Exploration Green – It's How You Build Beauty, Nature and Flood Control, With Jerry Hamby

(Houston and Nature Episode 8)

https://HoustonNature.com/8

Nivien Saleh

What does beautiful flood control look like?

I'm Nivien Saleh with Houston and Nature.

That nature can support flood control is well known. That's one reason why the Katy Prairie is so valuable, and why we need to preserve our coastal wetlands. But how do you build natural flood control from the ground up, when all you have is a denuded landscape?

The people of Clear Lake can tell you, because they have a beautiful park in their midst. That park serves humans and wildlife, and during hurricane season it provides a buffer against flooding. Most impressive, it is human-built: Over the last six years or so the Clear Lake Water Authority, hundreds of volunteers and Houston-area environmental groups have been researching, nursing, building, and planting. The result is Exploration Green. And if you haven't seen it, you really should.

Today's episode features Jerry Hamby, one of the lead volunteers at Exploration Green and a passionate supporter of the project.

Before we get into it, though, a bit of housekeeping: If you haven't already done so, subscribe to my Nature Memo. This way, every time I publish a new episode I'll let you know by email. You can do it at https://houstonnature.com. That's also where you'll find episode transcripts and other resources.

And now on to the show!

Thank you so much for being on the show, Jerry.

Jerry Hamby's Nature Principle

Jerry Hamby
Glad to be here.

Nivien Saleh
You are a professor or at least until very recently, you were a professor. Tell me a little bit about that.

Jerry Hamby
My entire professional career was devoted to teaching in higher education. I started teaching English as a graduate student when I was in my early 20s, and I taught for 31 years at Lee College when I retired this last August. I taught English and humanities. In the last five years I was there I taught an honors class that combined those two disciplines, and it was team-taught. So there were two of us in the classroom with the top of the top students. And it was a very interactive class, not just in the classroom, but the fact that we went out into nature. Teaching that class allowed me to integrate my interest in nature studies with the disciplines that I taught. So we went to the San Jacinto Prairie, for instance, last fall, and we integrated history of the site with the history of the prairie renovation. We walked through the prairie, saw a historic cemetery. We spent the afternoon at the Baytown Nature Center. So we got to learn firsthand how we are part of the narrative of the place where we live. One of my favorite quotes is by Wendell Berry. He said, "You can't know who you are until you know where you are." That sense of person and place is so intricately woven. It was something that we instilled in our students when we went to visit the Baytown Nature Center, as well as the San Jacinto Prairie.

Nivien Saleh

So they really got the idea that that plants and wildlife probably also create a sense of place, right?

Jerry Hamby

Absolutely. The Wendell Berry quote comes from is from a book by Richard Louv called The Nature Principle. Louv talks about how we have disconnected ourselves from nature and we need to find our way back. It seems like a really obvious, simple thing to do, but given our high-paced, high-technology lifestyle, we've lost that.

Nivien Saleh

Absolutely.

Nivien Saleh

That sounds like such a cool, cool class, you know, just hearing you talk about it, I'm I'm thinking I would like to be a student in it.

Jerry Hamby

It was a delightful experience. The class is called "The human condition." It was started exactly 20 years ago this fall by a couple of my colleagues who've since retired. And over time, the class has been passed down to different teachers. About six years ago, my former colleague, Georgeann Ward, asked me if I would like to teach the class with her. It was perfect timing. I was reaching this point in my career that I was already thinking about retiring. She delayed that retirement.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Nivien Saleh

Houston, the Houston area, is huge. So there are lots of people that might have no idea where Lee College is. So tell me, where is it?

Jerry Hamby

Lee College is in Baytown. It is a very old ... one of the oldest community colleges in the Houston area. It was founded in 1934, and it serves a really broad population. In addition to the students who live in Baytown proper, the service area extends out to Barbers Hill, Liberty, Dayton. Lee College even has a presence in the Texas Correctional System.

So the college has really adapted effectively to the community and provided me just an amazing career. I taught at Lamar University in Beaumont before I got that job, and I always consider myself extremely lucky to have been able to teach in higher education.

Nivien Saleh

I completely understand how you feel. Do you live in Baytown?

Jerry Hamby

I do not. My wife Susan and I live in Clear Lake; it's about a 30 minute drive to work.

Exploration Green Is Not Discovery Green

Nivien

I met you in the fall of 2016 when you and I were both students at, the Texas Master Naturalist program and that is when I started hearing about Exploration Green, and I may have heard that you're somehow associated with Exploration Green, I thought, well, yeah, I've seen it. It's downtown. It's. Of course, it's not downtown because what's downtown is Discovery Green, but I imagine that I'm not the only one who thinks Exploration Green is Discovery Green. How do the two differ?

Jerry Hamby

Well, they differ because Discovery Green is a much more managed, controlled site providing green space in the heart of downtown. It's an amazing space. And of course, its name did inspire the name Exploration Green. I can't tell you how many people refer to Exploration Green as Discovery Green. Whoever came up with this - and it was a committee - I think they were looking to connect to something larger. Discovery Green was new at the time. It was quite vibrant. Everybody was enjoying it. They wanted to put a twist that reflected NASA, hence the exploration.

Nivien Saleh

Aaah.

Jerry Hamby

So the idea behind that name is to show we're part of Space City, but we are a green space.

Nivien Saleh

Could it also be because Exploration Green used to be a golf course, and isn't don't they use the term "green" in golf courses?

Jerry Hamby

Yes, the heart of this park is its connection to what used to be the Clear Lake City Golf course. And that course was first opened in the early 1960s. Thrived for decades, and as the Clear Lake area developed, larger, more modern facilities popped up. Some of the patronage to the Clear Lake course may have dropped off, and there was a company buying the property with the expressed intent of preserving it. For whatever reason that didn't happen. The course declined, the upkeep of the course declined, and there was a lot of concern that the company that purchased it was going to resell it to be subdivided and developed into retail space and

residential area. We're talking about a 200 acre spot in the middle of one of the most flood-prone areas in Houston.

Nivien Saleh

Mm hmm.

Jerry Hamby

The idea of dividing that up and adding more layers of concrete and the need for greater infrastructure to handle flooding was just untenable. There was a grassroots movement with the people who lived near that golf course. That's how I first discovered what was eventually going to develop into Exploration Green. I saw signs showing up in people's yards that said, "Keep green space green."

Nivien Saleh

Mmmh.

The Clear Lake Water Authority Takes Charge of the Golf Course

Jerry Hamby

The people became active in trying to find a way to wrest control of that property away from the company that had bought it, and along the way the community aligned itself with the Clear Lake City Water Authority. Clear Lake is in the City of Houston, but it has its own water district. The Clear Lake City Water authority in part is responsible for our flood control, all the drainage. And this park ultimately was was a perfect meeting of community needs in terms of finding green space, finding a way to mitigate flooding, and - in a really creative twist -, create natural habitat for wildlife. This all came about because there was a series of town hall meetings where people were sharing ideas. Subcommittees were formed to look at all of the possible ways to develop this park. One committee looked simply at trails. Another committee looked at landscaping, a different one looked at amenities. And ultimately, a plan was devised and shared with community. Once there was clear community buy-in, a landscape architect was hired to come up

with a master plan. And the master plan has guided us so far through almost 50 percent of the park's development.

Nivien Saleh

You said the whole thing started out with people rejecting development of the former golf course. They said keep the green space green. When was that?

Jerry Hamby

That would have been around 2011. Renaissance Golf, the company that owned the property, was trying to find a way to sell it. The water authority approached them, my understanding is they made an offer. Renaissance Golf wasn't interested in that offer. The water authority tried wresting control through legal moves, it eventually ended up in a court case in which Renaissance Golf won. It looked like they were going to do what they wanted with that property. The water authority appealed that decision, and it was during that time that Renaissance Golf decided, they would sell to the water authority, so the water authority purchased the land that almost 200 acres. They immediately went out trying to find some organization with which they could create a conservation easement.

Exploration Green in Perpetuity, Thanks to a Conservation Easement

Nivien Saleh

Explain what is a conservation easement.

Jerry Hamby

In Texas, most of the lands, even the large open spaces we see, most of that land is owned by private individuals. Conservation easements present a unique way to preserve the integrity of those sites. A conservation easement is an agreement between a landowner and some steward, some organization that wants to protect that land. The idea is that if an owner - and in this case it's the Clear Lake City Water Authority - owns this property and has said it intends to preserve it in the way that is outlined in that master plan, the conservation easement, the conservation

agreement forever protects that land and locks it into the specific requirements of that conservation easement. So if for any reason the water authority decided to sell the property, the new owners would have to abide by the same guidelines, the same master plan that was put in place. So what we have is a park broken up into five sections or phases, each of which has a lake. Each of those lakes can hold up to 100 million gallons of water. Then there is a trail system, a concrete trail system that will eventually go around all five lakes. Then there are layers of native habitat. That is where my volunteer work has tied in for the last six years.

Exploration Green Features Over A Hundred Bird Species

Nivien Saleh

And that's been very impressive volunteer work, and generally speaking, I find it so impressive that the community has been this involved in this project. Essentially Exploration Green is a giant detention pond, right, and we have many detention ponds in Houston, and most of them are nothing to look at. I mean, they're just ugly. And when I visited Exploration Green maybe two years ago, we were driving through south on I45, and I said, "Let's stop. I heard of Exploration Green so many times, I want to look at it." So we stopped, I saw it, and it was just enchanting. It is an detention pond, but it is so much more as a result of the efforts that that you and the fellow community and the Clear Lake Water Authority have engaged in. You already talked about the fact that there is native habitat and all kinds of amenities. I went there and I found this cool snail in the water. It was this giant snail, and I'm like, "Oh, my God, this is so cool. There's this snail!" And I almost wanted to grab it. Then I told you about this, and you'd say, "Yes, that's an apple snail. It's invasive." But for me it was still a cool experience, this giant snail. The Clear Lake Water Authority was really concerned about flooding in the area, right?

Jerry Hamby

Yes.

Nivien Saleh

And so that's why they pursued this conservation easement. Is it then the water authority that approached the community and tried to get the community involved? Or was the community approaching the water authority?

Jerry Hamby

I got the impression that it worked both ways. Some of the people I've met, once they heard that the property was in danger of being sold, immediately jumped into the situation. I think the Water Authority at the same time was interested in doing it. It was just a perfect pulling together of those two forces. It was just a little bit of luck, a great deal of community energy and ultimately an even greater need for a space, a space for wildlife. We're not very far from Armand Bayou Nature Center, which is the largest urban park of its type in the country. But it's not near residential areas. You have to drive out onto the edge of Southeast Houston to get to it. And the beautiful thing about Exploration Green is: It is absolutely dead center in the residential area. But when you're out there, you really can get lost in the wildness of that space. We live on what used to be a coastal prairie. As this park has been developed, you can see that wetland prairie re-emerging and re-staking a claim in that land, and there's just something magical about that.

Jerry Hamby

Early on, we started noticing native birds returning to this space in numbers we'd never seen. And as of about a year ago, observers had logged 100 species of birds in the park. We are now part of the Audubon's Christmas bird count. We're also part of an Audubon Tern Bird survey that happens every month. So there's been a great deal of interest with birders. We have bluebird nesting boxes on the first phase of the park and a project set to put more in on phase two. We've been talking recently with some scouts about perhaps putting in some screech owl boxes. We have bat boxes

Exploration Green's Impressive Volunteer Corps

Nivien Saleh

How many people from the community are involved in getting Exploration Green to where it is and where it will be?

Jerry Hamby

There are hundreds of people in some capacity associated with it. Part of the development of Exploration Green was the creation of Exploration Green Conservancy. The conservancy has an executive board made up of people from the community at least three of whom, four of whom, live right on the properties, the houses that are adjacent to the park.

The people associated with the project are varied. One of the members of the board, Jessica Bates, moved to the house she lives in along the park because the park was being developed. She lived in New York. She and her partner were relocating to Houston, and once she found out about Exploration Green, she sought out a property to buy ...

Nivien Saleh

Mmmh

Jerry Hamby

... along what is now phase two of that park. So you have people like Jessica, people who are drawn to this area specifically to be near that park.

The town hall meetings organized by the water authority and Exploration Green Conservancy drew in hundreds of people multiple times to give updates on the project and more importantly, to recruit. That's how my wife Susan and I became involved in this. We used to ride our bikes along old golf cart paths, and it was clear things were changing. And the signs would announce town hall meetings. At one of those there were tables set up in the back of the room for people to volunteer in various capacities. This would have been in early 2014.

Nivien Saleh

Mm hmm.

Trees For Houston, A Major Force for Good

Jerry Hamby

We decided to sign up to be volunteers to work on planting events, specifically tree planting events. At first, it was simply a matter of doing a little maintenance in an onsite nursery. The nursery is about half an acre and at full capacity can hold up to a thousand trees. And so in those early days, we were simply taking trees that were donated by Trees for Houston. Trees for Houston donated trees. Members of the board bought some trees, and the volunteers up-potted them from five gallon to 15 gallon pots. And over time we eventually put them into even larger containers. That early volunteer work was dozens of people coming initially once a month. That expanded to twice a month. Now there are twice-weekly events.

We we have so much work to do. As the park grows, there are more needs. As we plant trees, we have to acquire new inventory. We planted between December and February, 2019 to 2020, 350 trees.

Nivien Saleh

That is amazing.

Jerry Hamby

It stunned us. All of this was facilitated through the patronage of Trees for Houston. Exploration Green in its current incarnation could not exist without the support and patronage of Barry Ward, the executive officer of Trees for Houston and the staff who work for him. They've provided almost all of our trees. They provided the materials for the mats, the irrigation system, the training.

Nivien Saleh

Oh yeah

Students from Northwest Houston Help Out at Exploration Green

Jerry Hamby

As the project has moved along, we've increased the number of volunteers, we've increased the skill set of those volunteers, and we're drawing more and more people into the project. I mean, even now, in the midst of the pandemic, we had a planting event last Saturday that drew over 40 people. We planted 99 trees. The good news is: The community has really engaged, and when I say "community," it's a broad sense of how a sign out showing that there's a planting event who become part of this process. But beyond that, there are organizations in the community: boy scout troops, girl scout troops, interns at Johnson Space Center. We had students coming out from the northwest side of Houston simply because they learned we had a planting project.

Nivien Saleh

Northwest side of Houston? How many how many miles did they travel to get to that project?

Jerry Hamby

They told us it took them over an hour to get there.

Nivien Saleh

Wow. It seems that the community has done a lot to make Exploration Green happen, and that is that is really cool. At the same time, Exploration Green has given the community a lot. What would you say has Exploration Green done for the community?

Bird Boxes, Bat Houses, and the Occasional Baby Alligator

Jerry Hamby

Well, first and foremost, it has given them just one of the most unique green spaces that I've ever seen. We have given a lot of tours - sometimes associated with specific events - I led a tour with the Native Plant Society of Texas conference last year. And it brings in people, some from the area, some outside who have a laboratory right there. I mean, on the one hand, it's just a beautiful park. Most of the people I see there are walking on a concrete trail that encircles the first two phases of the park. You'll see people with their children, I've seen elderly people out there with wheelchairs and walkers. It's just a magnet. It's just a very nice place to go be outside. And so on the one hand, you just see your casual park visitor. But there are citizen scientists, people who love to just go out and bird watch. I see people sitting on those benches with tripods, taking photographs in the morning. I'll see people going out and just simply observing the wildlife up close just to learn about it. And one of the most fun aspects of my volunteer work there is because the close proximity between the trail and where the volunteers work, I'm always getting questions about the park. People want to know about the bird boxes or the bat boxes, or they ... They want to know if there are alligators in the ponds.

Nivien Saleh

Mmh

Jerry Hamby

And the answer to that is, yes, there are occasionally alligators. The waterways connect ultimately to Horsepen [?] Bayou. Horsepen Bayou feeds into Armand Bayou. So those alligators were already there. So occasionally there will be alligators in the park.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah

Jerry Hamby

In terms of what the community is getting from this: Particularly in the pandemic when our access to being able to socialize is so limited, this park has given people a unique place where they can go just for their own sanity, if nothing else, and just enjoy themselves.

Exploration Green as a Skill Building Hub

Nivien Saleh

These are very valuable benefits that you're describing, but they come from the park as an established amenity. The benefits that I have in mind come also from the process of creating the park, the skill-building in the community, the knowledge that, you know, you've turned into a tree planting expert. Right? Many others have, too.

Jerry Hamby

One of the unique things about this project is: Some of the early leaders had already done restoration work. Bob and Deborah Good [?] created or recreated pothole prairie wetlands in the Pine Brook subdivision where they lived in Clear Lake and other places. They brought those skills, that knowledge to their volunteer work with Exploration Green. The early tree inventory was for the most part created by Deborah Good. And what she did is: She wanted to find trees that were native to the Houston area. Now, that's kind of a tricky thing.

Nivien Saleh

Why? Because they weren't really that many trees in the Houston area?

Jerry Hamby

Exactly, because we ... Because what was normally here was, for the most part, a coastal wetland prairie. there were trees, there were riparian corridors along the bayous. But we were not as thick with trees as we are now. And so what you wanted was you wanted to find trees that had kind of migrated their way here or were already here that could provide greater benefits. I saw Deborah's initial tree list. It didn't just tell you the species. It would tell you specifically what habitat needs, I mean, down to the specific caterpillar that would feed off the leaves of, for instance, a sugar berry tree. She was very meticulous in trying to find trees and shrubs that would attract native insects, birds, other animals into this space. I learned a great deal from her.

Just that alone is one of the most invaluable things I learned. I also learned how to set trees into a space in a way to create really an illusion that it was native-grown.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Jerry Hamby

There are about three groves of loblolly pine trees. These are native to southeast Texas. But the trees, many of them approaching 60 years old, are dying when the excavation work was being done, the trampling of the equipment onto the ground disturbed the roots.

Nivien Saleh

The compaction of the soil.

Jerry Hamby

Exactly. And so there's been an acceleration even beyond the natural life cycle. Because there were already groves of loblolly pines, when we started thinking about what we wanted to plant in that phase, we wanted to think: How can we put in trees that can replace some of these? Deborah had a list of about 40 native tree and shrub species that we drew from. So I've learned a lot through Deborah. The volunteer I've worked most closely with is a man named Alan Brown. Alan has been with this project from the very beginning. We have learned from each other, from Deborah, from Barry.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

A Tree Planter, Jerry Loves the Short Grass Prairie

Jerry Hamby

We're we are always looking for ways to add new native species that .... The key there, of course, is diversity. And again, that's something I've learned a lot about. I mean, truth be known, I'm not a tree person.

Nivien Saleh

I wouldn't be able to tell.

Jerry Hamby

I grew up in the Texas panhandle. What is native to my experience is short grass prairie. I grew up looking at open expansive spaces. And there's something within me that even now thrives on that, longs for that. I connected with trees because that happened to be the niche that was available to me in the park at the time I became a volunteer. I have since learned a lot about trees, learned to appreciate those trees. But at heart, I still love those open spaces.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah, you are one of the most intensely involved people. But then there were many other people that were involved slightly less intensely. And so to a certain extent, we can extrapolate your experience of learning, of improving your skills, and it kind of multiplies and ripples through the entire community. And that's a pretty cool thing.

Jerry Hamby

Here's something else that's happening. As the project has gotten larger, we've needed more people to take on those lead volunteer responsibilities.

Nivien Saleh

Oh, leadership skills, that's another skill that you could learn mhm.

Jerry Hamby

Correct. I have been working closely with about three or four lead volunteers who are taking over the jobs that I've been leading. They've shadowed Alan and me as we go through and select trees to plant.Then the new lead volunteers will follow us at the planting site as we of rough out how many trees we think we want to put in a particular area. So there's a whole group of lead volunteers who are coming in behind us. It's important for many reasons. One, the park is just expanding at a pace that requires more leads. The other thing is: My wife Susan and I are going to be leaving the Houston area within the next year. Our plan is to move to the Texas Hill country. So out of practical consideration, I have been passing along responsibilities. And what that's meant is more people are learning the process.

Nivien Saleh

And that's great.

Jerry Hamby

It is amazing.

It just gives me a great deal of satisfaction to know that this project's going to continue long after any of us who were currently associated with it are working on it.

How did Exploration Green Fare During Harvey?

Nivien Saleh

An obvious question probably is how has Exploration Green held up under Harvey, um. Are there metrics to say: Clear Lake has been better because of the way Exploration Green was planted, that if it had been a golf course, it would not have been doing so well.

Jerry Hamby

Harvey presented our biggest challenge. And the project met it with flying colors.

The water authority was watching eagerly as that storm was developing because they'd never really had a test. When Harvey hit, only half of Phase One was completely excavated. The other half was probably a month, two months away from completion. But it was not in condition to be able to accept that water as readily. So what happened was: The gate that regulates the outflow released water over a two-week period. And the effect of that is that it allowed the water to go downstream at a much more manageable rate. One of the things that has been a slow process in learning for civic engineers is how to deal with water flow through a city. Houston is called the Bayou City.

As we conduct this interview, there's a bayou very close to us. And like many of the bayous that go through the heart of Houston, it's channelized. It has concrete boundaries that increase rapidly the flow of that water. Well, we know now that that is a disastrous way of handling the water, particularly for the recipients on the downstream end. Instead of letting that water absorb or diffuse at a more natural pace, it is being conveyed at a much higher rate that is damaging to property. So with the outflow gate at Phase One of Exploration Green the water just gently went right up to that limit. It filled that capacity, and then over a period of about two weeks, it very slowly released downstream. There was absolutely no structural damage to that dam there or to the outflow gate. We did have a few issues with invasives. Because of the water that flows into the park comes through neighborhoods, it brings in ...

Nivien Saleh

Yeah, all the seeds.

Jerry Hamby

Oh yeah, all the seeds. And so a lot of the native grasses were displaced by vaseygrass or Dallas grass or other invasives. So we've had to deal with the aftereffects ...

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Jerry Hamby

... of these large rain events, but the structural integrity of those lakes has been exceptional. The water authority estimates that at least 100 homes in the immediate surrounding area of Phase One, were saved from flooding.

Nivien Saleh

That's what I was interested in.

Jerry Hamby

There's a man who bought a house on what used to be the golf course back in the early 1960s, right when the golf course was developed. His house had flooded multiple times. It did not flood during Harvey. And as the park continues, that storm water retention capacity is just going to increase.

Where Does All Your Passion Come From?

Nivien Saleh

Thank you. Over the years or months I talked to you every now and then, saying, "Hey, Jerry, I want this or that from you," and you're like, "No, I can't. I have to work at the Lee College, and then I have to volunteer at at Exploration Green." It seemed like you were always super busy. What amazes me is that you have such a busy life as a professor, and then you put every minute, it seems, of your free time into this project. And I'm wondering: Where does all this passion come from?

Jerry Hamby

I've always loved nature. I honestly cannot think of anything I would enjoy more than hiking in a natural space. I grew up near Palo Duro Canyon.Our family would frequently have picnic outings there, and I got to explore the small trails near those picnic areas. My father would take us on trips to boat, ride motorcycles and hike, and I just I always loved being outside. The funny

thing about it is: I didn't have much of an interest in learning about it beyond maybe the historical, the social, the cultural. I didn't have much interest in the naturalist element. About 10 years ago, Susan and I were in Austin on a tour in a park. The woman who was leading the tour had a Master Naturalist tag on. I'd never heard of Texas Master Naturalist program, I asked her about it, and she told me all about the program and the training and the certification, the volunteer work. I logged that in the back of my head. I thought, when I retire, that would be kind of a fun thing to do. It would be fun to learn about areas of study I didn't get much background in. My background is in fine arts and humanities. I took my minimum science in college, so I don't have much background in that.

Nivien Saleh
Yeah,

Jerry Becomes a Texas Master Naturalist

Jerry Hamby
I thought, I'll do that when I retire. When I started doing volunteer work for Exploration Green in 2014 I met another Texas Master Naturalist: a woman who had just finished her certification for the Galveston Bay Area chapter, Martha Richardson. She told me that the Gulf Coast chapter, the Houston Harris County chapter, had training in the evening and that I wouldn't have to wait until I retired. And so I applied. And in the fall of 2014, I did the training while I worked.

Nivien Saleh
Are you sure it was 14 because ...

Jerry Hamby
I did it in 2014. I did it before you did it.

Nivien Saleh

So you, you and I were not in the same class. Huh? OK. [Laughs]

Jerry Hamby

Don't you love this? Yes. So you want me to back up and start on this again?

Nivien Saleh

OK, ok. Never mind. Never mind. All right. So, you told me that you love walking, and have a passion for nature. But walking in the short grass prairie is more of a solitary pursuit while being in Exploration Green is a very social thing. So. I would think that as somebody who loves to be in nature, you would rather do something where you're alone, but that doesn't seem to be the case. You're very passionate for group work.

Jerry Hamby

I am. I am passionate about group works, but I also take great satisfaction in just finding a small project to do either on my own or with a small group of people.In fact, the bulk of the work I do with the park is solitary. There is something very zen-like about being in that space and being totally absorbed in it, losing myself in it. I can spend hours there and be perfectly happy But my abiding interest in this has been accentuated by the Master Naturalist training. Once I had decided I wanted to do the training and not wait until I retired, I'd already been volunteering. So I had this natural place to get in my volunteer hours. It was easy for me. I mean I have already logged almost 500 hours since January just at Exploration Green.

Nivien Saleh

Hmmm

Exploration Green Has an On-Site Wetland Nursery

Jerry Hamby

The park has only closed one time during the pandemic. So the tree nursery work has continued, usually with no more than 10-12 people. The large scale plantings have just started again last week with no more than 50 people. And there's a whole other part of this project that we've not really talked about that's as crucial as the tree planting. That's the wetland plantings. There is an on-site wetland nursery. It has ten tanks. Mary Carol Edwards was the first person who was in charge of that spot. And the nursery is now being managed by Christie, Christine Taylor. Christie is employed by Texas AgriLife. She propagates plants on site. And they've been going out once a week just to plant wetland plants in Phase Two. They have planted thousands of plants in those two lakes, and they have their own robust volunteer group, and they've expanded their work to other parks so that they also grow plants for other sites.

Why Are You Leaving Exploration Green for the Hill Country?

Nivien Saleh

Hmm. Good. You and Susan, as you said, are going to move away into the Hill Country. Having created this beautiful amenity, why are you deciding to leave?

Jerry Hamby

It's going to be very difficult. I've spent more than half my life in Houston. I love Houston. But this decision about moving comes down to some serious practicalities. Susan and I have evacuated three times from hurricanes. The first time we were stuck on the road for more than 14 hours and ended up 30 miles from the eye of Hurricane Rita near Woodville. We live in a particularly vulnerable part of the Houston area. On a straight line, we probably live less than 10 miles from Galveston Bay. I am concerned about increased flooding. The population of the larger Houston metropolitan area grows by an astonishing 100,000 people every year. I can't even get my head around what that means. And while projects like Exploration Green are doing an amazing job of trying to limit flood damage, I don't believe the pace can keep up with the danger. I don't want to spend my retirement years living in dread of hurricane season.

No Match for Climate Change?

Nivien Saleh

You believe that flooding and hurricanes are going to get worse as a result of climate change and as a result of population growth?

Jerry Hamby

Absolutely. During Harvey I woke up in the middle of the night, looked out in my front yard and could not see the street. And at that moment I realized, Susan and I could not leave our neighborhood if we wanted to. We started seeing reports on the news that people who had water in their homes should not call in for help. You know, the real need was for people who had to get up on their roofs because their house was so flooded that they were at risk of drowning. Our house did not flood. But we were easily within an hour of having water come into our house, and that's a very terrifying thing to see.

Nivien Saleh

It is.

Jerry Hamby

I just don't want to live with that.

What Insights Do You Have for Community Organizers?

Nivien Saleh

Hmmm. Well, that makes a lot of sense to me. It does, yeah. Exploration Green has been and is being such a great success and I wonder: Do you have insights that you could share with community organizers in other areas of Houston? What are your insights into making a communal project successful?

Jerry Hamby

Part of it is seeking out appropriate partnerships. I could give many examples, but I'll give a simple one. Amanda Daly from the Houston Zoo contacted Exploration Green's board and said, "We have a Pollinator Pathways project, and we would love to put in a pollinator garden at Exploration Green." I got involved in the chain of discussions and met with Amanda. We found a space where we could put in a very small plot, It's right on the very southern edge of the park, and it connects to a nearby neighborhood that has pollinator gardens that are within sight of one another. And the idea is that these pollinator insects and birds can travel visually from spot to spot to spot. It starts at Johnson Space Center, at the Attwater Prairie chicken hatching setup they have there and goes all the way through adjoining neighborhoods and reaches us at Exploration Green. Well, that was an amazing partnership to get a connection not just with the most popular cultural site in Houston, the Houston Zoo, but with a very noble and worthy project that improves people's communities. So working with Amanda, we helped install a few of those little pollinator gardens. And that relationship, I hope, will continue. Part of it is having social media-savvy people associated with this project - Jessica Bates has done a phenomenal job.

Nivien Saleh

So so recommendation one is: Seek out partners. Recommendation two would be: Have social media-savvy people and use social media for outreach.

Jerry Hamby

Absolutely. People often point out how much time I spend at events taking photographs. What I always say is: If you don't record it, the experience didn't happen. We need to share our work, share our experiences. I can't tell you how many times photographs that volunteers have taken, drone shots from people whose backyards abut the property ... I have seen their photographs in national publications. There is so much interest in our story and even more since Harvey, and people can see what an absolute success this project has been. We are a model for other urban planners, other urban areas needing green space. And the key is to tell that story, to share it and to be very visible with what you're doing.

Nivien Saleh

So number one is look for partners, number two is social media. Is there a number three?

Jerry Hamby

We are ambassadors for this community, and we we want people out here.

Nivien Saleh

Yeah.

Jerry Hamby

And, you know, when we're out there, they are asking us about the park. They are asking us about the wildlife. One of our lead volunteers, Rich Summers, loves to recruit people on the spot. If somebody comes by and asks a question or even if they don't, Rich will start talking to them. He'll tell them about the volunteer work events in the nurseries. He'll talk about planting events. He'll talk about a community event that may be coming up. We just have to encourage people to enjoy the space.

Nivien Saleh

We need people to care about nature and the environment.. If the park gets more people into the environment and into nature and to appreciate nature and to become an advocate for nature, then the park has done something very valuable.

Jerry Hamby

Right. One of the things that is a constant is people coming up and thanking us. And what I always say in return is, "Thank you for enjoying this park. It gives us great satisfaction to see that you're getting something out of it." You know, we need that community as much as they need this space.

Nivien Saleh

So I want to say: Thanks to you. And to all the volunteers that that have created this wonderful thing, and then thanks to to other people like the Galveston Bay Foundation, the Clear Lake Water Authority, Trees for Houston. It's just a great, great example of what Houstonians, Clear Lake-ians can accomplish when they come together and when they're committed to nature and to the environment. So thank you for your work. And I hope you're not going to miss Houston too much.

Jerry Hamby

Well, I appreciate having the opportunity to talk about Exploration Green.

Nivien Saleh

Thank you, Jerry.

Jerry Hamby

Sure, you're welcome.

Nivien Saleh

This it for today. To find the transcript of this episode, go to https://Houstonnature.com/8. That's Houstonnature.com, a slash, and the number eight. And as always, if you enjoyed this episode, please tell a friend.

With Houston and Nature, I'm Nivien Saleh.