



Wilderness Inquiry Oral Statement / Testimony April 2021

Thank you Chair Porter and members of the Committee.

I am Julie Edmiston, the Associate Executive Director of Wilderness Inquiry. I am also a former guide for trips for individuals of diverse abilities from Yellowstone to the Apostle Islands, a former teacher for students who are deaf and hard of hearing, and a parent of a child with a disability.

Wilderness Inquiry is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and our mission is to connect people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to each other and the natural world through shared outdoor adventures.

Our goal is to ensure that the outdoors is accessible for everyone. We really believe that anyone can participate in and enjoy the outdoors, and we have shown that this is possible across our more than 40 years. Wilderness Inquiry began with the challenge to show that people with disabilities could experience the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and we have grown to serve more than 40,000 people each year all across the country, including nearly 5,000 people with a disability.

Every American should have the right to experience our National Parks, National Forests, and public lands. Yet the ability to access those quintessentially American experiences isn't created equal for everyone. Core to our mission at Wilderness Inquiry is a commitment to supporting outdoor connection for people with disabilities. We believe, and we have shown, that the opportunity to access the outdoors is achievable for every person in this country. And we have developed programs to make that possible -- from providing supportive trips with highly trained staff, to adaptive gear and equipment, to working in close partnership with federal land management agencies and people in the disability community to build bridges that support outdoor access for all.

I want to share a quote from a Wilderness Inquiry participant. Janet is from the Milwaukee area, and has traveled with us to Canyonlands National Park, the Grand Canyon, and the Apostle Islands. She also uses a wheelchair.

"As a person with a disability, I am aware of barriers to inclusion and always devising strategies to experience life, my community, and all of its offerings in a manner similar to my peers but unique to my individuality. The Wilderness Inquiry trips I have participated in have always provided me, through your inclusive mission, a renewed optimism, a greater vision for myself, and a confirmation of the inherent kindness of others. While I generally don't lack in confidence, there are times when the barriers to fully experiencing the natural wonders of our country are daunting. I know that my world experience does not need to be narrowed because of my disability, but can be as expansive as my spirit and sense of wonder allows. I truly believe the branches of my life's path would not be what they turned out to be without the positive, reaffirming influences of the Wilderness Inquiry trips I've participated in."

Janet is one of thousands of people who have traveled with us, but this helps to show what is possible when we work together to break down barriers to accessing the outdoors.

The outdoors is a perfect platform for us to come together and experience our common humanity. We are no longer Julie who travels by foot and Janet who travels by wheels or Jen who communicates with sign language or Bob who uses a talking board -- we are travel companions, we are outdoor adventurers -- we are people.

I also think it's important for this committee to know how vital the role of the federal government is in providing and ensuring equitable outdoor access, and working through public and private partnerships to bring that to every corner of this country. We cannot do this work alone and at Wilderness Inquiry we work closely with land management agencies. Cooperative agreements that designate funding to fill in gaps that can be challenging for any one agency to do on their own make a huge difference in connecting individuals with disabilities to their public lands. I recently connected with a group in California that is starting to offer trips specifically for individuals with disabilities to go to some of our greatest National Parks. When I asked why, the response was similar to what we often hear -- we all need to connect to our public lands and in fact many public lands do have some incredible accessibility features -- but people don't always know that. Parks can offer accessibility manuals, but if people don't know they exist or can't find them, it is daunting to find their way to and in our public lands.

Organizations like Wilderness Inquiry can play a critical role in making those connections and we have appreciated support from the National Park Service, USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and others. A recent appropriation through the USDA Forest Service - Urban Connections program is a perfect example of the power of the land management agencies to build capacity and make connections to the outdoors, and is a model for building strong relationships with youth, interested citizens, urban leaders, interagency partners, and non-government organizations. This appropriation also includes specific language for including youth with disabilities, an important step in ensuring the funding really invests in equal access. Federal agreements and appropriations can also help leverage funding and partnership from the private sector to extend our reach and impact. We are aware of agencies working across sectors to provide training on how to best connect with individuals of all abilities on public lands, how to improve trails and spaces to have better paths or more lighting for communication, and how to update websites for better real-time information so individuals can make informed decisions. Together we can do more.

As I end my testimony today, I want to thank you for your leadership on the House Natural Resources Committee and the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. You can and do play a critical role in shaping the federal landscape around access to the outdoors for people with disabilities. I also want to ask for your continued support for the federal agencies that work directly with communities across the country to create opportunities for people with disabilities -- and all people -- to access our nation's public lands, parks, and forests.

At Wilderness Inquiry, our core belief is that everyone belongs. Your leadership is essential in making that belief possible and showing that every American can access, experience, and belong in the outdoors.

Thank you Chair Porter and members of the committee, we are grateful for the opportunity to testify today.