers. On the other hand our new program, Nature Service & Immersion, that allows participants to stay in the glamping facility at the nature preserve, has been reassuringly successful.

**Nature Service & Immersion Program**

We opened for participants in the program in July of 2021. Revenue from this mission based program helps us to pay for staffing - a real breakthrough for us, as we have been mostly volunteer since our founding! This is a huge step for us and will allow the organization to maintain itself as we do the long-term work necessary to build the Oregon Nature & Environmental Discovery Center.

In the Nature Service & Immersion Program, members can stay at the nature preserve, pay to serve and help with work such as gardening, tree planting and trail maintenance. This program offers visitors, as well as longer-term local people, the opportunity to share in the excitement of regenerating and sustaining the wildlife preserve portion of the organization’s property.

During the months of July - January 2021, the program hosted approximately 300 participants, and in 2022 over 500 participants. People enjoyed the river, the wildlife and the Butterfly Pavilion and gave the program very high praise.

**Children’s Programs**

**SUN School**  Summer learning camp moved online for 2021 again to accomodate the pandemic restrictions. This was our 6th year offering the program to help prevent summer learning loss. With the support of a generous grant from the Oregon Community Foundation, we are able to offer this popular program free through 2021. We felt this was so important due to the job loss and other pressures families are experiencing during the pandemic. There were two mini-rounds of SUN School for the school year: a Winter Session in January/February and a Spring Session in March/April. SUN School did not take place in 2022 due to a lack of staffing. But we expect to offer SUN School again in summer 2023.

**EarthWorks!** Permaculture for Kids, offered a spring session at the nature center, with masks and social distancing. The sessions were free in 2021 and sliding scale for 2022. The program uses hands-on games like The Interconnections Cards, the Poop Patrol, the Pollinators and the Win-Win-Win Ecosystem Challenge. Kids have fun outdoors while learning the concepts of sustainability and regeneration, observation, mimicry and nurturing support of nature.

**Nature Explorers** In 2022 we began a new outdoor program, introducing elementary age kids to nature, to observation and basic wilderness skills, and teaching the importance of cooperation and community.
**Bugs-R-Us** For the 5th and 6th years in a row (2021 and 2022), the center sponsored the **Bugs-R-Us Educational Service** to do bugs and bats presentations to the 400+ students at Evergreen Elementary School and also at the Dome School in Takilma. Kids got to hold GIANT live bugs, learn about how insects benefit the world and even **eat** a bug!

**Girls Can Do!** In 2019 we first offered this fun one-day experience for girls and their parent(s) to learn to use manual tools and power tools, introduce concepts of building and allow them to have a successful experience of hands-on building. But the pandemic prevented us from offering it in 2020-22. However we will resume in 2023 by offering the event at Evergreen Elementary School.

These free kids programs offer enrichment and connection to nature for our valley kids, (K - 6th grades), that would otherwise not be available. Children who experience the joy of discovering nature remember that joy all of their lives and grow to value the natural world in a deep and meaningful way that does not happen with only digital or book learning. Families who participate come back year after year because the kids LOVE them!

**Events**

In 2022 we brought back the **Halloween FUN event!** And it sure was! We had over 50 families join us for games, spider-hat crafts, costume contests and hay rides. We all had a blast! The event was put on by all volunteer energy. : )

**The Nature Center**

In both 2021 and 2022 spring the center featured the beautiful **Ceanothus Silk Moths**. This year the center offered up close and personal experiences with Painted Ladies, Cabbage Whites, Red Admirals and Monarch butterflies. But in 2021 we were unable to host Monarch butterflies because, with their numbers in the wild so low, we could not obtain any. For 2022 we partnered with approximately 10 “Citizen Scientists” who raised and released Monarchs, thus significantly helping the wild populations to spring back. This fall the coastal over wintering areas report record numbers of roosting Monarchs!

New fun exhibits in the Nature Discovery Playground include an addition to the Tracks exhibit where visitors find the tracks (pressed into cement tiles) and follow them to find the animal in hiding. The Music exhibit was refreshed and new drums and percussion items added.

We have become a Certified site for sheltering Western Pond Turtles that cannot be returned to the wild, so there is a lovely new Turtle exhibit with Tilly and Terry Western Pond Turtles.

**The Living Soil Ecosystem** and **The Living Forest Ecosystem** interactive walls inside the Visitor Center were completed.
Our progress toward building the **Oregon Nature & Environmental Discovery Center** received a big boost in 2019-2020. From our Master Plan and research on visitor data, we know once the center is built that we can self-support the organization. However, one of our greatest obstacles has been how to keep the organization running until we can get the **O.N.E. Discovery Center** built. The new Nature Service and Immersion program offers a solution and we will resume the Campaign to build the center early in 2023.

**Organization Support**

A tremendous amount of work was done over these two years setting up accommodations for the Nature Service & Immersion program, creating a camp kitchen, recovering two greenhouses, installing the new Turtle exhibit, opening the new Living Soil Ecosystem and Living Forest Ecosystem exhibit walls, responding to the planning departments concerns, starting our first year of employee payroll services, filing as a “grown up” organization with a “990” IRS form…..and of course adjusting all visitor experiences and programs to accommodate the pandemic. Several people on staff did contract COVID, but thank heavens, they made it through without hospitalization.

We are so very grateful to the Oregon Community Foundation, FourWay Community Foundation, the Carpenter and Evergreen Federal Bank for their support in building our Nature Service Glamping facilities, general operation support and with underwriting our Children’s Programming.

We simply could not do what we do without our wonderful Angel group of donors, who have made this progress possible, and we love them!

**The Volunteers who help with events, being docents, doing building, planting, weeding, and so much more, are a testimony to the “can-do” nature of our community. Thank you so much Volunteers!**

The remainder of the support for the organization and its programs has come from individual donations and visitors to the Rusk Ranch Nature Center and from the new Nature Service and Immersion program.

We thank you so very much for all of your kindness, your support and your belief in our community!

*Warmest regards, Board of Directors for Rusk Ranch Nature Center*

[ruskranchnaturecenter.org](http://ruskranchnaturecenter.org)