

## NATURE-SMART LIBRARIES

### Case Study: Rio Grande Valley, Pharr, Texas



**LEAP** Library Explorer Adventure Pack

Check-out your next adventure at these participating libraries!  
Try a different themed backpacks each visit.

**What's included?**  
2-week checkout  
10 different themes  
Books  
Guides  
Nature Tools  
State Park Access

**DUSTIN MICHAEL SEKULA  
MEMORIAL LIBRARY**  
1906 S. Cloister Blvd, Edinburg, TX 78539

- Birds & Birding
- Butterflies & Insects
- Star Gazing / Night Critters
- Native Plants / Botany
- Rocks & Fossils
- Gardening / Cooking with Plants

**MAYOR JOE V. SANCHEZ  
PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
525 S. Kansas Ave., Weslaco, TX 78596

- South TX Wildlife / Tracks & Scat
- Birds & Birding
- Butterflies & Insects
- Star Gazing / Night Critters
- Gardening / Cooking with Plants
- Outdoor Skill Building

**PHARR MEMORIAL LIBRARY**  
121 E. Cherokee Ave, Pharr, TX 78577

- Birds & Birding
- Fish & Fishing
- Beach Combing / Coastal Critters
- Star Gazing / Night Critters
- Rocks & Fossils

**DR. HECTOR P. GARCIA  
MEMORIAL LIBRARY**  
434 S. Ohio Ave., Mercedes, TX 78570

- Birds & Birding
- Star Gazing / Night Critters
- Native Plants / Botany
- Gardening / Cooking with Plants

**PHARR SAN JUAN ALAMO ISD**  
903 N. Flag, Pharr, TX 78577

- South TX Wildlife / Tracks & Scat
- Birds & Birding
- Butterflies & Insects
- Star Gazing / Night Critters
- Native Plants / Botany
- Gardening / Cooking with Plants

**BROWNSVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY -  
SOUTHWEST BRANCH**  
4320 Southwest Rd., Brownsville, TX 78521

- Birds & Birding
- Butterflies & Insects
- Beach Combing / Coastal Critters
- Star Gazing / Night Critters
- Native Plants / Botany
- Gardening / Cooking with Plants

**DONNA PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
301 S. Main St., Donna, TX 78537

- South TX Wildlife / Tracks & Scat
- Birds & Birding
- Butterflies & Insects
- Native Plants / Botany
- Gardening / Cooking with Plants

**PORT ISABEL PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
213 N. Yturria St., Port Isabel, TX 78578

- Birds & Birding
- Butterflies & Insects
- Fish & Fishing
- Beach Combing / Coastal Critters
- Star Gazing / Night Critters

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## INTRODUCTION

Pharr, located in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) of South Texas, is a predominantly family-oriented community with a largely bi- or multilingual population and many disabled or homebound residents. Pharr faces multiple challenges, including extreme heat and limited resources for safe and equitable outdoor play. Recognizing that engaging children would also benefit families, Pharr's library system sought to expand access to nature through its Nature-Smart Library (NSL) efforts.

## NATURE-SMART LIBRARIES IN ACTION

### Collections Development and Lending Programs

The city-operated Pharr Library system consists of two branches with dedicated and passionate staff. The children's programming system has been a driving force behind NSL efforts. Pharr's libraries benefit from the Learning, Exploring, and Play (LEAP) Backpack Program, supported by the Texas Children in Nature Network, and leverage outdoor spaces for programming.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

Pharr's NSL success is rooted in a mix of formal and informal partnerships that enhance resource sharing and program sustainability. The formal partnership with Texas Children in Nature Network provides support and resources for the LEAP Backpack Program. Informal relationships with public utilities, public works, parks and recreation and urban ecologists support nature programming opportunities. The Pharr Library staff maintains very strong relationships and regular communication with patrons. They even leveraged their suggestions for outreach channels to promote NSL and other library programming and have seen an increase in participation

Informal fundraising efforts for NSL are headed by children's staff leadership and supported by community partners. Any NSL addition to be funded has yet to come from an increase in the base budget. Texas Children in Nature Network, Texas Parks and Wildlife, PSJA Independent School District, and Nature organizations across the RGV partner to make the LEAP program possible.

## **AMPLIFYING AND SUSTAINING THE WORK**

While Pharr does not have dedicated NSL staff, the commitment of children's services staff has driven the rollout of NSL initiatives. An informal training program within both libraries ensures the longevity of these efforts. Library staff is building stronger relationships with city leadership to ensure continued support.

Pharr aims to become a Family Place Library system, increasing programming by 50%. Currently, all programming for ages 6–12 is mirrored with equivalent programming for ages 0–5. LEAP backpacks are available system-wide, with a pilot underway to assess the feasibility of scaling this model across the entire RGV region.

Expanded outreach by the children's programming team has increased participation in NSL activities. The system is exploring the addition of a mobile library unit to serve homebound and special-needs families better. The NSL team hopes for the continued circulation of LEAP backpacks and new grassroots partnerships to fund new outdoor learning/nature connection spaces.

Pharr's Nature-Smart Library efforts exemplify how a committed library system can address systemic barriers to outdoor play and learning. Through innovative programming, strong partnerships, and a focus on sustainability, Pharr creates meaningful opportunities for children and families to connect with nature—building a foundation for healthier, more resilient communities.