2011 ASLA Design Awards

Eagle River Preserve - Phase 1
Honor Award and Land Stewardship Designation
Norris Design

Environmental Restoration and Reclamation
ASLA COLORADO CHAPTER
2011 PROFESSIONAL DESIGN AWARDS
CATEGORY 5
Eagle River Preserve

PROJECT FACT SHEET

1. **Project Name:** Eagle River Preserve – Phase 1

2. **Project Location:** Edwards, Colorado

3. **Project Summary:** The first 25-acres of the Eagle River Preserve were built from the reclamation of a 72-acre gravel pit project where the landscape was rebuilt and sculpted from approximately 700,000 cubic yards of imported fill material. As a Wildlife Preserve for Eagle County that includes direct access to a previously private stretch of the Eagle River, the site was designed and constructed to create a natural looking habitat that features an irrigation ditch fed stream, waterfalls, ponds, wetlands, and riparian and upland habitat among the sculpted landforms that tie it to the surrounding landscape. Crusher fines trails, parking, restroom facilities, fencing, bridges and benches all help to direct and manage visitors to the Preserve and relieve pressure on the native vegetation and sensitive habitats. This site was previously slated to be turned into a high-density mixed-use development before Eagle County and the Vail Valley Foundation stepped in to purchase, restore and protect this land in perpetuity.

4. **Purpose of the Project:** For thirty years, the site of the Eagle River Preserve was an active gravel pit that had been run by B&B Excavating. When the land was purchased by Eagle County and the Vail Valley Foundation, the goal was to restore, enhance and protect the land as a Preserve that would be managed by Eagle County and create a new habitat for many local species of wildlife.

Since the gravel pit had been active for so long, the associated impact to the landscape was quite extreme. The excavation of the gravel material had left a scar on the land that was up to 70 feet deep in some areas with compacted and sterile soils. To mitigate and restore the land beyond just the minimum requirements in the mining permit, over 700,000 cubic yards of fill material was imported to rebuild the topography of the site. This material came from other construction sites in the area and a tipping fee was charged to help pay for the cost of design and construction. The intent was to sculpt the land in a way that would tie seamlessly into the surrounding landforms, accommodate the designed elements of the Preserve and appear as if it had existed here for years, yet still acknowledge the history and significance of the gravel pit.

Water played a significant role in the scope of work and design intent since the centerline of the Eagle River is the northern boundary of the property. In addition, with the purchase of the property came the water rights and the position of “end user” from the Dodd Irrigation Ditch. During the irrigation season from mid April through mid October, the site receives between one and four cubic feet per second (cfs) of water. To take advantage of this resource, the landscape architect designed a stream, ponds and a series of wetland basins in which the water flows through the site. The intent was to design different scenarios and microhabitats where the water would provide diverse ecosystems including a fast cascading stream, still water in shallow wetland pools, deep ponds with vegetated edges and the eventual confluence at the Eagle River.

The Client required that only native vegetation be used. Herbaceous wetland plugs were planted on the fringes of the stream, ponds and wetland basins. Riparian trees and shrubs were planted in a manner that
would allow them to take advantage of the hydrology and to create an ecologically and aesthetically appropriate mix of vegetation. Native xeric plants were used farther away from the water’s banks. Native grasses were seeded to provide a healthy cover throughout the Preserve.

The overall purpose of this project was to restore the physical impacts to the land created by the mining operation and to craft a naturally appealing, ecologically healthy Preserve that provides a superior wildlife habitat and a sense of place.

5. Construction Budget: $350,000

6. Role of the Landscape Architect: The landscape architect took the vision of the client and translated this into a set of construction documents. Since the project was a design/build effort with the contractor, the construction documents were just a starting point. The success of the project came from the communication, collaboration and flexibility between the landscape architect, the contractor and the owner as there were several design decisions made in the field while all three were present. While the overall design intent remained true, at times the details and/or layouts were field adjusted to best fit the evolving earthwork and changing topography as the fill material was sculpted.

The landscape architect provided planning, design and construction oversight throughout the entire project.

7. Special Factors: The overall project presented a unique scenario when twenty-five (25) acres of a seventy-two (72) acre scar on the land were back-filled with 700,000 cubic yards of dirt and the landscape architect was able to rebuild the topography based on the design intent of the project. There were times when the landscape architect did not know exactly how much fill material would arrive at the site and would improvise to have the contractors move material throughout the site in a manner that wasn’t originally planned. When the final topography was established, the landscape architect and contractor could then begin the layout and construction of the surface elements such as the aquatic system, trails and visitor parking lot while the additional fill material could be used later to fill the second and third phase areas.

It was also unique to benefit from being the end user of an irrigation ditch and to be able to create multiple “natural” aquatic features that became such a focal point for the Preserve. However, as the technical end user of the water, the site wasn’t physically located at the end. The rancher who leased the land to the gravel mine actually continues to own land on the opposite side of the Eagle River, so their water right is senior to the right of the Preserve. Therefore, a splitter and bypass system that spanned over the river had to be developed so they could access their water ahead of the Preserve.

8. Significance: When a commercial development plan for this site fell through, Eagle County and the Vail Valley Foundation stepped up to purchase the property with the intent of preserving and restoring the land to a wildlife habitat. Because of the high price tag on the property, there was a level of skepticism about the project from some members of the public who doubted that a wildlife Preserve was the highest and best use for this piece of land. However, as the landscape and aquatic features have matured over the last several years, the aesthetic beauty and ecological health are continuously improving. From the day the Preserve opened, the County frequently gets very positive feedback with the way it turned out. For many who are not aware of the history of the site or the scars created by the gravel mine operations, this Preserve is an enjoyable destination with access to a tremendous fishery, beautiful landforms and a natural aquatic system. For those that are aware of the previous gravel mine site which resembled a barren and sterile moonscape, the improvements to the land are quite stunning. This Preserve represents the highest level of environmental stewardship and positively affects the perception our profession as it took an incredible amount of teamwork among the contractor, owner and landscape architect to make this project a success.