

## Sabal Palm Audubon Center



The Sabal Palm Audubon Center and Sanctuary was established in 1971 to instill in visitors a shared appreciation and sense of stewardship for the natural world through hands-on nature education, citizen science, and conservation of the area's unique wildlife and habitat. The Center and Sanctuary sit on a 557-acre tract of land along the Rio Grande, affording visitors a unique opportunity to experience the rich biodiversity found in the Valley, and exposing them to one of the rarest and most endangered ecosystems in America. Here visitors will find the last vestiges of palm forest that once dominated much of the lower Rio Grande Delta.

### Benefits of Sabal Palm Audubon Center and Sanctuary

- Attracts and shelters a biodiverse population of birds, reptiles, and other wildlife. The area is unique because it is the farthest north that some Mexican species are found.
- Considered a High Priority Ecoregion by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. The sanctuary is an integrated part of areas protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, and other entities to safeguard the largest remaining Sabal Palm ecosystem.
- Provides educational programs to more than 3,000 youth (ages 2-17) each year, creating an "outdoor classroom" for students from the ten independent school districts located within a 10-mile radius. Of these, 88 percent are considered economically disadvantaged. Many of these students receive their first introduction to nature and conservation at the Center.

### The Border Wall: Center Resources at Risk

*Plans to build a physical border wall along the Rio Grande would essentially fence off Audubon's Sabal Palm Center and other spans of critical wildlife habitat. This barrier will have disastrous unintended consequences for wildlife, nature-based tourism and community education efforts in the lower Rio Grande Valley and could force the closure of the Center.*

#### Threats to Wildlife:

- The proposed barrier will eviscerate all the gains in habitat protection and restoration along the Lower Rio Grande Valley corridor that have been achieved over 30 years through more than \$100 million in taxpayer investments and the conservation work of state and federal agencies, non-profits, and private citizens.

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- Hosts more than 10,000 local and out-of-state visitors each year, attracting tourists from all 50 states and other countries. Tourists' attraction to the Center provides economic benefits for the local economy. The average amount spent on trips to and from the Center totals about \$6.9 million.

- Is a known destination for birders and is designated a *Global Important Bird Area*. Birdwatching alone accounts for about one-fourth of the multi-billion dollar ecotourism industry in Texas (U.S. Dept. of Interior).



- Recognizing the community and economic benefit of Sabal Palm, the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation selected Sabal Palm to receive 2006 grant funds for the expansion of the visitor and education facilities at Sabal

Palm's historic Rabb Plantation House (c. 1876).

### **Audubon Center Education Programs**

While Sabal Palm's primary audience is kids in kindergarten through eighth grades, it also provides programs tailored for HeadStart students. Learning science outdoors is exciting and makes it easier for children to understand concepts that are difficult to grasp in the classroom. Working with local school districts, Audubon has developed Nature of Learning, a place-based science program for schoolchildren. This program is aligned with state education standards with a focus on reaching underserved youth in the community. Several times a year, Audubon staff and volunteers take Nature of Learning across the border to Matamoros, Mexico – providing interactive learning experiences for groups that cannot visit Sabal Palm.

- The proposed wall segments will destroy thornscrub habitat, fragment native brush stands, and block the vital movement of native animals along existing corridors, with detrimental effects that will be felt across Texas.

### **Threats to Tourism and Economy:**

- The proposed barrier will damage critical economic drivers for a region that urgently needs them, cutting off vital tourist areas and cutting property values. With per-capita income well below that of the nation and other parts of Texas, the Rio Grande Valley cannot afford the costs a barrier would force it to absorb.

### **Threats to Community Education and Recreation:**

- Residents of the valley—and people from across the country—stand to lose a vital place to discover and connect with nature if the Sabal Palm Audubon Center is cut off and orphaned on the south side of the barrier and forced to close. There is no other similar facility or program available to replace what the center brings to the community.

*Audubon cannot support this misguided effort. Audubon believes that measures such as vehicle barriers, modern remote-surveillance technology, and expanded staffing for the Border Patrol, should be explored before undertaking the construction of a physical barrier. With careful planning and site evaluation, the United States can protect both its border the natural resources and value of this unique area.*

*It's time for lawmakers and Homeland Security Officials to stop the rush to build and reconsider whether concerns about border security are best served by a wall that will be full of holes but will create a virtual "No Man's Land" trapping people, wildlife and community interests between the Rio Grande and what amounts to a new border.*

To learn more about Audubon's position on the proposed border fence, please contact:  
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