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Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Oversight Hearing on:
“EXPLORE America250: Enhancing Accessibility at our National Parks and Public Lands”

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Chair, members of the committee; thank you for the opportunity to be here.

My name is Joe Stone. I am a co-owner of Dovetail Trail Consulting; I am also a person with a C7 spinal cord injury.

I have been using a wheelchair for the past 15 years. In the first few years after my injury, I was struggling to figure out what was possible in the outdoors, and I was constantly met with barriers that forced me to turn around, head back to the car, and give up for the day. But I was stubborn enough to keep trying.

Over time, I started to find my way back into the outdoors. Although life in the outdoors as a wheelchair user was very limited, I did find some success. As I shared those successes, more people with disabilities began reaching out to me, asking how and where they could go.

Rediscovering the outdoors has completely changed my life. I went from believing I would spend the rest of my life in a nursing home, 100% dependent on others and government services, to building a life filled with adventure, community, and purpose. That journey is what set me on this path to creating better access for people with disabilities on our public lands.

I want to share a few stories.

Two friends of mine, Travis Mills, and Taylor Morris, are two of only five surviving quadruple amputees from the Iraq War. They came to visit Grand Teton National Park with their families.

They took the boat across Jenny Lake to hike to Hidden Falls, an easy hike for most, and their goal was to experience the outdoors with their kids. But when they got off the boat, they were met with a series of steps, beginning at the dock and hundreds more up to the falls.

This was newer construction, but there was no information available ahead of time to tell them what they were walking into. So they were left sitting on the dock, while their families went up to Hidden Falls without them.

Both Travis and Taylor gave their limbs in service to a country they love; should they not be able to access the lands they sacrificed so much to protect?

A couple weeks later, I was back in that same place. I met a mom sitting on that same dock with her daughter, who has a disability. It was the same situation. Their family had gone up to experience Hidden Falls, and they were left behind.

She watched as I used adaptive equipment to get over those barriers, and she was in awe of it. It gave her hope for her daughter's future. But the reality is that kind of equipment can cost over \$20,000 and is not accessible to most families. So even in that moment of hope, she still saw a world her daughter could not fully participate in.

I have seen another version of this.

A couple came to Grand Teton National Park to go for a hike; one of them was a wheelchair user, and the other was not. They were told that the trail would be accessible. It was not.

They made their way out, committed to the experience, and then hit a series of steps and narrow sections that they could not get through. They were stuck and had to be rescued off the trail.

That situation was avoidable. Better information could have prevented it entirely.

All three of these situations show the same thing. People with disabilities are not avoiding the outdoors; they are actively seeking it out. They are willing to explore, to take risks, and to figure out what is possible. But too often, they are met with barriers instead of clarity.

That is the gap.

At Dovetail, this is exactly the work I do. I partner with land managers to assess trails using objective data, things like width and cross slope. But just as important, I look at the full entry to exit experience. From the parking lot to the trail itself, can someone with a disability fully participate in the experience? What I consistently find is this: when you improve access, you improve the trail for almost everyone.

That is why I am encouraged by the EXPLORE Act. It gives us direction. But policy alone does not change what happens on the ground. If we want it to succeed, we need two things: real funding, and the right people at the table.

Agencies are already stretched thin. Accessibility work takes time, expertise, and resources. Without dedicated funding, this work gets delayed, and delay means continued exclusion.

People with disabilities need to be part of this work as well, not as an afterthought, but because lived experience is what makes the difference between something that looks accessible, and something that actually works.

People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the world, the only minority group anyone can join, and the first to be forgotten. For the first time in human history, we are starting to see a real shift toward inclusion. But this work is not just for people with disabilities. It is for their friends, their families, and entire communities.

We have a real opportunity right now. The EXPLORE Act gives us the direction. Now we need the commitment to follow through. My ask is simple: fund this work, and make sure the people doing it include those with lived experience.

The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 were all created to ensure access and inclusion for people with disabilities. But when it comes to our public lands, we have not seen the consistent funding or intent needed to fully carry those laws forward into the outdoor experience.

That is where the EXPLORE Act comes in. It has the potential to finally fill that gap, to bring these long-standing civil rights laws into the reality of outdoor spaces.

So my ask is simple. Fund it. If we do that, we will not just expand access. We will make our public lands work better for everyone.

Thank you.