

Testimony of Amy Bowen, US Army Veteran to
The Committee of Natural Resources Subcommittee of Oversight and Investigations

Good Afternoon Chairwoman Porter and members of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee,

My first “camping experience” was as a college Army ROTC cadet four months after September 11th. I was in Fort Lewis, Washington during a freezing wet night, pulling security with a pretend rubber M16A2 rifle, questioning my life choices. This is not what I thought camping was supposed to be. While I felt deathly cold that January night, I toughened over the next decade and lived up to being a third generation Army veteran. I entered the Army in 2005 as a registered nurse at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, taking care of my peers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan - until I had the opportunity to deploy to Iraq in 2008 and run a clinic for American troops. After Iraq, I transitioned to become a Civil Affairs officer, a job under United States Army Special Operations. At that point, my experiences outdoors were more hate than love, but I grew confident with each challenge: survival school, hot days at Airborne school, long days in North Carolina humidity carrying a lot of equipment, bugs, and more long days in the mountains of Georgia with more humidity. As I was growing to know what I could do myself, I pushed the boundaries of what people could expect from me as a Soldier and began to enjoy the outdoors.

I deployed in 2013 to a remote outpost in Afghanistan, surrounded by the beautiful Hindu Kush mountains. I became the only woman on the outpost after a few months in, not feeling isolated until a man attempted to sexually assault me. I decided to leave the Army when I returned home in 2014. At that point I had severe back and hip problems related to parachuting and carrying heavy loads during training and deployment, and my mental health struggled as I came to terms with the attempted sexual assault in Afghanistan. I went from being an elite athlete with a promising military career to a person who felt completely hollow and uncertain of her future. I struggled during my first three years as a civilian. I didn't fit in with male dominated veteran groups, and I was retraumatized through regular sexual harassment at VA appointments (1 in 4 women veterans experience this according to Disabled American Veterans). I also didn't fit in with civilian women either, so I shelled up and moved close to the mountains because that's what I knew made me happy.

Shortly after moving out west to Colorado, I focused on trail running and began rock climbing. For the first time, I chose my own outdoor adventures and escaped into the mountains. Getting to spend time with my thoughts and challenge myself in America's natural landscapes made me feel glad to be home and at peace. Now as a California climber in the Sierras, I avoid inefficient physiological responses to fear through deep breathing and thinking through logic. Some in the health community doubt the therapeutic benefits of outdoor recreation, but I'm not here to testify that outdoor therapy is a substitute for good VA healthcare. This is about autonomy and being able to believe that the best days aren't behind you, and not being a part of a broken veteran stereotype. It is about allowing yourself to have comfort in discomfort again, so you can overcome adversity and strengthen self-confidence. For example, stepping off in the cold mountain air with a headlamp at 4 am to summit a 14,000 ft mountain is not comfortable, but through managing risk and pushing my comfort zone, I accomplish goals I set for myself with what I am still able to do. I realized I missed the discomfort, challenge, and earned self fulfillment in these types of situations from the Army. Now, I am doing it under my own terms and thriving in these beautiful places. Of note, the most accessible park sites are also the most popular, relying on lotteries or reservation battles online. Improvements can be made in the park reservation process to empower people with disabilities their right to access with better predictability to plan.

Socially, Sebastian Junger describes our inclination as human beings to be a part of a group with a purpose and understanding in his book, "Tribe." Many veterans struggle with the transition back home because they lost their tribe in the military, but complicate that one step more for women who often have their service questioned by other veterans or veterans that are retraumatized during their VA visits. Motivated by safely gaining access in the backcountry and a much needed climbing partner, I found my community of people with purpose and shared passion for the outdoors at the American Alpine Club. I was the only veteran there, forcing me to get over the discomfort of social transition. Climbing equipment placement, avalanche safety, and gear were the focus of our conversations, so I could focus on our similar experiences and decrease my social isolation.

Having a disability later in life should not be the end to an individual's dignity. I am grateful that outdoor therapy fills gaps in the VA system for my health and wellness, but I want to lower the barrier to entry for other veterans to achieve this success. My barrier to entry was a bit steep - I'm a half Korean woman in her thirties. I'm lucky that I came across the American

Alpine Club, my boyfriend teaches me the wisdom he's learned the last 20 years of climbing, and I have a mentor in Jon Krakauer through the Tillman Foundation. I ask you as the Oversight Committee to not leave these benefits up to chance so that all disabled veterans have equal opportunity to benefit from access to public lands in an equitable way. Under the Trump Administration, the COMPACT act passed to report on the usage of public lands for the medical treatment and therapy of veterans. I thank that committee for taking an interest in this issue, and I'm glad that the Biden administration is giving us additional opportunities for recreational access by prioritizing protecting 30% of our lands and waters by 2030. I ask both parties to continue to work together for veteran outdoor access, and follow through that these services are equally accessible to all disabled veterans - race, gender, seen and unseen disabilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my experiences; my hope with this testimony was to depict how public lands enabled me to not worry about becoming the person I was before Afghanistan, but transition to a new version of myself that can still find fulfillment - just with some modifications. Ten years ago, I prepared for war outside on large military training areas, but now I'm training for the rest of my life on national public land.