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Vet Voice Foundation  
Remarks on H.R. 3976 (Ruiz) "Wounded Veterans Recreation Act"  
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1324 Longworth House Office Building

Chairman Bishop and members of the subcommittee.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Garett Reppenhagen and I am the Program Director for the Vet Voice Foundation. Vet Voice Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-partisan, non-profit organization which was established in 2009. One of the key campaigns at the Vet Voice Foundation is simple and two-fold: First, to reach out to America's veterans, especially our nation's wounded warriors and introduce them to outdoors. This introduction is very important for our service members. Outdoor recreation can and does play a strong role in the recovery of many of America's veterans when they return from the battlefield and begin the process of reintegration to their communities and families.

Second, Vet Voice Foundation is also involved in protection efforts of our nation's public lands. Throughout the western United States, Vet Voice Foundation and its membership have provided a unique voice in the call to preserve our natural heritage for future generations advocating for both responsible federal conservation policies and funding as well as legislation that protects these beautiful landscapes.

In order to share with you how I became involved with this organization and its mission, I feel it is also important that I tell my own story. My family has a tradition of military service. Both my grandfathers served in World War II. My father's father was a Marine and my mother's father was in the Navy. My father joined the US Army as an Engineer and completed a tour in Vietnam. He retired after twenty years of active duty and passed away the following year from Agent Orange related cancer when I was fourteen years old.

I joined the United States Army as a Cavalry Scout in August of 2001, one month before the attacks on September 11th. I served in a nine month peacekeeping mission in Kosovo before being selected to sniper school and earning the second best score in the Special Training Target Interdiction Course. I deployed to Iraq in January 2004 and served in a Brigade sniper team on counter IED and counter mortar missions. After a ten month stop-loss, I received an Honorable Discharge in June 2005. During the one year in Iraq I performed over 160 combat missions without the use of an armored vehicle, engaged in countless firefights, and survived dozens of ambushes.

My transition back into civilian life was a challenge. I found that I struggled with intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, anxiety, troubled sleep, an aversion to crowded areas, depression, and relationship issues. While I have always found peace in the outdoors, it was never more evident than when I returned home from Iraq. Camping, hiking and exploring natural wonders became a way of life and an opportunity to find peace.

My road to recovery was not just spent in VA offices but also on hiking trails and cold water streams.

As a veteran with a PTSD diagnosis, I can tell you that outdoor recreation has benefited me in so many ways- spiritually, emotionally and physically.

In 2012, I joined Vet Voice Foundation. Since then, I have worked and traveled all over the west, recruiting veterans to our cause, hosting outdoor events and conservation service projects. I partnered with Veteran Expedition, Sierra Club, and Rivers of Recovery to bridge more veterans to the outdoors. The connection between veterans and conservation is not a new phenomenon. Actually, veterans have a storied tradition of involvement in conservation dating back to arguably one of America's greatest presidents, Teddy Roosevelt, who was a founder of our nation's conservation movement.

As veterans, many in our community view conservation as a civic duty. Protecting America's lands is patriotic. After all, as veterans, we not only fought to preserve our nation's democracy, but also this land in all its glory- from shore to shore, from sea to shining sea, against all enemies. Yes, conservation is patriotic and if you talk to our membership they will be quick to remind you that keeping America's public lands -- its natural treasures -- beautiful, is a noble and worthy cause for veterans.

Today, thanks to Representative Raul Ruiz and the bi-partisan coalition that joined to support his efforts, I am here to offer the support of Vet Voice Foundation and the veteran community for the "Wounded Veterans Recreation Act."

This bill, is a fitting tribute to America's veterans and military families.

As I have noted, veterans frequent America's public lands. Many are sportsmen, hunters and anglers who value their time in the wild. Some simply utilize these treasures as a means or reconnection with family and friends by camping and hiking. All however, have as I, found some form of peace on our precious federal recreational lands.

Currently, to enjoy a free lifetime pass on these lands, a veteran would have to be totally and permanently disabled with a 100 disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs. In my case, I am a 90 percent service connected veteran- thus I do not qualify for this pass due to my current rating. My situation is also similar to many veterans I have worked with over the years as very few are permanently disabled at 100 percent.

Also of interest, 3.5 million veterans live with a service connected disability. Free access to our nation's parks and federal recreational lands would definitely give an incentive to get outdoors for what would be a very therapeutic experience.

On that specific note, the University of Michigan conducted a study in 2013 which clearly shows that veterans participating in extended outdoor recreation activities showed signs of improved mental health. The study also suggested a link between outdoor activities and long term psychological well-being.

The study also clearly noted that veterans with the most serious health problems benefited the most from outdoor recreation.

While Vet Voice Foundation was happy to see a scientific study of this nature, it came as no surprise.

A member of Vet Voice Foundation, Scott Roney, is a retired Army Chaplain who currently serves as a behavioral health provider at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton. Scott, like many mental health clinicians sees service members and their families as they are in the process of reintegration. Many of these men and women are seeking help in dealing with combat trauma. Scott is a strong believer in encouraging these men and women, as well as their families to look to the outdoors as a means of recovery.

Last summer, Scott joined Vet Voice Foundation as we visited various lawmakers and the White House to discuss our mission and work with veterans. I was truly moved to hear Scott share with congressional and White House staff the stories of courage and recovery as well as how mother-nature can play a role in helping make someone become whole again. Yes, this is a very powerful anecdote that our veterans can turn to. Science and our nation's behavioral health specialists are in agreement- get outdoors and get healthy.

Today, I ask the members of this committee to please consider this information when evaluating this bill. Including all service connected veterans for a lifetime pass through this legislation is a benefit long overdue to our community. We have sacrificed dearly for this nation. Some of us have scars that will always be present. As I look at this committee I do know that you are all patriots and care deeply about the future of America's veterans. With that stated, I ask again, please remember us as you consider this legislation. It would truly benefit our community and families and would likely draw even more veterans to the outdoors.

In closing, I want to personally thank Representative Raul Ruiz for his leadership on this bill. His vision, commitment and character are things we all hope to see in our elected officials.

In conclusion, Chairman Bishop and members of the subcommittee, thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I hope that in the coming months, Vet Voice Foundation and its members can possibly visit with members of the subcommittee and its staff. I know our veterans would be honored to meet with you all and discuss their stories of why the outdoors are such an important component of their lives.

I look forward to answering any possible questions you may have concerning my testimony. Today has truly been an honor for myself and our organization. I humbled to be here.

