

Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge Community Engagement Report



ECHO
EARLY CHILDHOOD
HEALTH OUTDOORS

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VALLE DE ORO NATIONAL
WILDLIFE REFUGE



ECHO and the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge are working together to develop a new *nature play space* to promote physical activity, nature play, and outdoor exploration. The space will act as a gateway experience to the rest of the refuge.






COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS AT VALLE DE ORO

Over the past few months, the ECHO team has worked with the Valle de Oro staff to engage with community members that have visited the refuge. We were able to gather ideas from board members, local youth groups, and the refuge staff. All of the input we have received has been incorporated in the planning and design of the nature play space!

WHAT IS A NATURE PLAY SPACE?

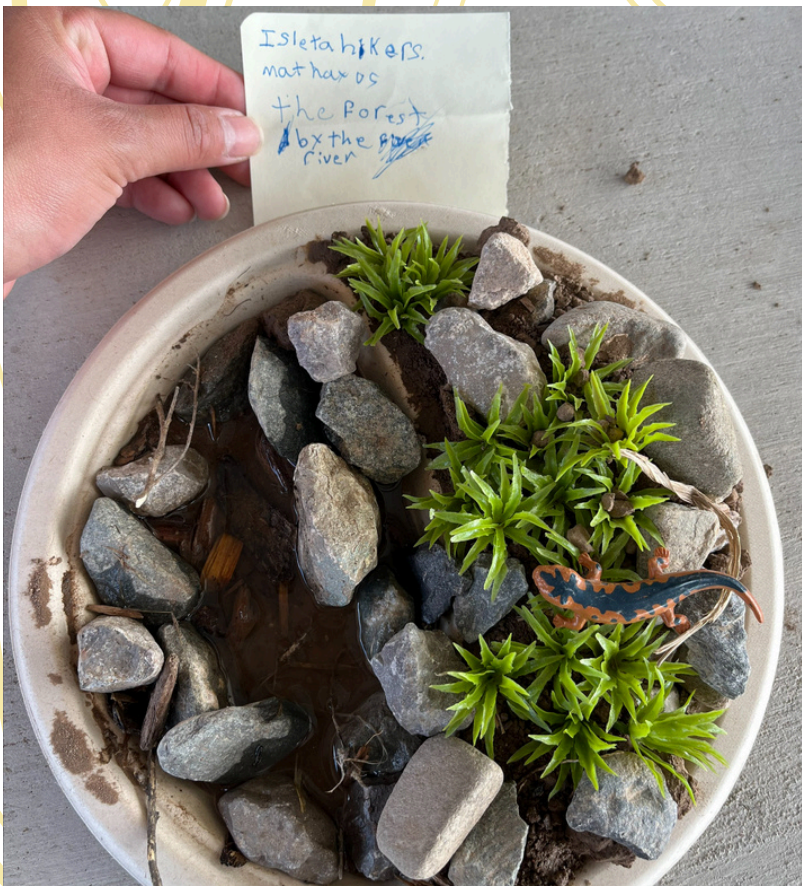
A nature play space is an area for your children to explore, engage, and learn from nature. By using natural features like stumps and logs to walk across, areas to dig and get a little dirty, and pathways to guide new adventures, we can help stimulate hands-on learning and exploration.

Nature play is proven to support physical, emotional, and social development, as well as boost understanding of natural processes and ecosystems.

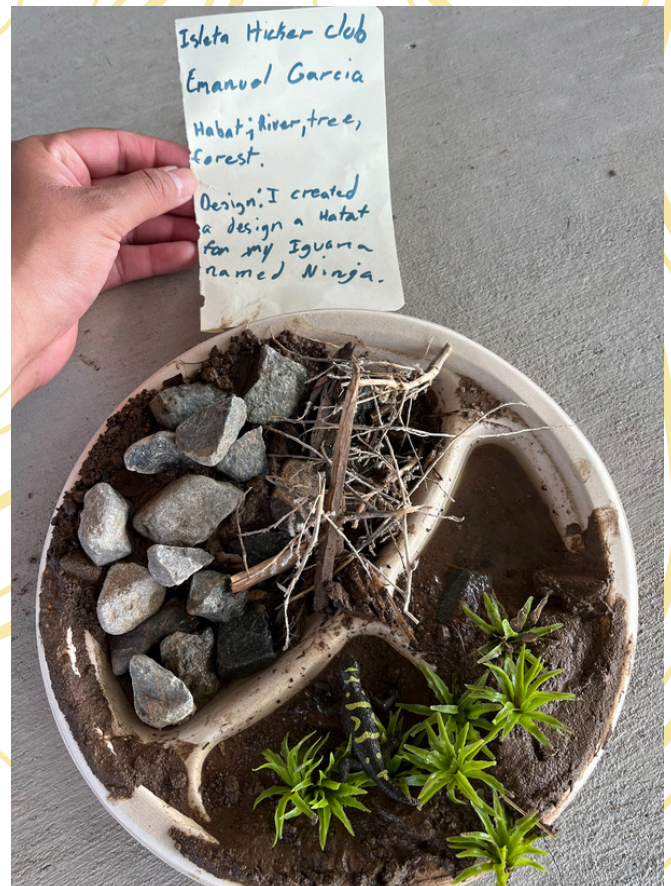
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENT TIMELINE 2023 	May/June Isleta Hiking Club Model-building	May 12th Mountain View Elementary School Field Day	May 18th Community Update: Open House Booth
	July 17th Friends of Valle de Oro Board Member Presentation	July 19th YCC & RMYC Presentation and Model-building	August 9th Valle de Oro Staff Visioning Session

ISLETA HIKING CLUB MODEL-BUILDING

A youth group that provided input on the nature play space area included the **Isleta Hiking Group**. This group participated in a habitat model building activity that allowed them to create a designated habitat space for animals that incorporated elements and structures that they valued. This group was also able to provide input on the activity engagement boards!



Isleta hikers,
mat hax os
the Forest
by the river



Isleta Hiker club
Emanuel Garcia
Habitat: river, tree,
forest.

Design: I created
a design a habitat
for my Iguana
named Ninja.

Common themes: Natural elements including rivers, trees, boulders and forests.

MOUNTAIN VIEW ELEMENTARY FIELD DAY

Valle de Oro staff hosted a field day for over **150 Pre-K-5th grade students from Mountain View Elementary School**. The field day included a variety of activities including archery, nature observation, and crafts. Two of the activities encouraged students to reflect on how they like to spend time in nature, and what they would like to see at the refuge.

The **"Animal for a Day"** activity encouraged students to choose one of the eleven species that are commonly found at Valle de Oro that they would like to be for a day, and share why! The species list included the American kestrel, New Mexico whiptail, coyote, dragonfly, and the black-tailed jackrabbit.

Themes from this activity will be incorporated into play features.



"I would want to be an American kestrel because I could see the sky from above."

"I would want to be a coyote because they are fast and strong."

"I want to be a toad so that I could jump high."

Common themes: Activities/movements including jumping, flying, climbing, hiding, exploring, and running; wildlife elements including interactions with wildlife and wildlife-themed features; vegetation including trees and plants; and exploratory elements including camping, mountains, and forests.



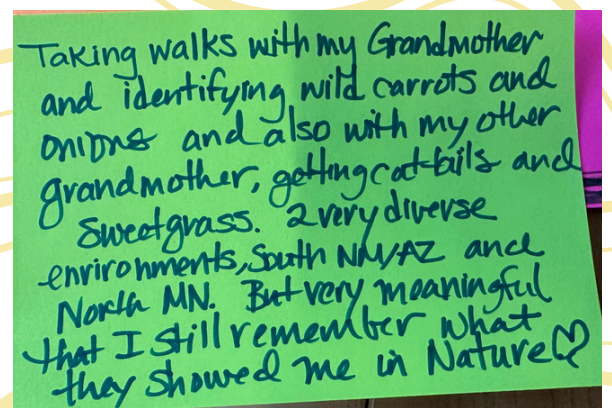
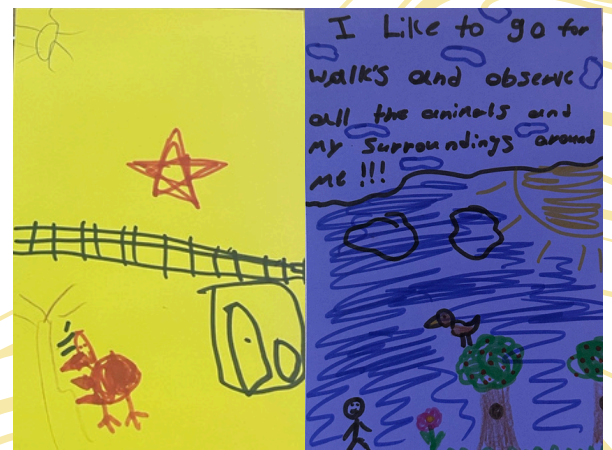
The **Nature Flag** activity encouraged students to reflect on how they like to spend time in nature and then create a "nature flag" to share with the group. Students were given two prompts to start their reflection:

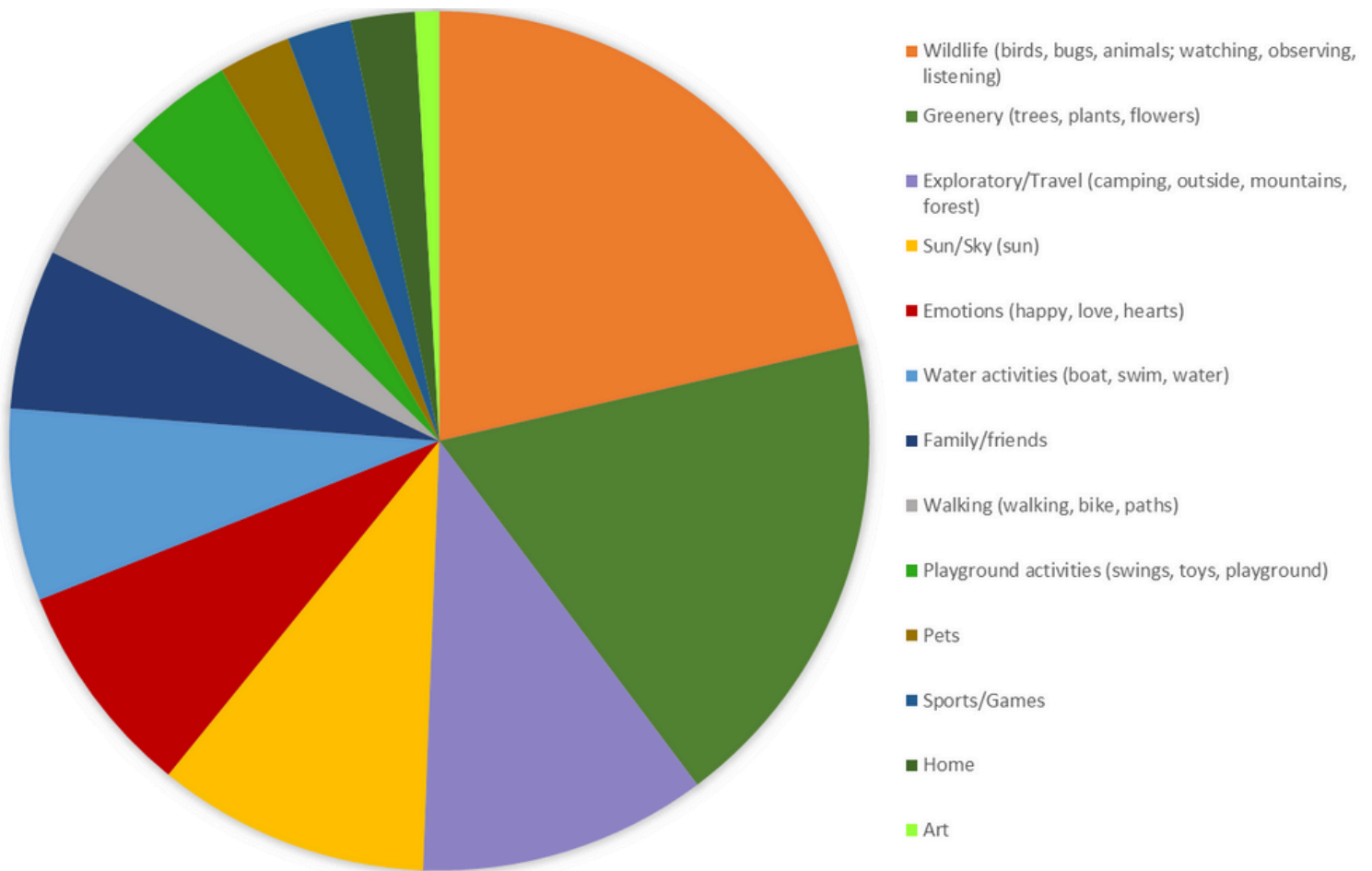
"How do you like to play in Nature?"

"In nature, I like to ___"

The flags created by Pre-K-5th grade students included drawings, descriptions, and favorite memories. The ECHO team spent time reviewing each flag and identifying **13 common themes**. The following themes were identified for each age group:

- Vegetation (trees, plants, flowers)
- Wildlife (birds, bugs, animals, watching, observing, listening)
- Emotions (Heart, love, giving)
- Sports/Games
- Playground activities (trampoline, structures)
- Water activities (water, fishing)
- Walking
- Exploratory/Travel (camping, field trips, mountains, forest)
- Home
- Family/friends
- Sun/Sky (sun, clouds, stars)
- Pets
- Art





Pre-K:

- Wildlife (birds, bugs, observing)
- Vegetation (trees, plants, flowers)
- Emotions (happy, love)

1st Grade:

- Exploratory/Travel (camping, field trips, mountains)
- Wildlife (birds, bugs, observing)
- Vegetation & Sun/Sky

2nd Grade:

- **Vegetation** (trees, plants, flowers)
- Wildlife (birds, bugs, observing)
- Exploratory/Travel (camping, field trips, mountains)

3rd Grade:

- **Vegetation** (trees, plants, flowers)
- Wildlife (birds, bugs, observing)
- Water activities (water, fishing, river, pool, pond, boat)

5th Grade:

- Wildlife (birds, bugs, observing)
- Vegetation (trees, plants, flowers)
- Walking (walking, walking dogs, hiking)

COMMUNITY UPDATE: OPEN HOUSE BOOTH

The ECHO team had the opportunity to engage with community members directly and learn about the elements they want to see incorporated in the future nature play space. Attendees were also invited to share about their favorite memories in nature by creating a nature flag and by adding to the engagement boards.

"I would go to water puddles by the ditch collect tadpoles take them home and create an environment and feed them and when they grew up I released them back at the ditch."

When we were kids we'd choose to be a horse - a Galemono, Quarter horse, Pinto - then have an outdoor race. Lots of fun and fast running around curves too."



Common themes: Wildlife interactions including birds and tadpoles; and physical movement including running and jumping

FRIENDS OF VALLE DE ORO BOARD PRESENTATION

Friends of Valle de Oro Board members were invited a Zoom meeting with ECHO staff to hear an introduction to the project and engagement progress thus far.

NATURE PLAY SPACE MODEL BUILDING

Valle de Oro hosted youth groups from the **Youth Conservation Corps (YCC)** and the **Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC)**. VDO staff and 9 students from the youth corps crews participated in a model-building activity where they were able to reflect on the following prompts:

"What are some of your favorite childhood memories in nature?"

Examples: Outdoor spaces, activities, events, times with friends/family

"When you visualize your memory, what's around you? What specific settings, components, elements, people, animals, etc. helped make these your favorite memories?"

Examples: insects, fruit trees, biking, pathways, family, picnic tables, pond



Group 1 Description:

- Patch of grass with flowers, different textures (used to play in the garden as a kid)
- Rocks kids can climb (we all played on playgrounds)
- Pond (all like water)
- Sand pit
- Seesaw
- Tree for shade
- Climbing stick
- Slide



Group 2 Description:

- Cottonwood tree/bosque as main piece
- Big log/branch with slides and ladders going up to slides
- Table
- Native trees
- Chairs in reading area
- Roadrunner springer equipment

Group 3 Description:

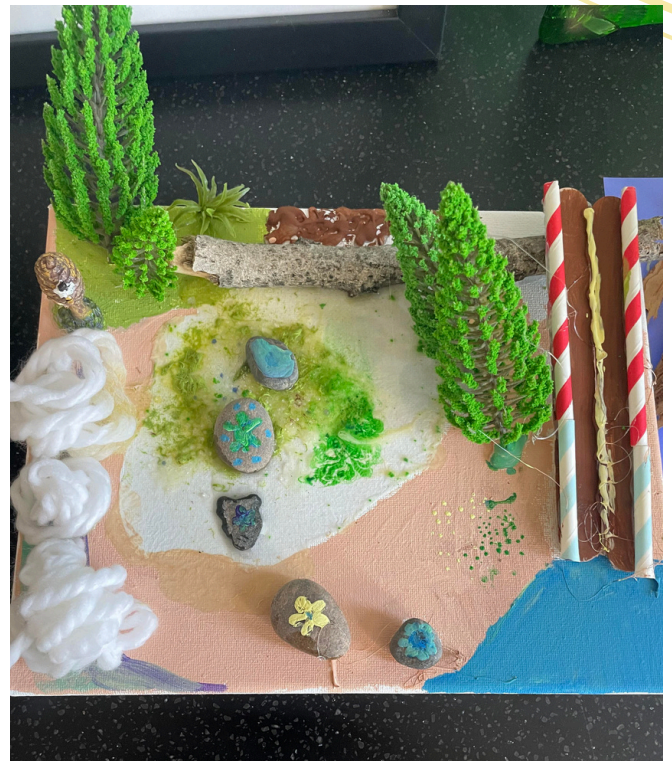
- Colorful seating area
- Monkey bars
- Tires to jump through/on (tires especially from memories)
- Ladder and water slide into a pond (played with hose as kids)

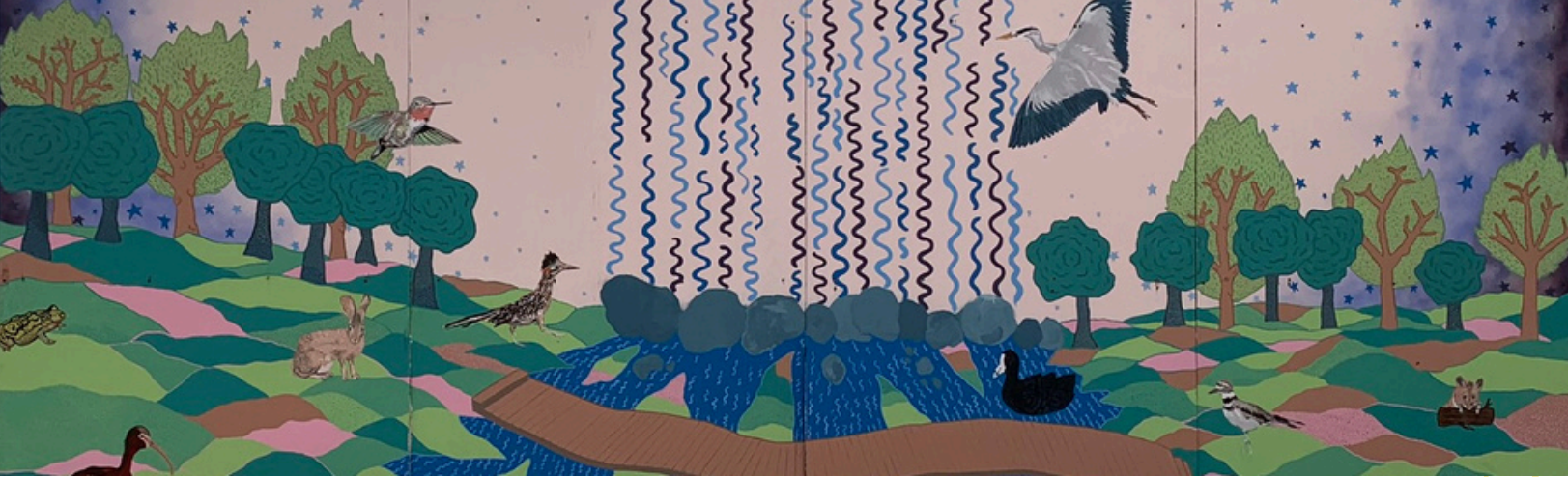


After reflecting, students split up into groups and were able to build a nature play space model as a group that reflected their favorite memories!

Common themes identified included:

- Structures to climb on
- Water sources
- Incorporating shade structures
- Natural Resources
- Incorporating materials from the Bosque/feel of the Bosque
- Trees
- Shade
- Slides





VALLE DE ORO STAFF VISIONING SESSION

In August, the ECHO team met with the Valle de Oro staff to host a visioning session on the nature play area. This virtual meeting allowed VDO staff to provide input on ten reflection questions. The group reflected on personal connections as well as the elements based on their experience working at the refuge. Together, they were able to provide input on elements that reflect values from the VDO refuge visitors and surrounding communities.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

What are some of your favorite childhood memories in nature?

Responses included memories that included: using all senses, art, water, dramatic play, active exploring, digging, wildlife interactions, and food.

Who will be using the nature play area?

- Families with young children who live close enough to walk.
- Local multigenerational families
- Youth who don't have access to any other green space at home.
- Indigenous youth
- Spanish-speaking communities
- Field trips students
- Youth Crews
- Hiking clubs
- Refuge visitors
- Staff and Volunteers

How are you hoping for young children and families to engage with nature at the refuge?

- Sensory experiences
- Active & Hands-On Exploration
- Safe, welcoming environment
- Connect with nature
- Something unique, "different" from other museum or conservation type experiences.



What is your vision for the nature play area?

Welcoming space that highlights: interconnectedness, sense of community, environmental stewardship, ownership and sense of pride.

"I want them to feel like this is a space worth protecting."

"A welcoming space that highlights the interconnectedness between our everyday lives and natural world."

"Another safe extension of/at the refuge before getting into 'too wild' or 'uncomfortable spaces.'"

Families feel a sense of ownership - this is our place - open, accessible, culturally relevant, safe.

What activities should the space encourage?

COMPONENTS

Sensory play, climbing, building, collaborating and problem solving, wildlife and plant interactions, quiet observations, unstructured messy play.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Activities that promote: inspiration, imagination, wonder, amusement, laughter, creativity, observation, laughter, connection, connection to the Earth and land-based cultural traditions.



What activities do we NOT want to encourage? What concerns do you have?

- Exclusion, policing youth
- Disruption to other people or items, loud noises
- Harming wildlife or others, destroying materials, wasting resources like water, taking without leaving for others (for both people and wildlife)

What infrastructure or settings are needed to support to users and activities?

- Features that work with the refuge's current environment
- Accessible features that considers visitor diversity (age, ability, preferences)
- Diversity of features (soft surfaces, light colors, shade, etc.)
- Signage detailing area use/regulations as well as additional signage throughout the space
- Elements that define the space and boundaries
- Big picture needs and considerations
- Natural structures that can be changed, adapted and to be unique with each interaction.

What kind of upkeep and maintenance might be needed?

- Updating signage
- Trash pick-up
- Organizing and replacing loose parts and materials
- Irrigation while plants are established
- Safety checks (disinfection of highly touched surfaces, checking area wasps and black widow spiders).

What questions are we missing? What else should we be asking?

- Accessibility for all (ability and age emphasized)
- Use of sustainable and recyclable materials
- Ensuring that this space is culturally sensitive and grounded in New Mexico culture
- Defining the space - boundaries, entrance and exiting the space

WHAT WE LEARNED

After meeting with a variety of community members, the ECHO team organized and identified common interests and themes.

WHAT SHOULD THE SPACE ENCOURAGE?

The space should encourage personal connections that promote inspiration, imagination, wonder, amusement, laughter, creativity, observation, laughter, connection, connection to the Earth and land-based cultural traditions.

It should also include components that encourage sensory play, climbing, building, collaborating and problem solving, wildlife and plant interactions, quiet observations, unstructured messy play.

Considerations for the upkeep and maintenance of the nature play space: updated signage, trash pick-up, organizing and replacing loose parts and materials, irrigation if plants will be incorporated, frequent safety checks (disinfection of highly touched surfaces, checking area wasps and black widow spiders).

MAINTENANCE & UPKEEP

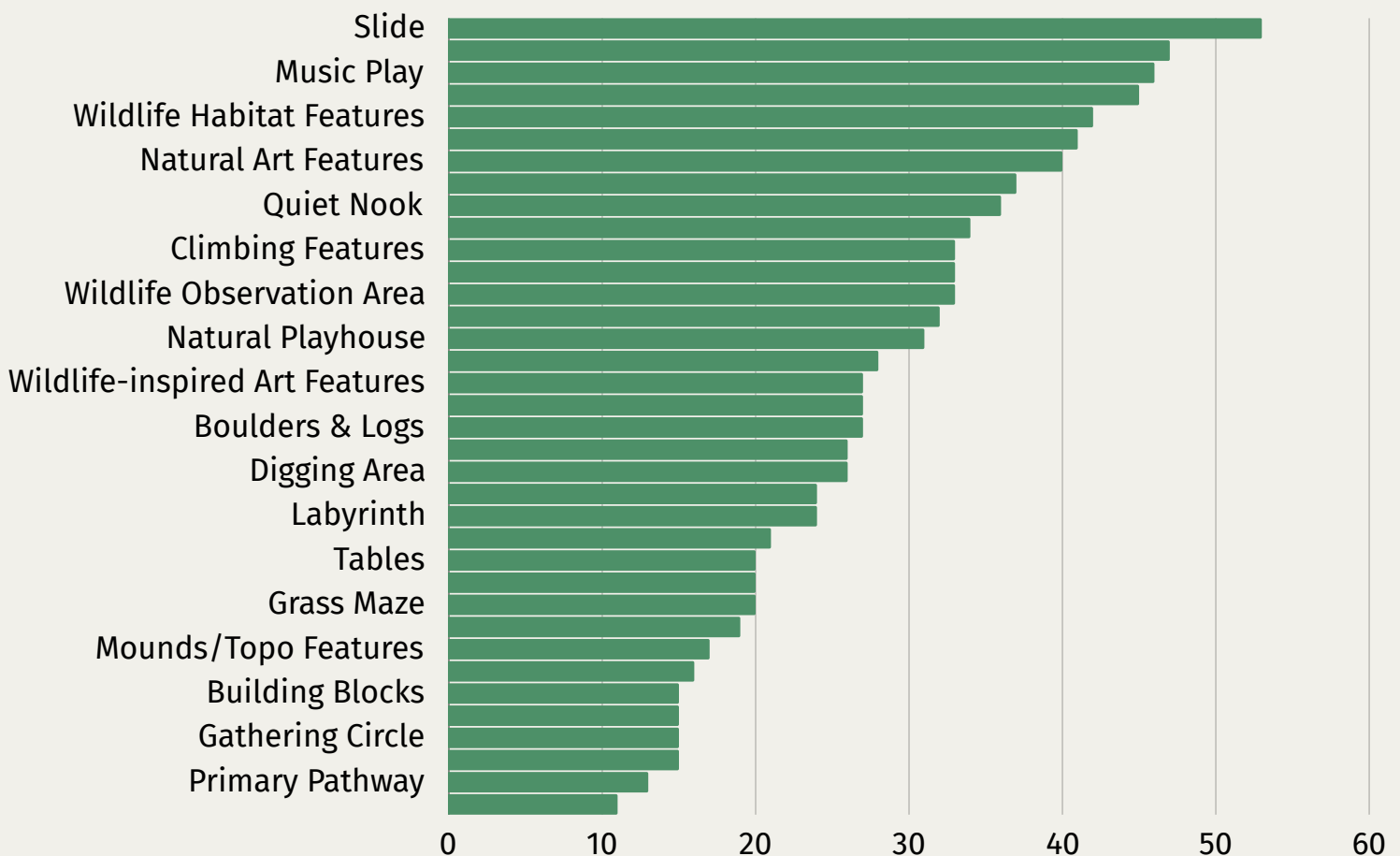
SUPPORT & RESOURCES

The following infrastructure and settings should be considered to support users and nature play activities: features that work with the refuge's current environment, accessible features that considers visitor diversity (age, ability, preferences), diversity of features (soft surfaces, light colors, shade, etc.), signage detailing area use/regulations as well as additional signage throughout the space, elements that define the space and boundaries, natural structures that can be changed, adapted and to be unique with each interaction.

ENGAGEMENT BOARD FEEDBACK

Throughout the year, the ECHO team received feedback through interactive engagement boards. These boards were set up at the refuge and at the events hosted at VDO. They encouraged refuge visitors to place a “dot/sticker” on a preset list of 37 activity settings and components that they would like to see at the refuge. The list included settings like digging areas, balance features, and loose parts to name a few. The engagement boards received 1,009 responses to the activity settings and components section and over 40 “additional ideas” responses.

ECHO Engagement Boards



WHAT OTHER NATURE PLAY & NATURE EXPLORATION IDEAS DO YOU HAVE?

Another component of the engagement boards included a section that was open-ended and encouraged community members to provide their own ideas. The ideas we received included priorities in a space, activities they enjoy participating in, or events they would like to attend in the future.

Ideas included:

- Prioritize earth building/minimize mass produced material
- Focus on interactive areas
- Cultural uses of plants (permission in partnership with Pueblo of Isleta)
- Water play that considers conservation
- Learning about native plants
- Refurbished material (possible suggestion: bark beetle ponderosa pine)
- Night observing
- Intergenerational learning about nature
- Frog and toad pond
- Scavenger hunt (seasonal)
- Foraging
- Climbable structure (of an animal - cranes, lizard)
- Easy to maintain and repair if needed
- Learning to be still and listen

