

SOUTH TEXAS ECOTOURISM CENTER
VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK
March 29, 2022



South Texas Ecotourism Center

A letter from Director Edward P. Meza, South Texas Ecotourism Center

Dear Volunteers,

Thank you for considering volunteering your time and expertise at the South Texas Ecotourism Center. We appreciate your generosity in helping with accomplishing the Center's goals of educating and interpreting the unique and beautiful ecosystems of South Texas to our visitors. Not only will they discover the diversity of our four major ecosystems, but also will learn where they can personally experience these natural wonders nearby. As volunteers you are the heart of our organization and without you we could not function to our fullest capacity. We have various volunteer opportunities at the Center including greeting visitors, working the gift shop, giving tours, maintaining the grounds, educating students, researching and fundraising. Please complete the Volunteer application in this packet if you are interested in joining our family.

We look forward to working with you!

Sincerely,
Ed

“Experiencing, Restoring, and Preserving the Native Landscape”

South Texas Ecotourism Center
501 W. State Highway 100, Laguna Vista, Texas 78578 (956) 772-0210
www.stec-lv.org

STAFF

Edward Pro Meza, Director

Britney Marchan, Office Specialist/ Head Educator

Michael Flores, EcoSystem Specialist/ Educator

Pablo Medrano, EcoSystem Specialist/Educator

Jeremy Christensen, Facilities Specialist

HOURS OF OPERATION:

7 days a week (daily) 8am to 5 pm
subject to seasonal changes

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In 2016, voters of Cameron County approved the County Hotel/Motel Venue Tax and Motor Vehicle Rental Tax. The venue tax identified two projects: a multipurpose center and amphitheater on Isla Blanca Park and an Ecotourism Center in Laguna Vista. This allowed us to collect one-half penny per dollar from visitors from outside the county who would either rent a hotel room or rent a car in Cameron County, which means that most, if not all, of the funding for these projects comes from visitors to our area.

In 2017, we started looking at what we wanted to do and developing these projects. As Cameron County Commissioner, I approached the Town of Laguna Vista because they had 23 acres on Highway 100 that needed to be developed and they needed to do something with that property that had been sitting vacant for over 20 years. We wanted to help and partner with the city, to create an economic driver for their development. We felt that if we could promote this ecotourism center from that location, it would help them, it would help us, and it would help anyone that would visit here. We agreed to build our concept on a tract of land adjacent to the Bahia Grande complex, part of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. The Town of Laguna Vista dedicated approximately 10 acres for the development of this project. The land was originally owned and donated to the Town of Laguna Vista by Mary and Frank Yturria. Thus, our partnership was established.

We started with a whole lot of public involvement in designing what we were looking for. It was very difficult trying to convince people of the concept that we were trying to create, because when we talked about developing a Nature Park, everybody's idea of a park is an urban park setting that has swings and playgrounds, but we wanted a Nature Park that featured native plants and animals. So it took us a while to convince others.

The plan involved many stakeholder meetings throughout Cameron County; not only Laguna Vista. We had to go through a due diligence about where we would locate this center. It also included many visits to other nature parks in the state of Texas and out of the state of Texas, all over the world for that matter. The process developed and we came up with ideas based on community feedback on what they would like us to do and not do. At the end of the day, we developed a concept.

September 21, 2018, plans to construct a state-of-the-art ecotourism facility along Highway 100 took one step closer to reality when the Cameron County Commissioners' Court approved design concepts. Our next steps were to hire Megamorphosis Design from Harlingen, an architectural firm, to help us design the project. The educational signs designer selected was Scott Clarke Designs and the general contractor selected for the construction was Noble Texas Builders.

David A. Garza, Precinct 3 Commissioner

MISSION AND PURPOSE STATEMENTS
SOUTH TEXAS ECOTOURISM CENTER
LAGUNA VISTA, TEXAS

Our mission is to encourage the exploration of South Texas by highlighting its assets spreading across the counties. The South Texas Ecotourism Center directory will put the cities of South Texas, whether rural or large, in the spotlight for locals and visitors to visit. Our intention is to give visitors and residents alike a greater appreciation of our beloved South Texas, and to bring everyone here closer together.

Cameron County Judge Eddie Treviño Jr. stated, “The South Texas Eco-Tourism Center will act as an information hub to direct visitors to the myriad of other outstanding nature destinations in the Valley, including county parks, state parks, federal wildlife refuge parks, and others. Additionally, it will provide environmental educational opportunities and protect ten acres of coastal prairie habitat that borders the Bahia Grande Unit of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. We look forward to partnering in the future with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to expand access to the Bahia Grande area.”

Cameron County Commissioner Pct.3 David A. Garza stated, “I have been honored to spearhead efforts to develop the South Texas Eco-Tourism Center, to be developed in Cameron County. This project has been a cooperative effort with the Town of Laguna Vista that will promote and partner with ecotourism and environmental education sites throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Visitors will not only obtain information on other destinations, they will find discovery opportunities and a unique look at the ecology and wildlife of coastal Cameron County. They will see conservation in practice, immerse themselves in native habitat, and will be treated to a vista of the Bahia Grande unlike any other. We are not only working to create a nature facility, we are working to create an experience.”

VOLUNTEER POLICIES AND PROCEDURES SOUTH TEXAS ECOTOURISM CENTER

GENERAL

We know that you are dedicated individuals who bring varied backgrounds and skills and have great concern about our environment and its resources. We greatly appreciate that you are willing to donate your valuable time to our endeavor. Here are a few considerations that will ensure that your volunteer experience is a constructive and positive one.

- ◆ **Be Flexible:** There are times that things will come up last minute. You might be given a certain task and then asked to do something else. Therefore, when the need arises try to meet that need.
- ◆ **Be Considerate of Others:** You will interact with other volunteers, guests from all over the world, and staff. Everyone has different views, ideas, cultures, ethics, etc. We expect all of us to respect the feelings of everyone and not treat anyone differently for any circumstance. We have a zero tolerance for harassment or discrimination. Please treat the public, staff and other volunteers with courtesy and respect and expect them to treat you in the same manner.
- ◆ **Address Concerns:** If you have questions, concerns or due to health reasons you are not able to accomplish a duty, please let your supervisor know immediately. If you have any concerns or problems with another volunteer or staff, let the volunteer coordinator or supervisors know as soon as possible.
- ◆ **Be Patient:** We have many volunteers that come and go throughout the year so change is always happening. When you arrive, please take time to learn and observe how things are done. Even though you might want to make changes to things that you see, please discuss with staff your suggestions before making any changes.
- ◆ **Starting New:** It is sometimes hard for a volunteer who was in a supervisory role in a previous job to be comfortable with certain duties. All duties we give to our volunteers are important jobs and help support the STEC - everything from cleaning bathrooms to clearing trails. We believe in treating everyone equally no matter where you came from or who you were in your former job. So relax and enjoy your experience as a volunteer.

AN STEC CODE OF ETHICS

Volunteers are expected to project a positive image of the STEC to the public even during personal time and will not represent themselves as official spokespersons for the STEC. All media, political, regional or national contacts will be forwarded to the appropriate staff. Everything we do is within the public eye, so keep all personal opinions on politics, religion, and other controversial subjects to yourself while on duty. Volunteers will behave in a courteous and professional manner toward the public, other volunteers and STEC staff. Unprofessional behavior, such as cursing and dishonesty, will

not be tolerated. Voicing of personal opinions in a public forum will result in a reprimand. If continued, termination.

PROCEDURES

SIGNING IN Volunteers are required to record their hours in a Volunteer Log Book in the Volunteer Room of the Visitor Center. Hours should include number of hours worked and the category in which these hours were contributed (Visitor Services, Maintenance, Biology, etc.). Please include your travel time. Hours are due the 1st of every month! Any problems or needs encountered should also be recorded in the Log Book.

SCHEDULING is important. Please try to commit to working on a regular schedule. For example, come in every Tuesday afternoon, the first Sunday of every month, or every Special Event. Knowing that we can count on you enables us to plan a consistent program for our visitors. Let us know if you will not be coming to work.

VOLUNTEER IDENTIFICATION should be picked up at the time of signing in and returned to the appropriate location upon signing out.

***DRESS CODE** prohibits improper attire. No sandals or open-toed shoes while working. Volunteers should wear comfortable and tasteful clothing that is appropriate for the task assigned. Shoes of some kind should be worn by all guests.

PROJECT ASSIGNMENTS should be received from the staff member who will serve as your direct supervisor. Necessary equipment to complete the task will be made available by the staff member. A staff member will always be present on the grounds when the facility is open.

SMOKING, USE OF DRUGS, ALCOHOL, OR POSSESSION OF FIREARMS are prohibited on the grounds of the STEC by volunteers, staff or the public. If volunteers become aware of this violation, they should inform the staff of the infraction.

SAFETY The safety and well-being of volunteers, staff and the public is extremely important. Everyone must help to maintain a safe working environment. Report safety hazards and improper behavior to a staff employee. Horseplay or other unsafe actions are strictly prohibited. No volunteer will drive, operate or use any tool, equipment or vehicle without proper authorization. Staff will introduce the usage, safety and maintenance of all equipment before usage.

REPORTING ACCIDENTS Volunteers must notify their supervisor as soon as possible if they are involved in any type of accident that results in damage to equipment or that results in injury to anyone. Accidents and incidents are bound to happen when least expected. All accidents and incidents, regardless of how minor they may appear (cut fingers, strained back, etc), must be reported as soon as possible to your supervisor.

IMPROPER PUBLIC BEHAVIOR includes trespassing in areas off the constructed pathways , especially the area where the animal sculptures are installed. These items are works of art and quite expensive. No individual should attempt to remove any object, living or dead, from the premises. When observed, a volunteer should discreetly ask the violator to desist from the activity. Avoid confrontation.

If resistance occurs, please contact a staff member immediately. If danger from any wildlife is observed, a warning should be given to those who could encounter it. Rattlesnakes have already been seen on the premises.

MAINTENANCE NEEDS should be attended to as soon as possible. Please notify a staff member immediately when repairs, something out of order or vandalism has taken place.

QUESTIONS will be asked of you from time to time by guests. Please respond in a friendly and polite manner. Answer as best as you can, but if you are not sure, please say you don't know. Suggest a source for an answer. The nearest staff member is usually your best helper. Remember that every question, regardless of how unreasonable it may seem, is an opportunity to engage the guest in a positive manner. Take the time to make the visitor feel that he has your attention.

COMPLAINTS should always be treated seriously with attention. Always be courteous and tactful. Listen and do not take sides or argue. Explain the situation if you know the answer. Do not bluff. Avoid confrontation. If the complaint is valid (Ex: the restroom needs immediate attention), thank the guest and follow through. If the complaint is more controversial (Ex: these are the wrong plants to be planted in this spot), direct the complaint to the appropriate staff member.



BRIEF VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTIONS

These descriptions are not meant to be inclusive. They are merely suggestive of the broad range of tasks that will be addressed.

MAINTENANCE

General cleaning: Cleaning windows, sweeping floors, mopping floors, walking grounds, trash removal, weeding of walkways and specific areas only approved and supervised by staff, special projects, set up and breakdown of tables and chairs. The ability to undertake manual work in all weather conditions, willingness to talk with visitors, team working, safe use of garden tools, lots of enthusiasm. Also may require bending, carrying, lifting, depending on job. Working along side maintenance staff in approved general labor. Also having all work approved and supervised by maintenance or staff. Work can be flexible depending on volunteer requirements or request.

ADMINISTRATION

Volunteering with the office includes answering the telephone, using the proper greeting approved by the staff, taking messages, filing documents, data processing information in computers, research. Helping with dispersing brochures or keeping card rack stocked.

GREETERS

Volunteering as a greeter at the entrance. Welcoming visitors and informing them what the center is about, rules, and where the restrooms and water stations are located. Turning on the introduction video before their visiting the grounds.

GREETER/ROAMING INTERPRETER

This volunteer role will assist in welcoming guests, giving directions (restrooms, highlights such as the vista viewpoint, bird blind, butterfly garden). Answer questions about the property and help ensure the safety of visitors.

INFORMATION DESK

Stationary in the gift shop to give more detailed information to guests.

BIRDING/NATURE WALK GUIDE

Lead guided walks teaching guests about the different biomes showcased in our exhibits and natural history of wildlife in the area.

FIELD TRIPS/PROGRAMS

Assist in providing environmental education programs to school groups by teaching/leading small group hikes. Ages of students vary, primarily K-6th grade. No experience needed, but teaching experience is helpful, Training and feedback provided by professional naturalist staff.

Summer Camp Counselor

Assist with educator-led activities and acting as a role model for young campers. Help educational staff with preparation, activities, group management, and ensuring a positive camper experience.

Habitat Maintenance

Assist with trail maintenance, weeding and garden maintenance, and invasive plant removal.

EVENTS

Volunteering as greeters during special events. Helping with crowd control. Selling tickets. Helping with parking. Picking up trash before, during and after the event.

FUNDRAISING

Volunteering helping selling tickets. Decorating. Finding items for silent auction. Receiving tickets or invitations from guests during events. Greeting guests. Clean up afterwards.



STEC TIMELINE

2016: The Center's development was approved by voters in a venue tax election. Proceeds from hotel and motel tax collections to fund its construction.

September 21, 2018: Plans to construct a state-of-the-art ecotourism facility along Highway 100 took one step closer to reality after the Cameron County Commissioners' Court approved design concepts Tuesday.

October 22, 2020 A formal ground breaking ceremony was limited to community leaders and key stakeholders who formally gave a kick-off for the construction of this project.

February 22, 2022: Opening Celebration occurred with more than 250 guests and visitors observing the ribbon cutting and comments from stakeholders.

INTERESTING STEC FACTS

The South Texas Ecotourism Center is situated on a tract of land adjacent to the Bahia Grande Complex and is in partnership with the Town of Laguna Vista and Cameron County who dedicated about 10 acres for the development of this project. The land was originally owned and donated to the Town of Laguna Vista by the late Mary and Frank Yturria, prominent conservationists.

The funding for this facility was made possible through the County Hotel-Motel Venue Tax and Motor Vehicle Rental Tax and from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department which awarded two grants from the Local Park Grant Programs. The total project cost of the facility is approximately \$12 million dollars.

The Architectural Firm working on this project is Megamorphosis, the Educational Signs Designer is Scott Clarke Designs and the General Contractor selected for the construction is Noble Texas Builders.

48,000 plants that have been installed at the center are native to the Rio Grande Valley. The rare exception is live oak trees planted on either side of the center's outdoor classroom.

The 46 seats in the outdoor classroom were made from scrap piling left over from construction of STEC's massive elevated boardwalk, which offers an impressive vista of the Bahia Grande Unit of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge abutting STEC to the south.

The high point on the elevated boardwalk is 25 feet, although it may appear higher. The three telescopes on the top deck are for public use.

Environmental features include a pond system that collects virtually every bit of runoff from the center, including the semi-permeable parking lot and even the stretch of S.H. 100 out front. The park also incorporates donated recycled steel from the former aircraft carrier USS Independence, dismantled by International Shipbreaking Ltd./EMR Group at the Port of Brownsville.

A major focus of the STEC is education. STEC will offer free, prepared online curriculum to teachers grades 2-8, covering nature and ecotourism and approved by the Texas Education Agency. In support of its educational mission, a main feature of the park is a 8,000-square-foot classroom/exhibit/event indoor space.

WIFI is available throughout the facility and QR codes on interpretive panels give the observer the latest information about the particular topics on their cell phones.

A grant from the federal Economic Administration helped to pay for bringing utilities to the south side of S.H. 100 and will allow the City of Laguna Vista to develop 13 acres for retail/restaurant space. A camera will be installed atop the boardwalk that will be available 24/7 on the Center's web page. There are also security cameras throughout the facility facing the front, back and sides.

Wildlife Night Cameras will be installed at the end of the boardwalk and at the water's edge to view the wildlife visiting the Center at night.

The facility may be available for private events such as weddings, receptions, etc, Contact the STEC manager for usage policy and scheduling.



VOLUNTEER APPLICATION
South Texas Ecotourism Center
501 West State Highway 100
Laguna Vista, Texas

Our organization encourages the participation of volunteers who support our mission. If you agree with our mission and are willing to be interviewed, undergo a background check, and trained in our procedures, we encourage you to complete this application. The information on this form will be kept confidential and will help us find the most satisfying opportunity for you. Thank you for your interest.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Cell _____ Email _____

Check all areas that you may be interested in providing volunteer service: Administration
 Events Programs Education Maintenance Clerical Sales Nature Tours
 Grounds Upkeep Fundraising General Other _____

Languages spoken other than English _____

Any special talents or skills you have that you feel would benefit our organization: _____

Please circle days available: Mon Tues Wed Thur Fri Sat Sun

Times available: From _____ To _____

Any physical limitations? _____ If yes, explain: _____

Emergency contact: Name _____ Phone _____

Have you ever been convicted of any felony or misdemeanor? _____

Please list one reference with phone number: _____

As a volunteer of STEC, I agree to abide by its policies and procedures. I understand that I am volunteering at my own risk. The organization, its employees and affiliates, cannot assume any responsibility or liability for any accident, injury or health problem which may arise from my volunteer work. I understand I will receive no compensation, monetary or otherwise, for this work.

Signature of Volunteer

Date

Signature of Supervisor