Increasing access and inclusion for wildlife viewers with disabilities:
Focus group findings and co-production workshop

AFWA National Meeting, September 2024

Freya McGregor, Dr. Ashley Dayer, Emily Sinkular and Shelly Plante

1

Welcome!

Freya McGregor, OTR, ADAC, CIG
Research Associate
Project Co-PI

Ashley Dayer, PhD
Associate Professor
Project PI

Shelly Plante
Nature Tourism Manager
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Chair, Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Working Group

Emily Sinkular
PhD Student

2

Today's presentation

Intros and setting the scene (5 mins)

Focus group findings (10 mins)

Brainstorm and Discussion (25 mins)

Debrief (5 mins)

3

Setting the scene

4

The importance of studying wildlife viewers

- Viewers **growing in number** & potential influence
- Viewers **difficult for agencies to reach**
- **Lack of information** on viewers' thoughts, preferences, behaviors
- **Better serve & communicate** with viewers & other underserved groups
- Connect viewers to mechanisms to **contribute financially**

5

Three Phases of Dayer Lab Wildlife Viewing Research

Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3

6

Phase 1 finding:

39%

Of wildlife viewers experience somewhat, quite a bit, or a great deal of **accessibility challenges**.

**How can we
better support them?**

7

**Focus
group
overview**

8

Focus groups to learn more

- Wildlife viewers with **disabilities** or who are **neurodivergent**
  - U.S. only - **all four AWA regions**
  - Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, West
- Recruited via **social media**, emails, newsletters, specific invitations
- Recruitment partners: **State fish and wildlife agencies** on our Steering Committee
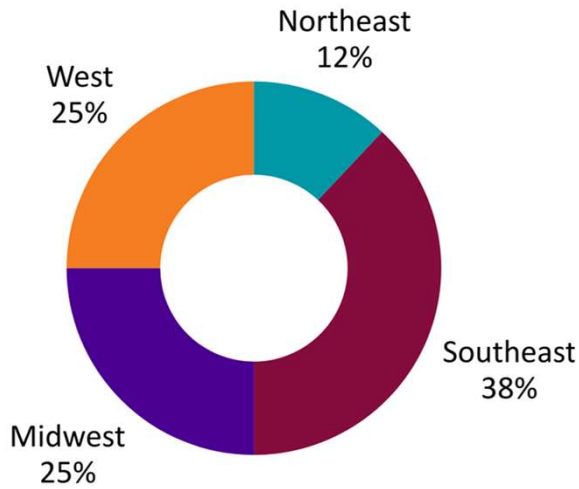
9

Focus group process

- 940 started **screening survey**, 102 were eligible
- 8 focus groups
  - Held from July 9 - August 14
  - **32 participants**
  - 3 - 6 participants per group
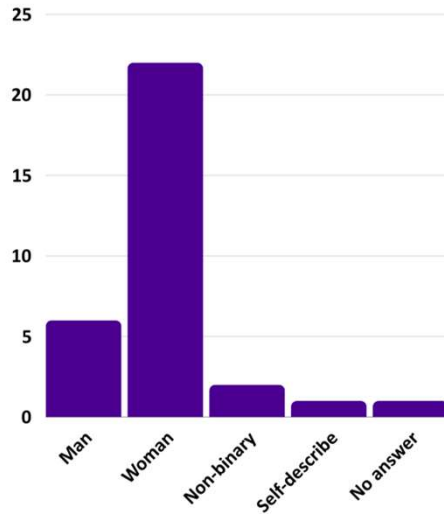- Participants received $50 gift card for participating

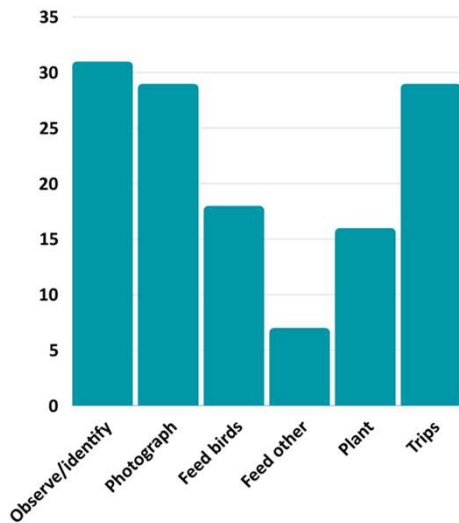10

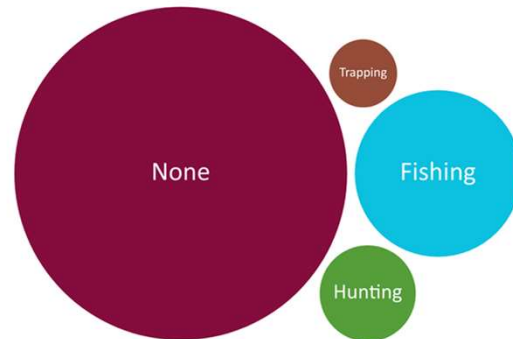## Participant demographics

AFWA regions represented

Gender

11

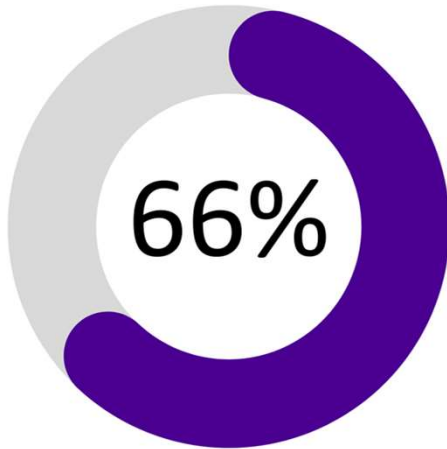## Participant demographics (cont.)

How they participate

Other related activities

12

Participant demographics (cont.)

Neurodivergent

66%

Disabilities associated with…

Hearing 35%

Cognition 41%

Vision 19%

Chronic illness 69%

Physical 63%

Other 16%

Mental health 63%
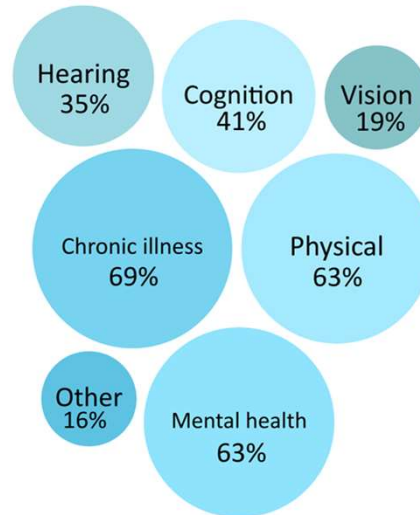
13

Focus group analysis

Qualitative coding: Review the transcripts to identify **key themes** that emerge from discussions.
- Use **software** to note the major themes, then **condense into key points.**

We examined two main themes:
- **Facilitators** of wildlife viewing
- Effective **allyship** for disabled wildlife viewers

Today we will share initial findings, not a full analysis!
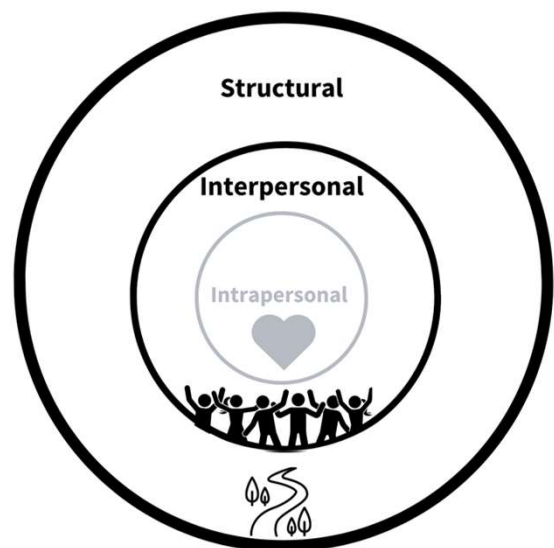
14

Findings

15

Facilitators of wildlife viewing

We wanted to understand how **wildlife viewing programs,** including **staff** and **wildlife viewing locations** can be better facilitators of wildlife viewing.

Structural

Interpersonal

Intrapersonal

16

Before we begin...

- What findings **stand out** to you?
- What do you need to **help you implement** these recommendations?
- What are **barriers** do you foresee to implementing these recommendations? What do you need to do to remove or reduce these barriers?
- **How can WVNT support you** in these making these changes?
- What questions do you have?

17

Findings: Supportive wildlife viewing programs

Most common themes:
- Providing detailed **information ahead of time**:
  - Site description
  - Start and stop time
  - Facilities available: Bathrooms, water, shade, parking/ transportation
- Have **smaller group sizes**
- Feeling like they don't **belong**

18

On providing contact information

"Just creating **an environment where you feel like you can communicate your needs** would be super helpful. Like having a contact person beforehand or there that you can be like, "This is something I can do, this is something I can't." You know, making sure things are gonna work for the most amount of people, you know. And just considering: everybody's different."

19

Findings: Accessible wildlife viewing locations

Trail design:
- Trails with **firm and stable surfaces**
  - More **boardwalks**
- More **benches** and **shade**
- More **signage** with access information

Other facilities:
- **Enough parking** available
- More **bathrooms**
- **Drivable** wildlife viewing locations

Existing trails and wildlife viewing locations should be **well maintained!**

Photo: Freya McGregor.

20

On accessible wildlife viewing locations

"Benches are important for me, but especially **benches with back support**, so I can rest my upper body as well. **Wide paths**, especially when it's a boardwalk, and I'm in my wheelchair. **Clear signage**, especially around forks in the trail and footpaths. Sometimes I can get lost and confused. **Restrooms** available, not just at the parking lot, but farther into the site, if you have to walk a ways to get to the point of interest. At one wildlife viewing blind, I've been to, there were **viewing windows at various heights**, so people at different heights could see. And then, making sure those accessible features are **maintained regularly**."

21

Findings: Big picture changes

- Need **more funds** to support accessibility:
  - Improve physical accessibility
  - Maintaining existing features
  - Paying disabled consultants
- Need more **staff training** on inclusion and disability etiquette
- Supportive **social media communities** are helpful

22

On big picture changes

"I think that the **more information**, whether it be in the form of text on brochures or signage, or at exhibits or **training for staff** or days and **events specifically for people who are disabled**. I just think that the State agencies need to really play their part in increasing consciousness about the spectrum of people with disabilities, and how abled-bodied people can support them."

23

Allyship and partnering with disabled wildlife viewers

Allyship: Actively and intentionally **supporting**, uplifting and **advocating** for a person or **group that you do not belong to**, often **using your privilege** to help dismantle systems of oppression and promote social change.

24

Findings: Being an ally to disabled wildlife viewers

Most common themes:
- Don't be judgmental
- **Don't make assumptions** about someone's access needs
  - Invite sharing of them
- Be **patient** and kind
- Seek quality **training** from actually disabled people
- **Understand the breadth** of disability and access needs

25

Findings: Organizational allyship

Organizational mindset:
- **Don't assume** you know all the answers
- **Avoid performative allyship**/tokenism
- Remain **flexible**; don't stop at one thing

Actions to take:
- Use up-to-date disability **language**
- Go **beyond accessibility standards**
- **Consult early**, and often, with disabled wildlife viewers (and apply this!)
  - Don't expect free labor
- **Partner** with community organizations
- Include **accessibility information**:
  - In all program descriptions
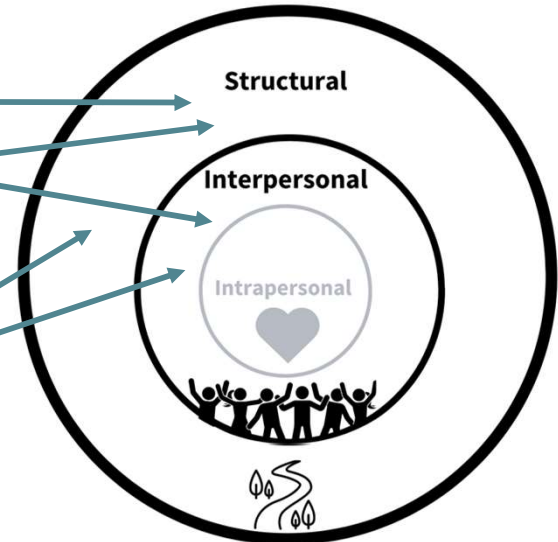 - On the website
  - At the trailhead

Photo: Freya McGregor.

26

In summary

Disabled wildlife viewers would like:

- More **benches**!

- More **detailed information** provided about programs, trails and other wildlife viewing locations.
- Genuine, ongoing **partnership** with the disability community.

Structural

Interpersonal

Intrapersonal

27

Brainstorm
(15 mins)

28

Discussion

Two aims:
1. You: Starting to think about implementing.
2. Us: Understanding how it looks for you to implement.

Process:
1. Group up with others from you agency or organization, or with other independents.
2. Enter the Padlet using the QR code.
3. Brainstorm and take notes on Padlet. This is anonymous!
4. Large group debrief after 15 minutes.

Scan the QR code or visit
https://tinyurl.com/5xyfutat

29

Debrief
(10 minutes)

30

Next steps

- Virginia Tech works on the full analysis
- **Two-part** results & recommendations workshop (on Zoom): we want your input!
- Publishing **final report** and **webinar**

AFWA Multistate Conservation Grant in 2025…?

- Develop four playbooks to help state agencies replicate prime examples of disability access and inclusion.

31

Going forward

"**You have to be dynamic about it, because disability is dynamic.** Not all of us are just wheelchair users, or born with limb difference. A lot of us come into disability at different times, and it's a process to accept it as well. **People who might need your help might not identify as disabled yet.**

"I wish people knew that: there are people who need your help who might not have a diagnosis, who might not know what to ask for yet, and so it is helpful to offer things and to try to know the answers. But **don't assume you have all the answers**, because it would be an impossibly long handbook."

32

Thank you!

Questions?
- Freya: freyamcgregor@vt.edu
- Ashley: dayer@vt.edu
- Emily: sinkular@vt.edu

Want more information?
https://viewing.fishwild.vt.edu/

Scan this QR code or visit
http://tinyurl.com/WVNT24
to sign up for email updates
about our research:

33