

Supporting Disabled Wildlife Viewers: Findings from focus groups

Freya McGregor, Emily Sinkular and Ashley Dayer



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Introduction: Shelly Plante

The Dayer Human Dimensions Lab has been partnering with the Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Working Group since 2019!



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Welcome!



**Emily Sinkular,
PhD**

Graduate Research
Assistant



**Freya McGregor,
OTR, ADAC, CIG**

Research Associate
Project Co-PI



**Ashley Dayer,
PhD**

Associate Professor
Project PI

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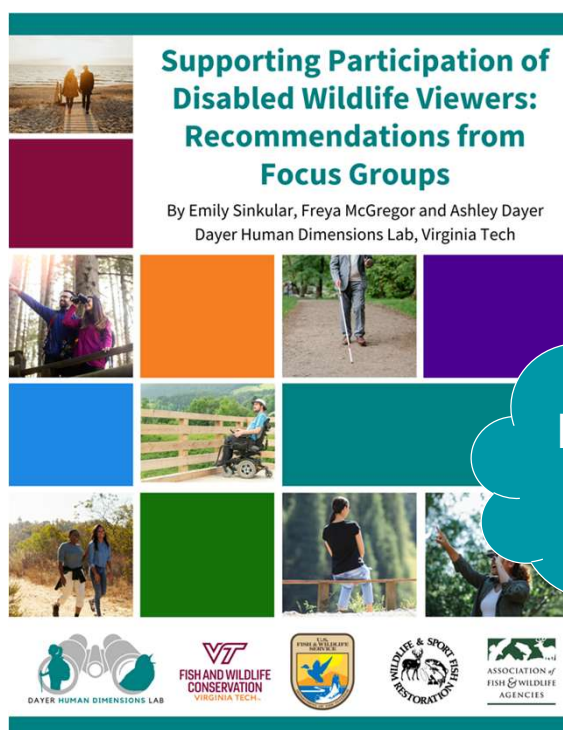
Introduce yourself!

In the chat
please share your:

Name, title, organization,
and favorite animal to see
or hear



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Report now available!

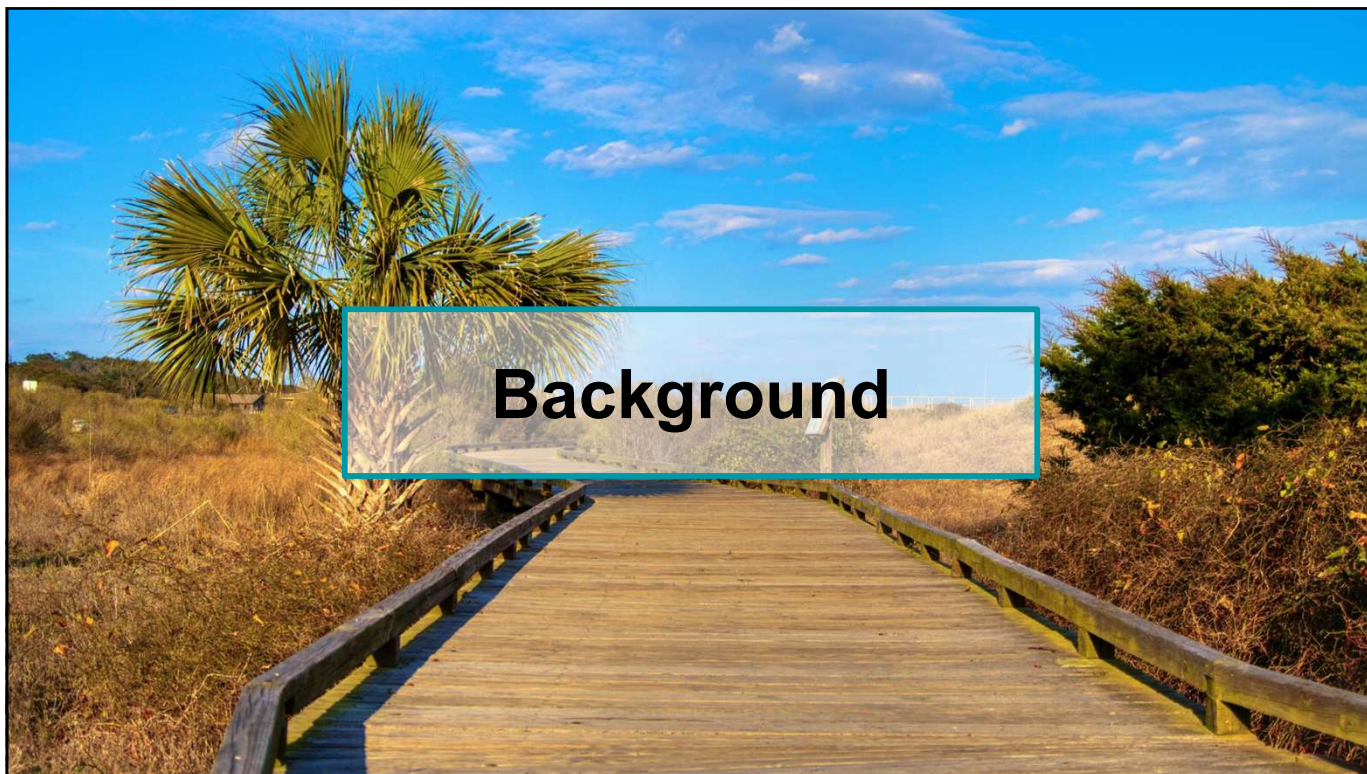
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Agenda

1. Project background
2. Focus group findings about:
 - a. **People** who support wildlife viewing
 - b. Wildlife viewing **programs**
 - c. Wildlife viewing **locations**
 - d. Practicing **allyship**
 - e. Recommendations for agencies
3. What's next



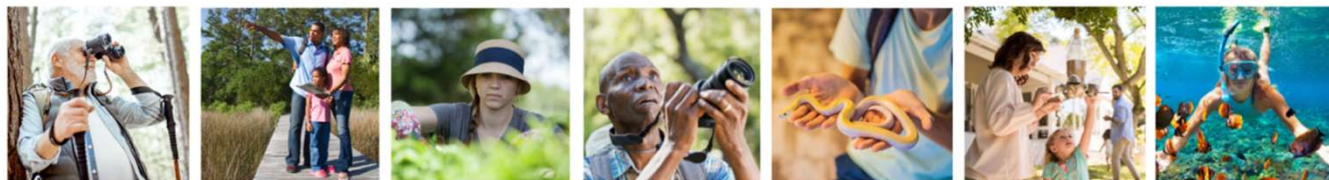
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Wildlife viewing is ...

“Closely **observing, feeding, and photographing** wildlife; **visiting parks or natural areas** to observe, feed, or photograph wildlife; and **maintaining plantings and natural areas** for the benefit of wildlife.”



(US DOI et al. 2016)

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Project background



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Want more information?
Check out our project
website:
viewing.fishwild.vt.edu



Literature
review

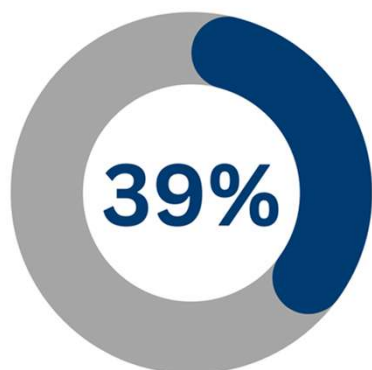


Webinar
recordings



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Phase 1 finding



n = 1,556

(Sinkular et al., 2022)

Of wildlife viewers reported having *somewhat, quite a bit, or a great deal* of accessibility challenges when wildlife viewing.

How can we better support these wildlife viewers with disabilities?

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Federal laws

Organizations and employers that **receive federal funding** **must not exclude or deny** people with disabilities from having an **equal opportunity** to benefit from programs and services.

(Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973)

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Federal laws (cont.)

All facilities designed or altered with federal funds **must comply with federal accessibility standards.**

These standards cover parking, buildings, trails etc.

(Architectural Barriers Act, 1968)

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Federal laws (cont.)

State wildlife agencies are required to ensure that **people with disabilities have equal opportunities** to participate in **all programs they offer.**

(Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990)

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Focus Groups

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Focus groups overview

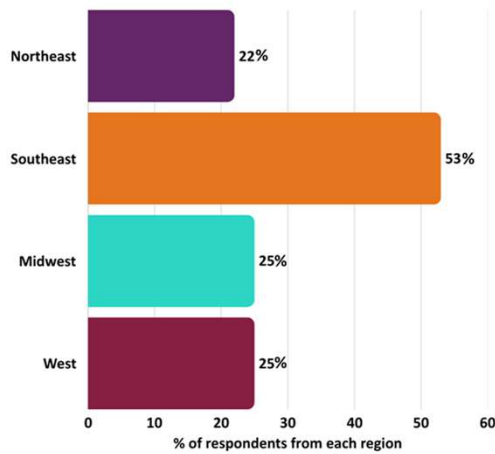
- **Disabled** and/or **neurodivergent** wildlife viewers
- Recruited via **social media**, emails, newsletters, direct invitations
- Held **8 groups** in July-August 2024
 - 32 participants
 - 3 - 6 participants per group
 - \$50 gift card



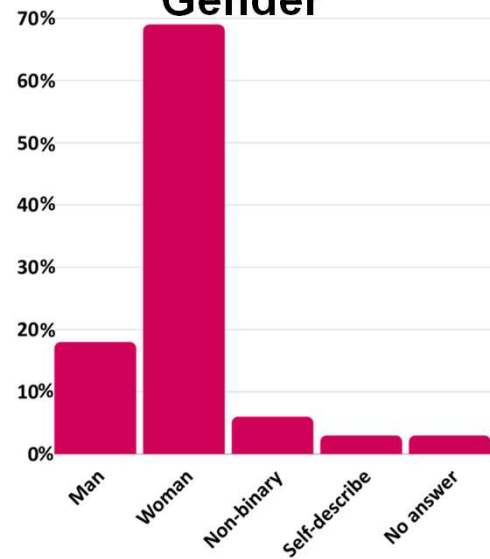
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Participant demographics

AFWA regions represented



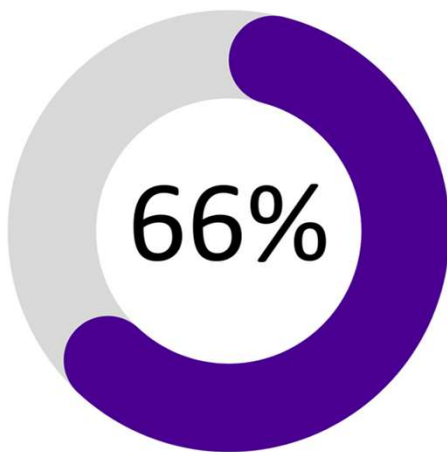
Gender



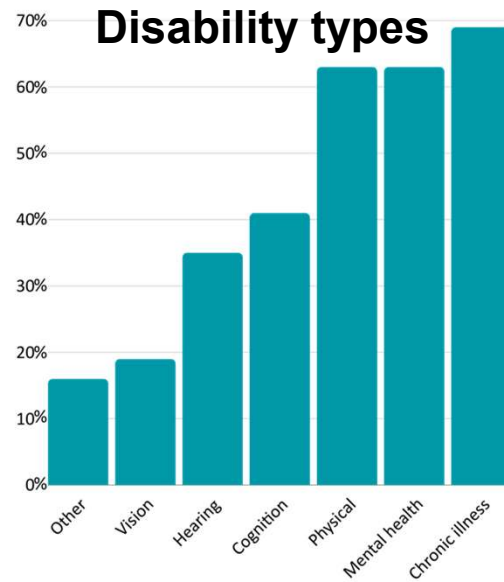
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Participant demographics (cont.)

Neurodivergent

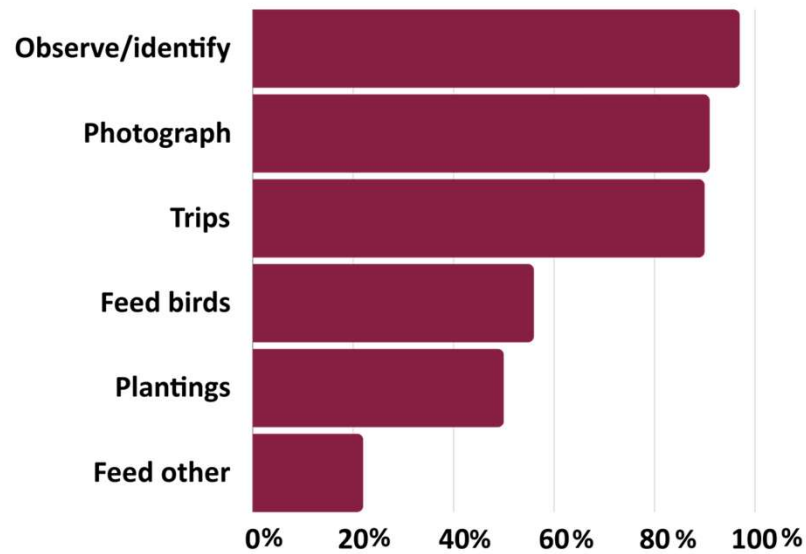


Disability types



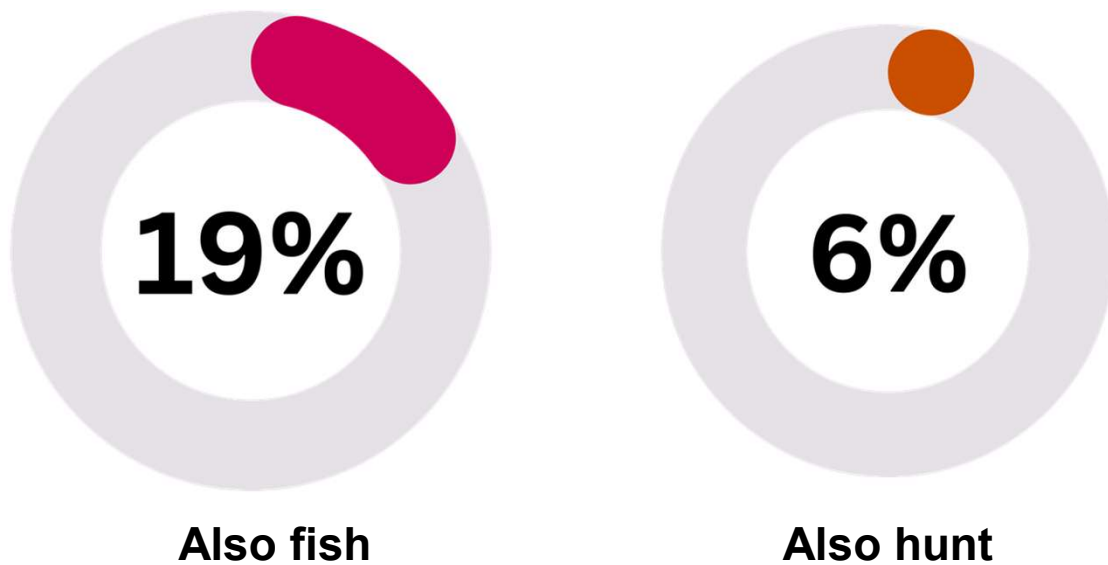
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Participant wildlife viewing behavior



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Participant fishing and hunting behavior



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Top motivations for wildlife viewing



**Connection to
nature**



**Mental health
benefits**

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A photograph showing the silhouette of a person in the foreground, looking out over a vast landscape. The sky is filled with a large flock of birds in flight. The background is a vibrant sunset or sunrise with orange and purple hues.

People and groups

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People who support wildlife viewing



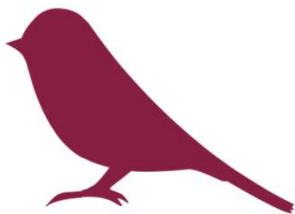
Partner



Friends

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Groups who support wildlife viewing



Nature groups

Online groups



State agencies

Identity groups



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Types of support from other people & groups

- **Scouting** wildlife viewing locations
- Assistance **driving** to wildlife viewing sites
- **Physical** assistance
- **Motivation** to view wildlife
- **Joining** on wildlife viewing outings
- **Information**



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Friends and Scouting



“I have a **friend** who I led a nature walk with, and they went to the **trail beforehand** to **make sure** that I could **bring my walker.**”

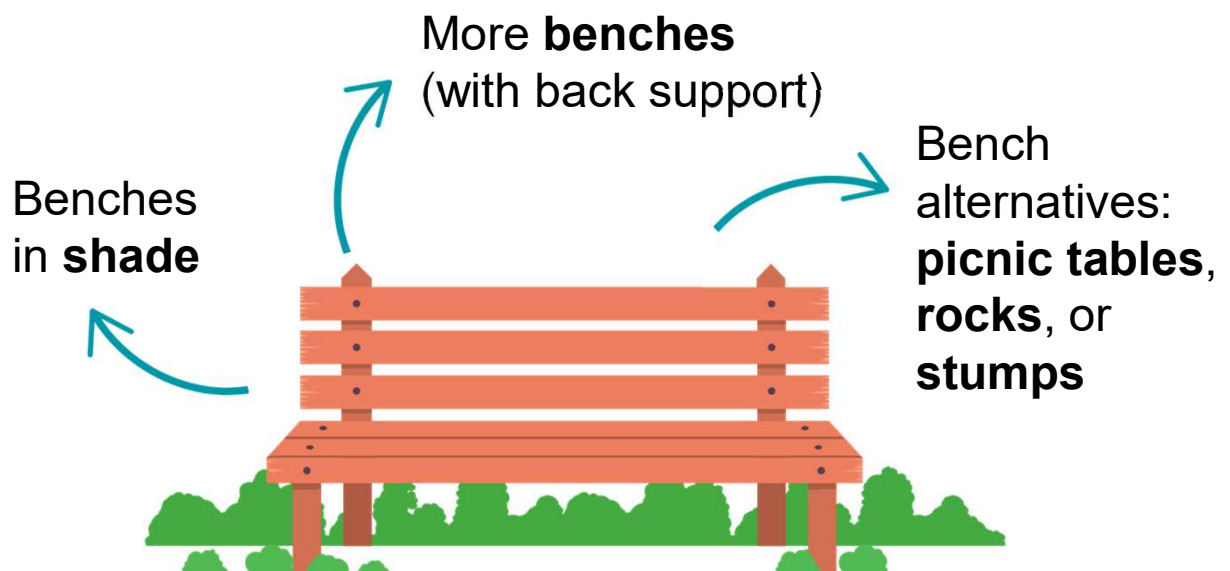


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Wildlife viewing locations: Benches



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Wildlife viewing trails

Information
about trail
accessibility

**Safety
barriers**

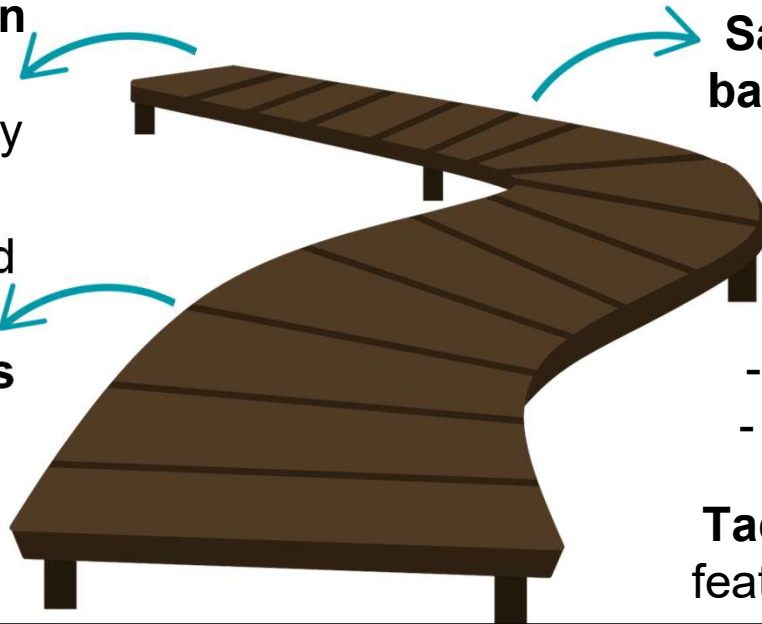
**Firm and
stable
surfaces**

Signage

- Navigation
- Interpretive

Boardwalks

**Tactile
features**



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Trail information



“It helps also to know just what the terrain is. I don't mind walking on gravel or mulch, as long as I know what it is ahead of time.”



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Wildlife viewing locations: Amenities



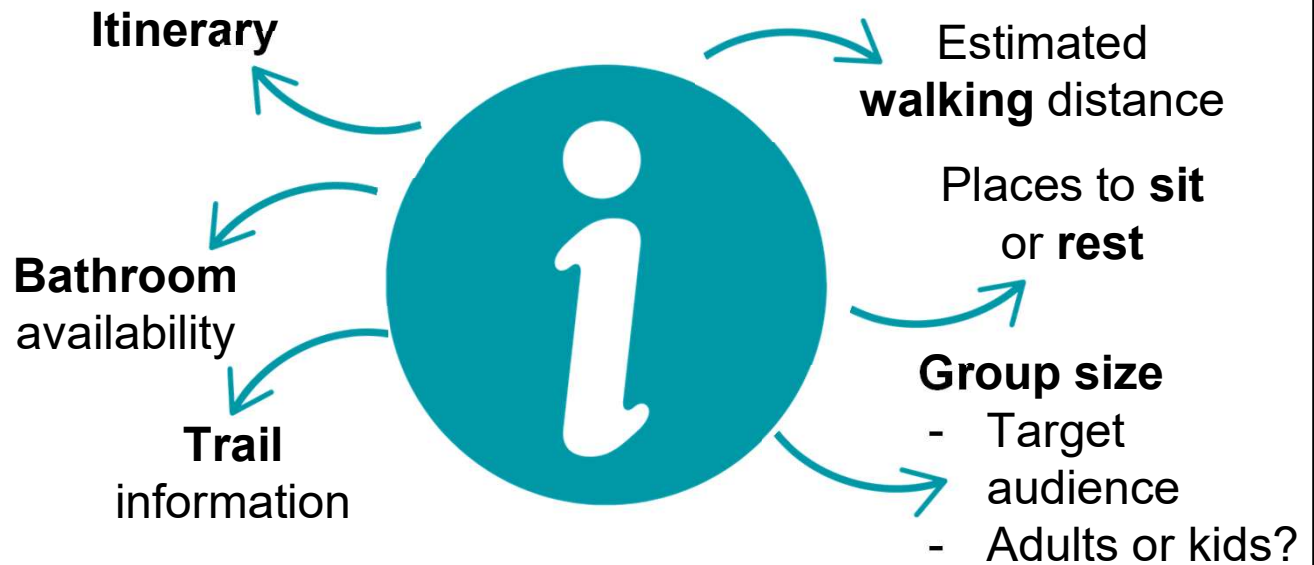
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Wildlife viewing programs



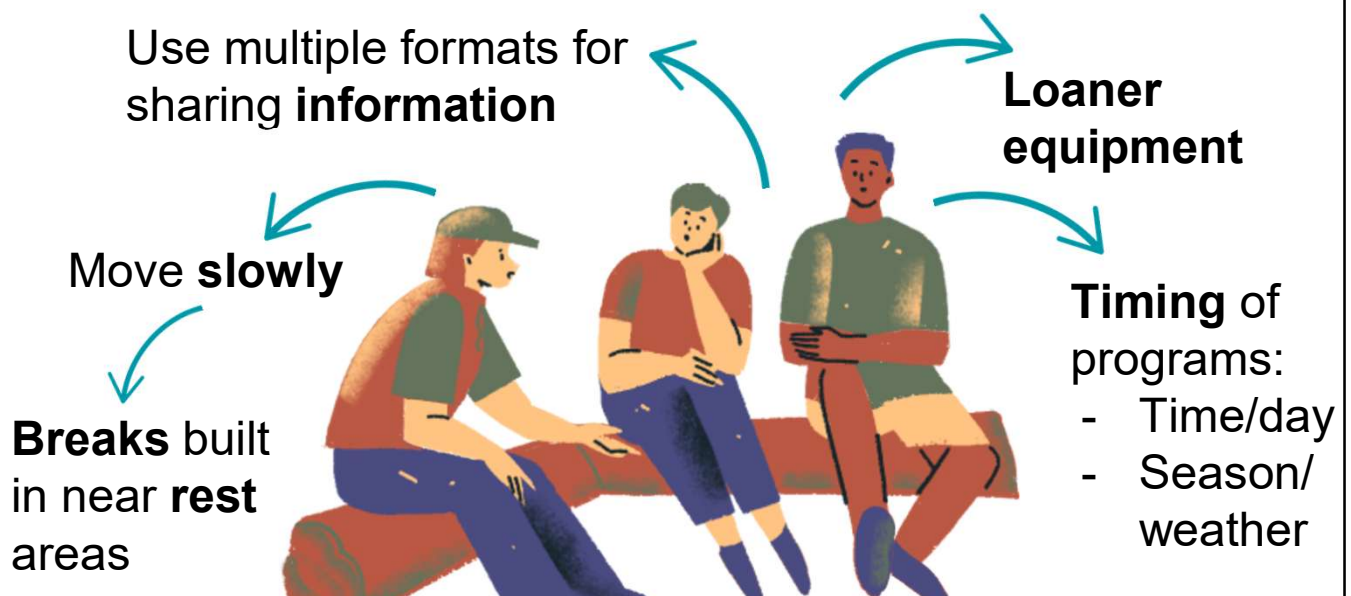
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Provide information ahead of time



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Program design



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Move slowly



“ When I lead my groups I 100% plan my walk – we don't call them hikes – for the person who is the **slowest** one in the group. I don't say that to them. I say, **‘No one will be left behind’.**”



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Other program considerations



**Transportation
options**



**Virtual
programming**



**Attitudes of
others**

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Reasons for not participating in programs

Lack **awareness**
of programs

Perception of
programs being
inaccessible



Feeling
unwelcome

Hesitant to
participate

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No participation



“I haven't participated in a program like that
before, either. I've always been **worried**
that they **wouldn't be accessible for me.**”



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Being an ally to disabled and neurodivergent wildlife viewers

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What is 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.



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Be kind

Staff, volunteers and other wildlife viewers were requested to:



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Be patient



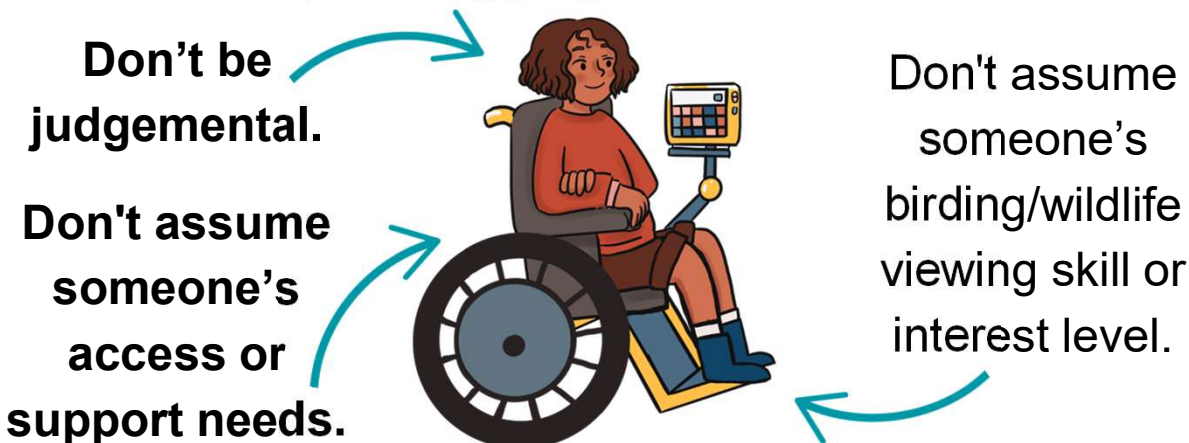
“Some of the people that lead the events don't have patience. They expect you to keep up with them and go at their pace and pay attention to exactly what they're saying at the moment. And **sometimes we're not capable of doing that.**”



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Don't make assumptions

Participants wanted staff, volunteers, and other wildlife viewers to stop making judgement calls about them.



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Don't assume someone's access or support needs



"Just because two people have the same diagnosis doesn't mean they have the same disabilities or accommodation/access needs."

"They see somebody in a wheelchair and **they freak out** like, "Oh, my God! How are we gonna make this work?"



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Counteracting those assumptions

Assume disability is present.

Appreciate the breadth of disability.



Presume competence.

Invite sharing of access needs.

Ask open ended questions.  Offer practical assistance.

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Appreciate the breadth of disability



“Disability means more than just ‘wheelchair user’, and you can’t always tell just by looking at someone if they have a disability. With the large spectrum of disabilities comes a large array of access needs, and accessibility is not simply (or necessarily) a paved path.”



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Normalize disability

Instead of acting like disability isn't there:

Support the use of adaptive equipment and service dogs.

Use up-to-date disability-related language.



Have a reliable and informed contact person for accessibility information for all programs, trails etc.

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Have a reliable and informed contact person for accessibility information



“I haven't participated in a program like that before. I've always been worried that they wouldn't be accessible for me... I've never really felt welcome. I never really felt like I could **reach out and inquire further about accessibility information.**”



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Normalize access needs in programs

Instead of acting like disability isn't there:

**Provide
accessibility
information.**

Communicate in multiple formats.



Incorporate
rest breaks.

**Be
neurodivergent-
affirming.**

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Normalize disability as an agency

Instead of acting like disability isn't there:

**Design for
accessibility.**

Hire,
and support,
disabled people.



Educate the public
about disability
and how to be
an ally.

Provide disability
representation.

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Provide information! (An overwhelming request.)

Provide **accurate, detailed, objective information** about **all trails and programs** when sharing about them online, on maps, at trailheads, and in marketing materials.

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Provide accessibility information



“Someone mentioned an owl prowl. I would absolutely love to go on something like that. But **I'm gonna guess it's not wheelchair accessible. There was never any mention of it.**

You know, if it could be, ‘This is a paved trail. This is through the woods. This is, you know, moderate difficulty’.”



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Promote different methods of wildlife viewing

Programs at different times of the day and days of the week.

Participatory science opportunities.

Various styles of wildlife viewing.

Opportunities for stationary viewing.

Loaner adaptive equipment.



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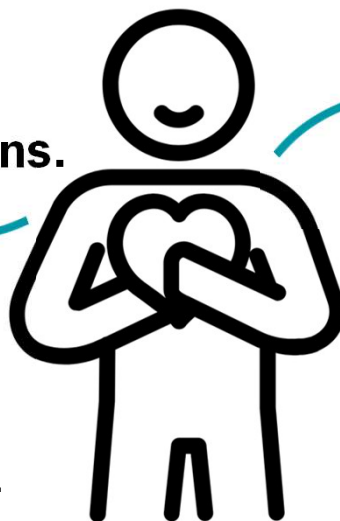
Be genuine

Avoid tokenism or performative actions.

Maintain accessible features.

Go beyond minimum accessibility standards.

Implement simple improvements quickly.



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What is “tokenism” or “performative” actions?



“It's more to **make themselves look better** than it is to actually help people.”



“They invite a disabled person on so they can say, ‘We have a disabled person on our board. For the record, we're really inclusive,’ but **may not mean anything other than words.**”



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Collaborate respectfully

Be transparent
when reaching out.

Don't expect free labor.

Consult
early and often
with disabled
wildlife viewers.

Incorporate a
variety of
disabled people's
input.



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Stay humble and keep learning



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Stay humble and keep learning

“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... **People who might need your help might not identify as disabled yet.** 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.”

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Allyship: Key findings

- Be kind and patient
- Don't make assumptions
- Presume competence
- Normalize disability
- Normalize access needs
- Provide detailed, concrete information
- Promote different methods of wildlife viewing
- Avoid tokenism or performative actions
- Collaborate early, and often
- Stay humble and keep learning!



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Recommendations for state wildlife agencies

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1. Share detailed accessibility information for all trails and programs



- By far the most requested change!
- Detailed, specific, up-to-date, pictures and descriptions
- All trails, not just the ones considered “accessible” – everyone has different access needs

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2. Improve inclusion in wildlife viewing programs by:

Training



Checklists

Incorporating multiple senses



- Ideas for training topics are in the report
- Checklists to help interpreters incorporate

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3. Improve accessibility at wildlife viewing locations

- Well-placed **benches** were the most requested access feature for wildlife viewing locations
- Firm and stable trails
- Safety barriers with handrails
- **Shade**
- More details in report!



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4. Provide ongoing training, especially about allyship



- Allyship is complex, and new approaches to working with others may be needed
- Repetition and expanding on topics over time is valuable
- Training should be provided by disabled educators

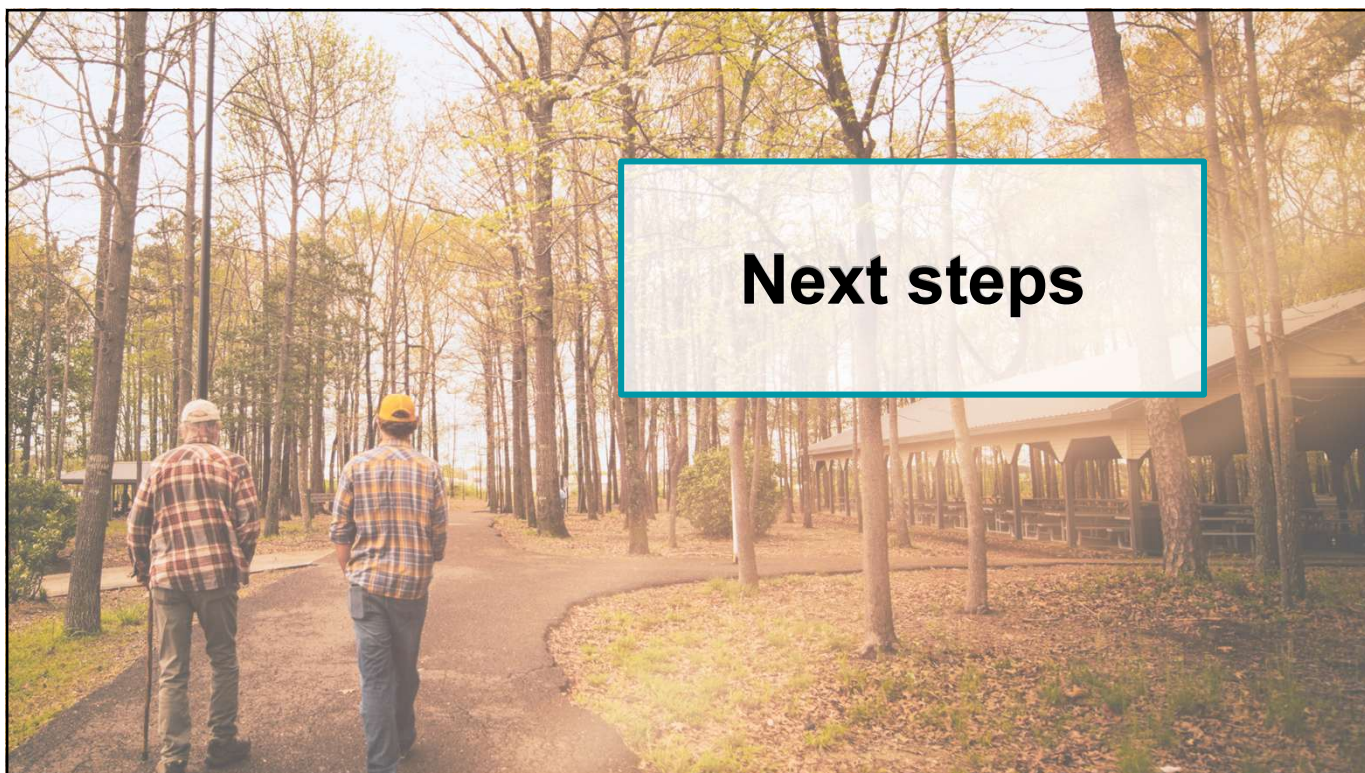
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5. Secure funding and collaborate widely

- Funding will be needed to implement many of the other recommendations
- Engaging effectively with other nature and disability organizations will help increase agency relevancy



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Phase 4: Case studies

Background: Lots of great work is already happening.



Problem: Other states don't know about it!



Solution: Detailed case studies: What was done, and how to replicate easily!



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One case study each representing an...

Accessible wildlife viewing trail

Inclusive and accessible wildlife viewing program

Ongoing engagement with the disability community

Adaptive equipment loaner program

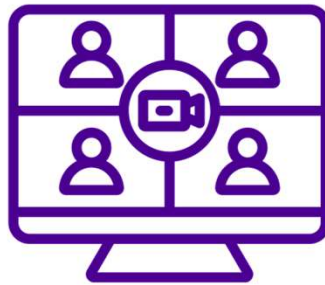
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Each case study will be shared via...



Reports

Webinars



Wildlife
Viewing
Toolkit
website

Conferences
x3



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**Supporting Participation of
Disabled Wildlife Viewers:
Recommendations from
Focus Groups**

By Emily Sinkular, Freya McGregor and Ashley Dayer
Dayer Human Dimensions Lab, Virginia Tech

**Reminder,
report
available now!**

Logos at the bottom include: Dayer Human Dimensions Lab, VT Fish and Wildlife Conservation, Wildlife & Sport Fish Restoration, and Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies.

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Thank you!

Questions?

- Freya: freyamcgregor@vt.edu
- Ashley: dayer@vt.edu



Want more information?

<https://viewing.fishwild.vt.edu>

Scan this QR code or visit <https://tinyurl.com/DayerLabDisabilityEmailList> to sign up for email updates about our research:



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