

Closing the Nature Center

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After 30+ years in the nature center profession, I must admit I thought I had seen it all. I have certainly seen the good times, most recently in the past few years with the Nature Center's budget growing proportionately to growth in attendance. I have also seen the bad times, including financial crises and the loss of important Nature Center positions.

None of my previous experiences, however, prepared me for the afternoon of March 21, 2020, when I was forced to declare the Nature Center "closed until further notice." Of course, we are all familiar with the overriding reason why this came to be: COVID-19. Most City of Fort Worth facilities had closed the previous week due to the COVID-19 emergency. Why did the Nature Center, the City's largest open space, have to close as well?

Despite closing the gates early at 3:15 p.m. on March 21, the Refuge set a daily attendance record. It was a nice spring day, 39°F at the outset and warming to a high of 58°F. The skies were fair, but clouds passed through on and off throughout the day.

Even though most City facilities had closed the previous Saturday, Nature Center staff, with departmental approval, had decided that since citizens were unable to visit many traditional City of Fort Worth destinations, we should waive admission fees. After all, we all know that being outdoors is a healthy activity, right? What could hurt if the Refuge stayed open?

Free admission for all began on March 14, and the first seven days averaged approximately 200 visitors each day, with a maximum of 281 on, of all days, Wednesday, which has historically proven to be our lowest visitation day. Saturday the 21st began normally, with 156 visitors entering the Refuge between 8 and 11 a.m.

Like a COVID-19 infection within a community, visitation started slowly but quickly spiraled out of control. By noon, visitation had doubled, with 160 additional visitors. In the next three hours, an additional 809 people entered the park. Despite warnings regarding the wearing of masks and maintaining appropriate distances from people outside your own household, visitors gathered en masse, with clusters at every parking area and Refuge attraction. Staff ability to maintain COVID-19 cleanliness standards, including cleaning restrooms and other amenities hourly, was completely compromised. Closing restrooms for cleaning simply created large groupings of people waiting to use the facilities.

In addition, everyday rules of the Refuge were ignored by the mass of visitors as vehicles illegally parked in every nook and cranny along the roadsides. At 3 p.m., we were forced to call in Fort Worth



On March 21, 2020, even basic rules of behavior were ignored. Every vehicle pictured was parked illegally. In addition, prairie restoration efforts suffered significant damage. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

marshals to regain control of the situation as the pleas of staff were ignored by visitors. At 3:15 p.m., we closed the gates, preventing additional visitors from entering the Refuge. An additional 85 people were turned away at the gate before the Nature Center finally closed at 5 p.m.

Complaints regarding the closing began the next day. In this age of social media and immediate communication, many questioned closing a 3,600-acre natural area. Surely, they said, social distancing is possible when hiking.

However, what we had witnessed on the 21st made any other decision impossible. I did not want to close the Nature Center but was forced to because what we had experienced was an inherent threat to the health and safety of our staff, volunteers, and visitors and to the natural resources of the Refuge as a whole.

Planning for the reopening began immediately as all senior staff were called in to work on that fateful Saturday afternoon. Our phased reopening plans, approved by the City of Fort Worth, are designed to prevent a reoccurrence of the March 21 fiasco as well as protect our staff and visitors from the hazards of COVID-19 to the best of our abilities. We, the Nature Center staff, thank you for your understanding and patience during the closure as well as during the phases of reopening.