

AN ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY PLAY SPACE

Natural materials help Kids' Trek fit in with the landscape

From the tree stumps on the ground to the plants that carpet an adjacent roof, Kids' Trek is, literally, part of the surrounding landscape.

Constructing this half-acre play space was an exercise in sustainability, as builders, horticulturists and craftspeople worked to incorporate native plants from Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and local areas. They also employed realistic-looking, durable materials that fit with the environment.

In other words, no artificial primary colors or giant plastic play structures here. Instead, it's an imaginative playground that encourages exploration of and adventure in nature.



“Kids' Trek incorporates many of the things that people relish about Northwest Trek,” Education Curator Jessica Moore said. “We wanted to ensure that Kids' Trek mirrors the lessons of the broader wildlife park in microcosm – in a space that's built especially for children.”

Root wads dug out of Northwest Trek's Free-Roaming Area were put together by contractors and reinforced with shotcrete to form a root wad cave for investigating or just taking a play break.

One of the largest outdoor play spaces in Washington, Kids' Trek occupies a spot just inside the main gate at Northwest Trek, opposite the café. It's immediately recognized by a 12-foot-high, 22-foot-wide entry sign shaped from gnarled, cedar logs. The KIDS' TREK name lettered on the sign was fashioned from madrone branches.

In carving out the space for Kids' Trek, landscapers salvaged the plants that were removed - including more than 600 sword ferns - and replanted them around the playground.

Diseased, hazardous and downed trees were harvested from Northwest Trek's 435-acre Free-Roaming Area and turned by a local mill into some 60 benches situated around the Kids' Trek perimeter. And the



Rocks used in the 100-foot-long stream at Kids' Trek came from Northwest Trek's grounds. The stream is about 2 inches deep.

That weeping rock is made of shotcrete, one of many Kids' Trek structures formed of long-lasting concrete and polyurethane coatings and meant to look like the real thing. The 13-foot-long slides with the look and texture of granite; the 20-foot-tall hollowed out tree trunk, with nets inside for climbing; the logs across the stream; even the hollowed out "Western red cedar" with a heron sculpture at the top and a burn mark along the side? All shotcrete.

The realistic charring on the huge tree was deliberate, Pool points out. It's meant to tell the story of a 1924 forest fire that swept through acreage that would one day become Northwest Trek. It also helps kids learn how devastating a fire – whether caused by a lightning strike or human carelessness – can be on the landscape. And how nature "resets" such an area and begins new growth.

And don't forget to follow the paths: Hundreds of leaf imprints and animal tracks are embedded around the grounds, prime for counting and naming. Which animal left those hoof prints? What kind of leaf is that?

collection of branches in the children's construction zone? They were tumbled sticks from the Nisqually River.

Wherever possible, Kids' Trek features native plants, said Jake Pool, the wildlife park's horticulturist/arborist. There are more than 90 different plant species around the play area - even on the roof of the pump house next to the playground. The park's first "green roof" includes a mix of woodland and alpine plants, all reflective of the native habitats of Northwest Trek's animals.

On one side of the playground, a 100-foot-long stream cascades along rocks (all excavated from around the wildlife park), travels under a beaver lodge of tumbled branches and, upon reaching the two river otter sculptures, flows back underground, recycling back to its head. Water makes a more discreet appearance from a "weeping rock" in the toddler area, seeping into the sand to keep it moist.

“When you first walk in, you realize there are things to look for,” Moore said. “We want kids to ask questions, to say, ‘Hey, did you see what I just found?’ ”

Those opportunities at Kids’ Trek are virtually limitless.

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Northwest Trek, accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, is a 725-acre zoological park dedicated to conservation, education and recreation by displaying, interpreting and researching native Northwest wildlife and their natural habitats. The wildlife park is a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma and is located 35 miles southeast of Tacoma off State Highway 161.