

September 18, 2016

LIFE ON MARS: WILDLIFE RESCUE AND REHAB CENTRE ADDS TOURISM ELEMENT

COURTENAY – After more than 20 years of rehabilitating sick and injured wildlife from across northern Vancouver Island, the Mountaineer Avian Rescue Society (MARS) is about to embark on a major expansion, adding educational tourism to the services it provides.

MARS has experienced significant growth in its caseload, and purchased a 4.4 hectare site in 2014 between Courtenay and Campbell River. With new zoning from the Comox Valley Regional District in hand, MARS is beginning the process of building a Wildlife Eco Centre along with a new hospital facility.

The Island Coastal Economic Trust is supporting the project with \$236,000 of the total budget.

“The business case for the creation of the ECO Centre is clear: a very conservative estimate is 10,000 visitors annually, leading to the creation of between six and ten local jobs,” said ICET Chair Phil Kent. “Beyond the tremendous impact MARS has on the wildlife they save, this project is going to be a significant driver of tourism-based economic activity.”

The ECO Centre will include an interpretive building with displays, a theatre, closed-circuit cameras showing ‘patients’ in the wildlife hospital, meeting rooms, a gift shop, and more.

“Wildlife viewing is a significant and growing tourism activity, with people interested in authentic, educational experiences,” said Warren Warttig, President of MARS and professional biologist. “From our educational or ambassador birds, unable to leave due to injuries, to the Flight Pen where large birds including eagles, swans cranes, and other large birds are rehabilitated, to trails and viewing ponds, visitors will have an immersive experience with the wildlife at our centre.”



MARS Wildlife Rescue Interpretive Centre – Concept Drawing

Studies show that more than 30% of Canadians included wildlife viewing as part of their vacation experiences, and that they tended to have higher-than-average incomes and education levels, meaning that they are prime targets for destination marketing initiatives.

“ICETs own research into the visitors who will come to the ECO Centre shows that the average per-day spending is about \$155,” Kent explained.

MARS is already an established presence on the island, with 20,000 fans on Facebook, and numerous media stories that have gone viral, reaching international audiences.

“We’re ready to really reach our potential with this project, building the facilities that will allow us to bring visitors in for a first-hand insight to what we do,” said Pearl McKenzie, Vice-President of MARS. “From the moment they arrive on site when they’re greeted by a volunteer for an orientation, to the conclusion of their self-guided visit, we’re going to be providing visitors with an experience unlike any other.”

Fully staffed with both employees and volunteers, the ECO Centre will encourage guests to ask questions and have conversations to deepen their understanding of the wildlife and the rehabilitation efforts they go through.

Each habitat within the facility will lead the visitors through displays highlighting the flora and fauna of the regions of BC from which the birds arrive: the North Island, the Discovery Islands, and the inlets and fjords of the Coastal Mainland.

“This accessible ‘trail’ meanders and winds through the simulated environments, complete with the sounds one would hear in nature, giving visitors a sense of the wildlife’s environment,” said Pearl McKenzie.

Interpretive signs and story boards will describe the historical importance of each habitat to First Nations as well as the values inherent for people today.

For sections of the facility not accessible to the public - like the wildlife hospital - closed-circuit cameras will be placed throughout the buildings to allow visitors to see the patients and the work being done in the rehab centre. Volunteers and staff will relay the story of each patient, including where and how it was rescued, the cause of injury or illness, prognosis, and other information.

The project is expected to be complete by August, 2017.

About the Island Coastal Economic Trust

Created by the Province of BC in 2006, the Island Coastal Economic Trust is celebrating its tenth year of investment in economic diversification, planning and regional revitalization.

ICET is independently governed by a Board of Directors and two Regional Advisory Committees which include more than 50 locally elected officials and MLAs and five appointees from the Island and Coast. This exceptional team of leaders collaborate to set regional priorities and build vital multi-regional networks.

Through a community-centred decision-making process, ICET has approved \$49 million for over 160 economic infrastructure and economic development readiness projects. ICET investments have leveraged over \$270 million in investment into the region creating more than 2500 construction phase jobs and 2600 long term permanent jobs.

A full overview of ICET can be found at www.islandcoastaltrust.ca.

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