

Outdoor Classroom Opens Adjacent to Playa Wetland

The world is literally your classroom- if you visit the Texas Panhandle this summer. As a result of a partnership between several different organizations as well as private citizens, an outdoor classroom has been established in the Texas Panhandle on behalf of the nonprofit group Ogallala Commons. The classroom is an educational tool set up to help inform the public about the values of playa wetlands and adjacent uplands to both wildlife and humans. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program in Region 2 has been focusing program efforts in recent years to "connect children with nature" through their involvement with the construction of outdoor classrooms such as this one.

Ogallala Commons is a nonprofit community development network dedicated to the preservation and conservation of playa and other important habitats in the southern and central Great Plains. The area covered by the Ogallala Commons is centered over the vast High Plain-Ogallala Aquifer, covering about 174,000 square miles across parts of eight Great Plains states. The backbone of the Ogallala Commons network extends along the long north-south axis of U.S. Highway 385 and the 102nd Meridian. The covered area also stretches west to the Rocky Mountain foothills and eastward to the prairies of the Midwest.

The Ogallala Commons Playa Classroom is located just outside of Nazareth, Texas. The always open Outdoor Classroom building features interpretive panels and overlooks a fully-functioning playa. It is hoped that the classroom will help visitors of all ages gain an appreciation for these important wetland areas.

“I believe this is the first Outdoor Classroom dedicated to education of the general public about playas in Texas and maybe even in the U.S.,” said PFW State Coordinator Don Wilhelm, “both the classroom and the partnership that developed over time for this project really turned out ideally.”

Many groups played a role in making this concept become a reality. Partners who contributed financial and/or technical assistance include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through its PFW and Migratory Birds Office programs, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Playa Lakes Joint Venture, and the Dixon Water Foundation. Most importantly, it should be noted that private landowner Darryl Berkenfeld, one of the founders of Ogallala Commons, set aside his own property for the development of this Outdoor Classroom.

To learn more about the Ogallala Commons, go to www.ogallalacommons.org