

Statement of Tipton Ray, Consultant  
Wilderness Inquiry, Inc., Minneapolis, MN

**“Expanding access to federal lands for people with disabilities”**

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest, and Public Lands  
July 24, 2008

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. Good morning and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today about a very important subject. My name is Tipton Ray. As a consultant in private practice my professional focus is on recreation programs that are inclusive of children and adults with disabilities. I was also an alternate TASH representative to the Regulatory Negotiations Committee when the proposed guidelines you're addressing were developed. In recent years, I have worked with various organizations to address issues surrounding accessibility of trails and facilities. In 2006, I came under contract with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, to conduct a comprehensive baseline accessibility assessment of overnight site facilities along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

I'm here today representing Wilderness Inquiry (WI), a Minneapolis, MN based nonprofit corporation dedicated to sharing the outdoors with others. They are also a former employer of mine. I would like to share with you the perspective of a service provider, which utilizes federal lands throughout the United States as a backdrop for many of its adventures - places like Yellowstone National Park, Chugach National Forest, St. Croix National Scenic River, and Everglades National Park, to name a few.

Wilderness Inquiry provides all kinds of outdoor adventures for a wide variety of people, including canoe, sea-kayak, hiking, horsepack, dogsled and raft trips throughout North America and the world. Our passion is making high-quality outdoor experiences accessible for everyone, including those who do not typically get out and enjoy the wilderness, especially people with disabilities. Each year we conduct over 250 events serving more than 9,000 people. Our trips are designed for everyone from novices to seasoned outdoor veterans of all ages and abilities. Trip participants come from all 50 states and from around the world.

Founded in 1978, WI is run with 10 full-time staff, 60 part-time staff, and a volunteer board of directors of 21 people. We are not a subsidiary, nor are we officially affiliated with any group or organization. We do partner with many organizations and over the years have signed Memoranda of Understanding with each of the federal land management agencies.

WI's stated mission is *“to provide outdoor adventure experiences that inspire personal growth, community integration, and enhanced awareness of the environment. Wilderness Inquiry adventures encourage people to open themselves to new possibilities and opportunities.”*

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We are very committed to integrating people with varying levels of ability on our trips. In fact, Wilderness Inquiry was started to demonstrate that people with disabilities can enjoy wilderness just like everyone else—on its own terms. Over the years, we’ve come to realize that the notion of “disability” is a very relative concept, mostly related to one’s attitude. Integrated wilderness travel tends to destroy stereotypes people have about “disability” and helps us all recognize our common humanity. Our philosophy is to treat each person as an individual rather than as a disability. We focus on what people can do—their abilities—not on what they cannot do. Our goal is to integrate persons with disabilities seamlessly into our trips without making a big deal about it, and we’ve been doing it successfully since 1978.

In addition to trips, we have a variety of programs and activities that help fulfill our mission. We do training for other organizations and provide outdoor skills workshops at community events. We also raise money to provide scholarships to make our programs financially accessible to everyone. We have been fortunate to partner with our neighbor, the University of Minnesota, to assist with our training, attract student interns, as well as conduct some very compelling research that demonstrates the positive and sustainable outcomes of integrated outdoor adventures for participants with and without disabilities.

In 1992, we contracted with the National Council on Disability to conduct a study and report, pursuant to Section 507 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, on the effect that wilderness designations and wilderness land management practices have on the ability of individuals with disabilities to use and enjoy the National Wilderness Reservation System (established under the Wilderness Act – 16 U.S.C. 1131 et seq.). We also developed and co-authored (Greg Lais, WI, Joe Meade and Liz Close, USDA-Forest Service) a companion piece to the above study titled, *Wilderness Access Decision Tool*, under an agreement with the USDA - Forest Service and the USDI – Bureau of Land Management. This tool was developed to help federal wilderness managers make consistent decisions on the use of the National Wilderness Preservation System by persons with disabilities.

In 1999, we came under contract to conduct a Congressional study required by Public Law 105-359 on ways to improve access for persons with disabilities to outdoor recreation opportunities made available to the public on federal lands. The final report was published June 27, 2000 and is titled *Improving Access to Outdoor Recreational Activities on Federal Lands*. We want to alert you to several recommendations within that report we feel are still relevant today.

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The outdoor adventure trips, however, are our “bread and butter” and the reason WI has become a national and international leader in outdoor adventure programming that include people with and without disabilities.

WI will not take a trip into unknown environments. We will scout these potential trip locations with a discerning and careful eye to any and all possible concerns, knowing well the skills and abilities of persons who typically sign-up for WI trips, as well as our own capacity to provide a safe and successful trip. Our risk management procedures require us to have a detailed understanding of what we can expect within a given outdoor recreation setting.

But, I need to emphasize: we do not look for the easiest, most accessible trip or route. We look instead for the potential experience offered by an area. We have learned not to depend on accessible outdoor developed areas, such as trails, beaches, campgrounds, and picnic areas. That said we do appreciate staging areas, trailheads, and campsites, which afford the greatest level of universal accessibility, benefiting all members of the group, including those who may have disabilities.

When WI staff speaks with prospective participants, we share with them what we know about the environment in which we expect to travel. We are upfront about the extent and severity of the obstacles they are likely to face. We can describe to the participant with a disability, with near certainty, that where we are going is not likely to be accessible, even those more developed areas provided by land management agencies. We offer no illusions about what they will be required to do in the backcountry. There are no flush toilets, sinks and showers, or running water, unless it's the river upon which we paddle each day. However, we also provide assurance that as an organization and as a traveling group we will provide the assistance and support each person needs to have a safe and enjoyable experience. From this conversation we identify what accommodations, if any, are necessary for this individual.

For many individuals with disabilities, having to give up their independence is of paramount importance. They come to the trip aware that they must, at times, rely on staff and co-participants, likely strangers all, to lend a hand with mobility around the campsite and, if necessary, assistance with their daily routine, like eating, dressing, or those of a more personal nature, such as toileting, perhaps the biggest concern of ALL participants new to wilderness travel. The person with a disability, who is more independent at home, can sometimes feel helpless and burdensome to staff and the group. Staff is aware of this and is trained to assure

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that these matters are handled sensitively and the individual is treated with respect and dignity.

Accessible facilities and elements, when provided, afford our participants the opportunity to retain their independence to the greatest extent possible, maintain feelings of self-worth, as well as feel included as a valued member of the group. When participants without disabilities observe those who have disabilities functioning independently, ably, and, in their minds, “normally,” stereotypes are eliminated and they start to focus on their co-participants in new ways - as peers, not people who need “help.”

Many land management agencies provide essential facilities in backcountry settings, such as toilet risers, picnic tables, fire rings, and tent pads or platforms. Any other creature comforts are those we take along. The Access Board has raised various questions with respect to the number or percentages of elements within outdoor developed areas that should be required to be accessible. Facilities are placed in backcountry areas primarily for resource protection and visitors are often instructed to concentrate their use at these sites. This is especially true for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), a part of the Superior National Forest and a frequent destination for us.

We wholeheartedly agree with this management approach. However, that means our groups have no choice but to camp in these established overnight sites. Since we cannot predict where we may stop at the end of the travel day or which campsites might be available, it’s essential that all facilities and elements, when provided, meet accessibility standards. If not, then there needs to be some level of direct accountability that clearly justifies why accessibility is not possible.

It can be said that participation on our outdoor adventure trips is “challenge by choice.” One can choose to travel into remote and rugged backcountry, even if that means they will need direct assistance to do so and if that is the type of experience they want. But, using a toilet facility, for example, isn’t a choice. Therefore, it shouldn’t be a challenge. We would like to particularly commend the Forest Service for their efforts since 1999 to install accessible toilet risers at campsites throughout the BWCAW. The simple, understated design, which blends well with the natural environment, plus the careful placement of these toilet risers, affords our participants the level of independence and privacy they desire.

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Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that people with disabilities have the same preferences for outdoor environments, as do people without disabilities. McAvoy (McAvoy, *Parks and Recreation*, August, 2001), informed by his extensive research on this topic while at the University of Minnesota and often in collaboration with WI, wrote that:

*“The very elements that make outdoor areas and programs attractive are their undeveloped nature, their ruggedness, the presence of natural forces at work, and the challenge to interact with nature more on nature’s terms rather than our technological human terms.”*

He found that people with disabilities participate in outdoor adventure programs not for therapeutic reasons, but for the same reasons as people without disabilities: “enjoyment, feelings of self-accomplishment, a connection with the natural world, opportunities to improve leisure skills, to overcome natural obstacles, and to test their own limits.” (*Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 3, 1989, p.63)

One myth McAvoy (2001) explodes is that “people with disabilities do not prefer the same kind of outdoor environments as do people without disabilities. This myth would hold that people with disabilities do not value outdoor environments, and they would like all outdoor environments made more accessible through development (i.e. leveling, paving, motorized access, etc.)” People with disabilities, generally speaking, DO NOT want to see the wilderness significantly modified in the name of accessibility as this may impact their experiences and the benefits they hope to accrue.

We recognize the challenges inherent in providing facility and programmatic accessibility to individuals with disabilities in outdoor recreation settings. However, we believe that if federal land managers choose to modify outdoor environments to protect resources and provide conveniences to visitors, then those facilities and elements should be accessible, to the extent feasible.

Respectfully submitted,

M. Tipton Ray, Consultant, Wilderness Inquiry, Inc.