

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on HR 1739 and HR 2149

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Before the

House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

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Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

I appreciate the opportunity to be part of the dialogue surrounding the BWCA, especially the truck portages. Let me first start by telling you that I am a 46-year old WASP, father of a five-year old son and a teacher in Minneapolis public schools. I have been involved in wilderness travel since I was five years old and living in Colorado. I have had the privilege and opportunity to float on some of the most spectacular and scenic waters in America.

Some twenty six years ago I hit a tree while snow skiing and I have used a wheelchair for my personal mobility ever since. While this did present obvious problem initially; eventually through training, education and more appropriate equipment and proper planning I have been able to find access to some beautiful wilderness areas.

Water is the medium I choose for access to wilderness area. It offers me the best mobility, whether that mobility be in a kayak, canoe or inflatable raft. I have led hundreds of people on these trips through organizations including the Outward Bound School, S'PLORE, Wilderness Inquiry, The Vinland Center, Breckenridge Outdoor Education Center. I have used the routes in question in the BWCA and I would like to say that those routes stand alone as an appropriately accessible portage without the trucks. These portages are for all intents and purposes ideal portage routes for those of us with mobility impairments. And they are appropriate alternatives in a designated wilderness area, whereas the trucks are not appropriate.

Perhaps you wonder how this could possibly be the case. So I will take the time to outline the rationale and reasons for this rejection of trucks in the BWCA. The BWCA is a designated wilderness area, part of the National Wilderness Preservation system. There are approximately 16,000 people with disabilities using this system each year. Persons with disabilities have the ability to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wilderness just as well as the able-bodied. So when we venture into a wilderness area we want it to be a wilderness area, and not compromised in the name of accessibility.

I realize, as do most of us in the disabled community, that my model for getting along in general is not one of total independence. This independence ideal is a vestige of our frontier heritage and now, quickly approaching the 21 st century, we see that interdependence is the more appropriate and real model. And while access to wilderness is not easy, it is the case that working hard for your access makes it that much sweeter, most things worth having in life do not come easily.

Perhaps, you are asking yourself why don't you want all the help you can get, regardless of the environment

and circumstances. Well, I still have a certain amount of pride in doing for myself-, but more importantly in thinking for myself.. Yes, I want access indeed, but I want access to options -- to a wide range of possibilities. 98% of the lakes in Minnesota are accessible to motorized transportation. I don't want the remaining 2%, this nationally acclaimed gem to be compromised in the name of access. And I resent people telling me what I need. I hear the term "victims" bandied about in this argument. I am not a victim, I am not a hero. I am just a person who happens to use a wheelchair. This victim mentality is a vestige of another era. We reprogrammed Jerry Lewis, I would hope that we can enlighten these other attitudinal dinosaurs. Persons with disabilities want equal rights, not special rights. Those who advocate special rights for the disabled in the wilderness, while their intentions are good, are misguided and a reflection of a bygone and patronizing era.

I believe these issues are a reflection of a small, yet vocal minority who live close by the BWCA. And that this is more an issue about control over what they see as their backyard. But the figures indicate that 66% of the visitors to the BWCA are not locals. The local community runs the risk of killing the goose that will ultimately lay the golden egg. The primary economy of timber and mining are fitly developed and growth lays with tourism and service industries related to it.

So, in closing, I encourage you to look upon this issue as a red herring. It is an attempt to degenerate the wilderness by holding up this "holy" banner of accessibility. The community of persons with disabilities does not support this move to reinstate the truck portages. And we resent this transparent attempt to invoke disabled rights to promote this issue.

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