

Project Abstract Summary

This Project Abstract Summary form must be submitted or the application will be considered incomplete. Ensure the Project Abstract field succinctly describes the project in plain language that the public can understand and use without the full proposal. Use 4,000 characters or less. Do not include personally identifiable, sensitive or proprietary information. Refer to Agency instructions for any additional Project Abstract field requirements. If the application is funded, your project abstract information (as submitted) will be made available to public websites and/or databases including USA Spending.gov.

* Funding Opportunity Number

F-FWS-WSFR-24-002

CFDA(s)

15.628

* Applicant Name

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

* Descriptive Title of Applicant's Project

Implementing Recommendations from the Wildlife Viewer Survey: Inclusion in Wildlife Viewing for People with Disabilities

* Project Abstract

Approximately one in four Americans have a disability - a proportion anticipated to rise with the aging population (CDC, 2018). In 2021, with the support of a Multistate Conservation Grant, Virginia Tech found that 38% of wildlife viewers (people who participate in observing, feeding, or photographing wildlife, or maintain plantings for the benefit of wildlife) reported experiencing accessibility challenges, defined as "the difficulties someone experiences in interacting with or while using the physical or social environment while trying to engage in a meaningful activity (such as wildlife viewing). This may be a result of a mobility challenge, blindness or low vision, intellectual or developmental disabilities (including Autism), mental illness, being Deaf or Hard of Hearing, or other health concerns."

Despite the large number of Americans and wildlife viewers with disabilities, little is known about best practices to cultivate their participation in wildlife viewing. Many agencies do not have the capacity to explore best practices for universal design (principles used when designing environments, products or communications to be as equitable and user-friendly as possible), the resources to conduct focus groups to hear from these constituents about their needs and experiences, or the training or expertise around disability or accessibility. This project will enable wildlife viewing staff nationwide to more effectively include a significant portion of the wildlife viewing community interested in engaging with wildlife agencies. If state agencies wish to broaden relevancy by creating equitable opportunities for wildlife viewing, it is vital that they work proactively to reduce - or better yet, eliminate- barriers that disabled wildlife viewers experience wherever possible. Not only will this create opportunities for participation that are more accessible and inclusive for wildlife viewers with disabilities, but increasing accessibility benefits nondisabled wildlife viewers too, such as expectant mothers who also benefit from intentional bench placement, and small children who also cannot see through solid safety barriers at observation platforms. The more relevant and engaging we can make wildlife viewing for the broadest possible audience, and especially for diverse historically underserved audiences, the more people will connect deeply with nature and act to support conservation efforts across North America.

If funded, a disability-led research team will develop a literature review and an accompanying webinar about disabilities and outdoor recreation to provide easy-to-understand information for state wildlife agency staff about these topics. Next, a webinar

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with detailed findings from our initial survey of wildlife viewers with disabilities will further highlight the experiences of this audience. A workshop covering and expanding on these topics will be given in-person at the Wildlife Viewing and Nature Tourism Academy 2024. To amplify the voices of wildlife viewers with disabilities and to ensure future recommendations are relevant, we will conduct focus groups of wildlife viewers with various disabilities across all the regions of the US. Finally, results from these focus groups, combined with insights from a co-production workshop with state agency personnel, will be packaged into a report and webinar made available to staff at state agencies and the general public. Each of these deliverables will build upon the last to enhance skills and empower staff at state agencies to understand, identify, and reduce barriers to access at the wildlife viewing locations they manage, and improve their programming and communications efforts to the disability community. Each improvement state agencies make towards increasing access and inclusion is one step towards making the state agencies, and wildlife viewing as an activity, more relevant to people with disabilities and other health concerns, and their communities.