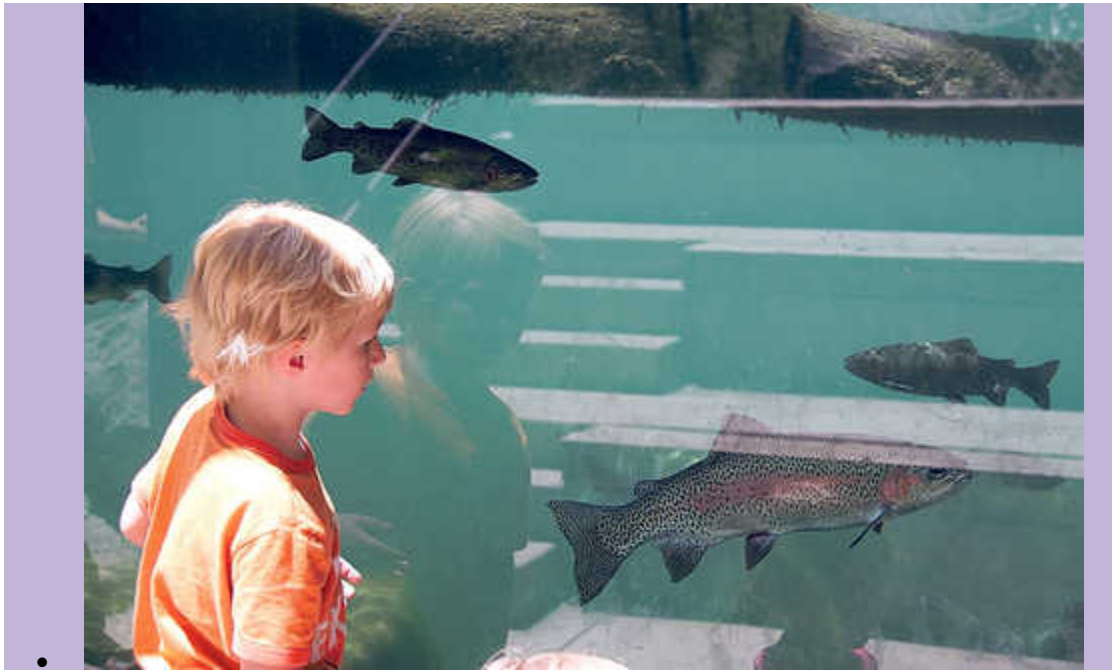


MK Nature Center turns 20

MK Nature Center is a magnet for kids and adults who are awed by wildlife

BY PETE ZIMOWSKY/IDAHO STATESMAN

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"Wow" is all that kids like Gage Eck can say when they come face to face with big fish at the MK Nature Center, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this weekend.

The excitement of MK Nature Center's 550-foot streamwalk, where you can get an eye-to-eye view of trout and other critters, never gets old - especially for the young.

"Look at that big one," said Gage Eck, 3, of Boise, as he came face to face with a giant rainbow trout last week while visiting the center with his mom, Randi Arnold.

The center opened in 1990 and was designed to provide a place where people could enjoy and learn about wildlife. It's celebrating two decades of bringing the outdoors to the city on Thursday and Friday.

"It's just wonderful," said Arnold. "It's free. It's educational."

Situated on 4.6 acres of a former landfill and baseball stadium, the center attracts about 200,000 people annually. It's usually one of the top places to take visitors in the Boise area.

LIKE AN ISLAND OF NATURE IN THE CITY

The Boise Greenbelt location also attracts critters, naturally. Don't be surprised to see deer, great blue herons, wood ducks, mink, garter snakes, beaver, foxes and other wildlife on any given day, depending on the season.

That's because it is a mini-ecosystem in the middle of the city. That ecosystem, besides helping to give these animals a place to live, also provides educational programs for 10,000 children, teachers and parents each year.

"The focus is on getting children outside and connected to the natural world," said David A. Cannamela, superintendent of the center, who was giving kids a tour of the wildflower and butterfly garden.

He, like other staffers and volunteers, gives kids and adults year-round tours that can offer glimpses of salmon, say, or maybe even a mink.

The Nature Center also plays host to other special events throughout the year. One of them is Idaho Salmon and Steelhead Days in September, a collaborative effort between private, governmental and tribal groups.

Salmon and Steelhead Days is in its 15th year and has been attended each year by about 2,000 fifth-graders who learn about salmon and steelhead. They also learn about lesser-known fish like sturgeon and lamprey.

HOW IT STARTED

The popular center blossomed out of a vacant lot after Jerry Conley, then director of the Idaho Fish and Game Department, started talking about what to do with the land with Wayne Melquist, who was F&G's nongame manager.

Nongame is the term used for wildlife that is not pursued by hunters and anglers. "The concept of a nature center was one I got from looking at Audubon nature centers," Melquist said. "It seemed like an appropriate fit."

Melquist remembers how the staff at Fish and Game, from public affairs to engineering, pitched in to help.

Stacy Gebhards, regional F&G supervisor at the time, came up with the idea for a stream and did a lot of the rock work.

"We were already working on the ground when Stacy came up with his vision of a stream winding through the area and dumping into the pond like Thousand Springs," said Melquist. "It was timely and added immensely to the final product."

Gebhards remembers that a group came to him originally with an idea to put a fish window in the Boise River, but that wasn't feasible because of fluctuations in the river's flows.

The concept works great, though, at the center.

The center's innovative programs continue monthly. Those programs and admission to the Nature Center are free, but the center relies heavily on donations, said Cannamela. Over the years, lots of citizens, corporations and civic groups have pitched in with the project and are still providing help, he said.

In the center's beginnings, the Morrison-Knudsen Co. made a substantial donation and the center became known as the MK Nature Center.

Getting there: The Nature Center is located along the Greenbelt behind the state headquarters of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game at 600 S. Walnut St.