

Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center: Growing to Meet a Bright Future

When it comes to fishing, they do things big in Texas – and they do them very, very well.

The Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center is a case in point. Open to the public since 1996, the Center is one of the largest aquatic education facilities in the country. Then again, it has to be. Texas consistently ranks in the top-five fishing states each year based on the number of licensed anglers.

The Center, located in Athens, Texas, regularly hosts visitors within a 100-mile radius, a distance that comfortably includes six millions residents of the vast Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. Annually, the center also draws guests from all 50 states and foreign countries.

The Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center is popular with students and teachers alike. Topics of study include aquatic ecology, water quality and, most of all, fishing. In fact, a primary goal for the Center is recruiting and retaining new anglers. To that end, it features both a casting pond and a fly-fishing pond.

The facility also offers visitors the chance to see a beaver pond, a pitcher plant bog, and a longleaf pine savannah and wildflower area. The wetlands trail is another popular educational resource, as are exhibits in the Visitor Center that impart the history and heritage of recreational angling and fisheries management.

Since its opening, the Center has continued to grow and widen its public outreach. A tram was added in 2001 for tours of the facility's state-of-the-art hatchery. From 2001 to 2006, the Center extended its popular wetlands trail, completing a circuit through the nine-acre wetlands habitat. Also added during this time was a walking trail accessible to people with disabilities, ten new interpretive wayside exhibits and two 1,200 square-foot timber-framed pavilions.

Twice – first in 1999 and later in 2007 for expanded programming -- the American Fisheries Society recognized the Center with its prestigious Sport Fish Restoration Award for Aquatic Education.

The most recent additions to the Center are the Richard M. Hart and Johnny Morris Conservation Center, and the new outdoor amphitheater near the casting pond. The Hart-Morris Conservation Center includes a lab and classroom for the study of aquatic ecology. The conference capability enables various groups to conduct seminars and workshops on outdoor topics such as pond management.

Sport Fish Restoration funds have been vitally important to the growth and development of the Center. These are the funds derived from the special excise tax monies collected on fishing tackle and motorboat fuel. They are provided by anglers and boaters each time they purchase the equipment and fuel essential to their outdoor pursuits, and support all the continuing education activities at the Center. Through the Sport Fish Restoration funds, the Center is able to provide 60,000 people annually with an overview of Texas freshwater habitats and species, and 30,000 people with the opportunity to fish in a stocked casting pond. Moreover, 22,000 visitors get a chance for a tour of a working fish hatchery – a “first” for many of them. And 20,000 school children receive a substantive aquatic education experience.

The Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center has established a record of unparalleled innovation and achievement in aquatic resources education. When the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

created the Center, they did so with an eye to the future – with the recognition that Sport Fish Restoration funds could help grow and embrace new partnerships, and bring enthused and informed new anglers into fishing and conservation.