

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

Engaging Communities in Urban Restoration on Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge



Urban Interface Along the Refuge's Perimeter Fence/Catherine Leicht

INTRODUCTION

Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is located in the South Valley, south of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Hosting the refuge is the Mountain View neighborhood, which has faced decades of environmental injustices and lack of access to public green spaces, creating distrust between the federal and local agencies since further development has limited access to public greenspaces. In response, the community led a grassroots movement to convert former farmland into Valle de Oro NWR, established in 2012. By utilizing a process of community feedback and engagement to design the refuge, the refuge has begun to mend historical distrust, represent community cultural values, and facilitate meaningful connections between residents and the environment.

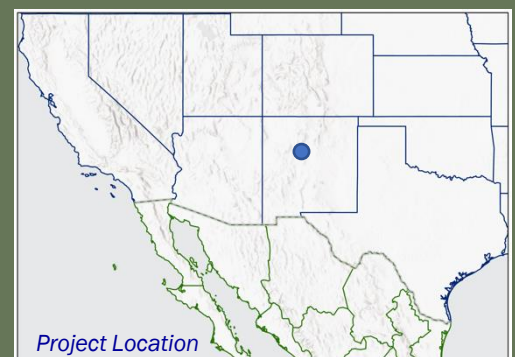
KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED

A majority of Albuquerque's polluting municipal waste facilities and hazardous industrial plants were established in the predominantly lower-socioeconomic Mountain View neighborhood, resulting in serious illness, birth defects, poor air and water quality, and environmental degradation. Additionally, urbanization and farming have reduced Middle Rio Grande Valley wetlands by eighty percent and have limited Mountain View's access to outdoor recreational areas.

At the time that Valle de Oro NWR was established, it was the first urban refuge under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Urban Wildlife Conservation Program, so there was no blueprint to follow. Additionally, the refuge was first established with only one staff member. Thus, community-based planning and implementation was derived out of necessity as much as a desire to build trust.

PROJECT GOALS

- Build trust by incorporating community feedback into the design of the refuge
- Restore the native ecosystems to provide greenspace access and increase diverse wildlife habitat
- Facilitate deeper relationships between community members and nature



PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Community-Based Planning: An adaptive planning process including community feedback meetings built trust between the community and refuge staff and actively integrated residents into the restoration work. During meetings, refuge staff asked community members for feedback on anything from restorative landscaping and interior decor to operational services. Friends of Valle de Oro further increased outreach by offering stipends for residents to serve as community consultants. Valle de Oro NWR staff analyzed this feedback and redrafted the refuge's strategic plan before holding other community events to present updated ideas where neighbors could add sticky note comments.

Reflecting Community Culture: Valle de Oro NWR's visitor center introduces the refuge's native ecosystems as well as the neighboring residents' culture. All exhibit descriptions are written in both English and a regional dialect of Spanish, the refuge includes a library of community-picked environmental justice books, and office space is provided for partner groups.

Ensuring Community Accessibility: With the financial support of the Friends group and other partners' assistance, Valle de Oro NWR continues to offer all services for no cost, including free food at all planning events, as well as free shuttle rides to the refuge.



Refuge Visitor Center lit by Luminaries/Morgan Loven

LESSONS LEARNED

Valle de Oro NWR staff found that a period of two-way education where refuge staff learned about the community while neighboring residents learned about the native ecosystems was the most effective for explaining ecological possibilities, building trust, and understanding community needs. As a result, Valle de Oro NWR implemented evening and weekend hours of operation to increase accessibility for working residents.

This commitment to community-based planning and long-term relationships created a diverse network of partners, allowing the refuge to accomplish much more than it could alone. Local contractors and artists designed Valle de Oro NWR's visitor center. Academic institutions distribute refuge news, participate in field days, provide interns, and assist with projects. Meanwhile community volunteers and the Friends of Valle de Oro write grants, which provide most of the refuge's funding. Continuous community engagement makes it easier for this network to expand as both local and national organizations recognize common relationships and missions.

NEXT STEPS

- Expand public outreach to increase community awareness and involvement.
- Develop a Nature Play Area at the refuge for children based on the input of Mountain View Elementary School's entire student body, local artists, and landscapers
- Transition leadership structure to a delegation model to operate with greater efficiency and enduring stability.

PARTNERS

- See online for full list of partners
- For more information, contact Valle De Oro NWR: valledeoro@fws.gov



**NATIONAL
WILDLIFE
REFUGE SYSTEM**



**FRIENDS OF
VALLE DE ORO**
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

