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Environmental Nature Center an adventure in Newport Beach



The Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach is a tucked-away oasis, featuring lush greenery, dirt paths water features and lots of tranquility. It has reopened with limited programs, including the self-guided Story Walk. Children run along a path on Sunday, March 7, 2021. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Tucked away in Newport Beach is an adventure through the ecosystems found throughout California all together in the Environmental Nature Center.



And on Sunday, March 7, it offered an adventure through the world of Dr. Seuss' "The Lorax" with a storywalk where kids and their parents – in small socially distanced groups – enjoyed a stroll through the Truffula Trees and learned about the importance of the natural environment around them.

Pages of "The Lorax" guided the readers through the nature center, educating them on how to treat the planet with kindness and show how one small seed or person can make a difference in the world. The storywalk was a culmination of Read Across America Week and just one of the many special programs the center puts on for the community.

"It's really nice to walk the trails of the nature center and see no human-made objects, no sidewalks, no cars, just trees and a stream and occasionally a squirrel," said Lori Whalen, assistant director of the Environmental Nature Center, said

Visitors can hike along the 3-acre nature center's stream, loop around the trail of Torrey Pines and stop in any of the 15 ecosystems native to California. Next year it celebrates 50 years.

"There's just something super powerful going about doing this by yourself or with your own family instead of having somebody to lead you around so it gives them the freedom to stop and look at stuff and observe, 'oh look at the bee colonies and those flowers,'" Whalen said.

With spring just around the corner, the center is gearing up for the bloom of wildflowers, lupin, poppies and much more. The center offers a living lookbook of the kinds of plants people can add to liven up their own yards and attract butterflies and birds or provide food and shelter for wildlife.

"If folks are interested in helping nature and helping native animals to survive, the best thing they can do is plant native plants in their yard," Whalen said. In order to keep the natural habitat alive and thriving, Whalen advised the best thing people can do is grow native plants indigenous to the area.

And while it hasn't been able to have as many people in to tour the gardens for inspiration because of the pandemic, the center has been able to expand its educational programming by going virtual.

"The pandemic, even though it's obviously tough on us, has given us an opportunity to sort of expand beyond our Orange County borders and bring in people from all over," Whalen said.



By the end of last year, the center was able to host mini camps for the children of essential workers and create special hybrid programs for schools and nature lovers alike.

While Sunday's storywalk was specifically geared for young children, the center offered a more adult version in February with the trail of beauty, as people strolled through a quiet, contemplative path with nature quotes along the trail. In addition, the center offers bird watching expeditions, socially distanced guided tours and an upcoming plant sale on March 20 for folks who are looking to add life to their gardens.

The Environmental Nature Center has resources on its website to help people find viable options to enjoy the world around them whether it's at the center or around all of Orange County and beyond.

"We're so lucky to live in a place with so many wild open spaces and nature reserves that there are options for everybody," Whalen said. "It's so great that suddenly people are seeing the light and understanding how beneficial spending time in nature can be for your sanity and for your mental health and for your physical health and so many other things."

The Environmental Nature Center is at 1601 E 16th St. in Newport Beach, find more information on programs and activities online at encenter.org.

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