

Explorable | Season Two, Episode Twelve: Transcript of interview with Jeremy Buzzell

Josh Loebner:

Hey, everybody. This is Josh Loebner. Welcome to the Explorable podcast, the podcast for disability inclusion and accessibility when it comes to travel and tourism. Before we get started, Toby, how are you doing today?

Toby Willis:

Hey, Josh. I'm doing all right. Thanks for asking. I'm really excited to share with our audience today what our guest has to offer about the National Park Service accessibility program.

Josh Loebner:

Definitely. Just to let everyone know, if you're familiar with the national park, whether it's... I'm in Knoxville, Tennessee so the Smoky Mountains are one of the closest national parks to me. Toby, what's the closest park to you?

Toby Willis:

Oh, my gosh. I mean, I live in Seattle. We're just surrounded by some of the most amazing national parks. I do have a special affinity for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park because I grew up in Tennessee visiting the national park there. I'd say my favorite out here is the Olympic National Park is fabulous. It's beautiful. I think Teddy Roosevelt called it the gem of the Americas because it is so beautiful. There's not a lot of tourism out there, so it's quite secluded and such a great place to visit.

Josh Loebner:

A little bit more about my background for everybody. I have a graduate degree in advertising. I super enjoy my role in advertising and disability inclusion in communications, but my undergraduate, I have near and dear to me a background in forestry. My undergraduate, it was forestry resource management. I had a lot of classmates that were going into the Park Service, whether it's state park services, National Park Service. Several of them became park rangers. I'll never forget one of the first classes I had. One of the professors wrote the word recreate on the board, and then he spaced out the word to form re-create. That was a conversation I had with our guest, Jeremy Buzzell, branch chief for the accessibility management program for the National Park Service. Jeremy and I had a conversation about that and how parks really are opportunities to recreate one's self, whether it's the natural vistas of the Great Smoky Mountains or the buildings and historical sites that are also under the auspices of the National Park Service. Jeremy, I'd love to welcome you and hear a little bit more from you about your role. Accessibility is significant and important when it comes to welcoming as many people as possible. Welcome to the show. Tell us a little bit more about your role.

Jeremy Buzzell:

Great. Thank you very much for having me. I always appreciate any opportunity that we have to not only encourage folks with disabilities to come to the national parks, but to provide information about our accessibility at parks. You started by asking that I talk a little bit about my role working for the National Park Service. I have to admit, I somewhat hit the jackpot when it comes to getting jobs. As a person with a background in accessibility working in many different contexts in the federal government, to be able to be now working at an agency with a mission like the National Park Service mission where I get the opportunity to go around to different parts

of the country and visit national parks, it really is that dream job that a lot of people could get. I feel very lucky to get it. The core of the job that I have really is coordinating subject matter expertise around accessibility. I say that because if you think about what our national parks do, whether they are historic sites, whether they preserve natural resources, whether they are telling some part of the American story, the vast majority of the people who work at these sites are experts in any number of things related to preserving natural resources, to preserving historic sites, to operating facilities, to providing visitor services. You've got people from all walks of life from all around the world who are highly trained experts in caveology and mountain climbing and search and rescue and these fascinating topics, but the majority of them are not people who have backgrounds in accessibility and disability. That's not where most people who work for the Park Service are coming. But because our park exist to serve all people, we have to make sure that we have subject matter experts who can then coordinate and collaborate with those folks on making sure that that historic experience that they know so much about is accessible, on making sure that the trails that the trail crews know so much about are more accessible. That's really where the role of what we do comes in. I work out of the national headquarters in Washington, so I don't work for a particular park. Really, I work for all the parks, if you think about it. It's important to understand that the Park Service is a very decentralized organization. We have 420-plus units around the country. They all have unique challenges in unique parts of the country with unique missions and unique features. We tend to say, "Hey, you know what? If you've been to one national park, you've been to one national park." Because of the decentralized nature of our organization, we serve really in a technical assistance and training capacity. We exist not to tell parks what to do. We exist not to provide funding to them to do things. What we exist to do is to support what they're doing on the day-to-day when they say, "Hey, we've got this challenge at this historic site. We want to be able to make it more accessible. How would we do that? Who do you know that has done that before somewhere else? Is there any best practices out there? How do we interpret this law related to accessibility that we're not familiar with? We've got this unique situation with this request. How would we do that?" Our job really is to be there to not only proactively address those things, but also reactively answer questions and field problems with people. And then we do also get involved in doing some evaluation and assessing levels of accessibility. If a park is looking for somebody to come out and help them understand where they are not accessible and where they could be more accessible, we would be involved in that. I would also say that because of where we sit in terms of being in Washington and having people who are involved in the disability community, we really do the piece of outreach that has to be done with the disability community. We will work with national disability organizations to understand their concerns. In some cases, we could have a park that says, "Hey, we want to get better at working with people with autism. Can you help us find an organization that could support us in that?" We might contact a national autism organization and say, "Can you get a local chapter to collaborate with this park?" and serve as that connective tissue around these issues. I mean, that's really what our day-to-day focus and role in the organization is, is really just to both be looking internally at how can I support a park to be more accessible, externally in terms of how do I connect parks to the disability community, and then we have some pieces that just have to do with, for example, doing a podcast like this where we get a chance to promote to people the accessibility that does exist at national parks. Because what I'd really like to do is spend more of our time focusing on what it is we get right about accessibility rather than the chances that we sometimes miss, or the places that we have that aren't accessible, often because of natural resources or historic character that we can't [inaudible 00:08:44].

Josh Loebner:

Well, that's great. Let's keep the positives going. Toby, what questions do you have?

Toby Willis:

I'm just excited to hear about how you're creating a network effect. I love that decentralized model and getting the community involved with those local parks. I think it's really important because the community understands that local need and culture around inclusion. To that end, I'm wondering if you, Jeremy, would share some examples of this work in practice. I know there's probably so many, but are there some that stand out, some initiatives that you've spearheaded that you'd like to share with our audience?

Jeremy Buzzell:

Well, I can give you a specific example of something that we have going on right now involving the disability community. I actually did bring up the example just now about how we've got a lot of interest in parks around how we do a better job of serving visitors who have autism. We tend to be very focused on access for people with mobility disabilities because again, we do have so much outdoor infrastructure. That seems to be the place where it's really obvious. But what we don't think about quite as much is, well, how does a child with autism who wants to participate in our Junior Ranger program participate in that program? How does an adult with autism who might have sensitivity to light and sound, how does that person navigate one of our visitor centers where we might have a lot of sound pollution from videos that are running or other effects that we have going on? What would be the things that we can do around those? For example, in collaboration with a part of the Park Service that we call interpretation and education, which are that national-level group that works on providing a few of the support on how we do a better job working with visitors and telling the stories of the parks, we've put together a four-part series on autism which is actually in collaboration with an institute on disability out of Indiana University, where they have some people who are specialists at working with people who have autism. That's an example of the sort of thing that because we have those kinds of connections, we put that together and then we can have this four-part webinar series that we share with the field about the experience of autism and how you serve people with autism. Another thing that we do that's an initiative which actually started as a result of COVID-19 and our recognition that we were rapidly making changes to the way parks operate in response to COVID-19. Whether we were closing buildings or curtailing services or whatever it is, the parks remained open but the services were changing. We needed our people from the field to understand how is that change going to impact the people with disabilities. If you have created social distancing requirements that change the flow of the building, how might that affect people who are blind? If you now have everyone in your park wearing masks, how is that going to affect communication with visitors who have hearing disabilities and maybe who rely on reading lips? What we actually did because this... We don't have subject matter experts who are going to be ready to go talking about this. This is a brand new world. What we did is we started a series of what we call Disability Dialogues, where we brought in people with disabilities to not necessarily talk about their experiences in parks, but "Hey, what's it been like going to the grocery store? What's it been like going to the mall and navigating this COVID-19 world as a person with a disability?" We had a session where we brought in individuals who use mobility devices. We had a session where we brought in folks who had hearing disabilities. We had a session where we brought in folks who have intellectual disabilities and one where we had folks with hearing disabilities, and just had them talk with the field about what their experience with COVID-19 was like. We asked them questions that we felt would inform a discussion about how would that extrapolate to the experience in a visitor center. How would that extrapolate to a walk and talk with a ranger guide? Those ended up being so popular that we decided not to stop with COVID-19. We just have a monthly Disability Dialogue now where we bring in folks from the disability community. It's very similar to... We have our own internal podcast where basically we have a host and they ask people from the disability community questions about a particular

topic. We had one where we brought in people who used unique mobility devices to use trails in the national parks. They talked about their devices and what they looked like and what their experiences were when they ran across people who were questioning their use of those devices on our trails. That's the sort of thing where again, we're connecting with the disability community and having them tell their story to our Park Service staff. We're getting a hundred plus or more people who attend those every month, and then we archive them and we make them available for people later. That's an example of some of the initiatives that we have where we are trying to connect the disability community not necessarily with an individual park, but certainly with our park staff.

Toby Willis:

I think it's great how you mention that it's so popular, the program's going to continue. I think we hear that almost from every guest, is how businesses and organizations are spinning up these programs and then realizing how popular they are and how well attended. It's great. I think it speaks directly to the business case for why we should be doing this.

Jeremy Buzzell:

Yeah. I would say that one thing we don't have a shortage of is we have a hunger for knowledge about accessibility in the Park Service. I would say I've yet to run across any situation in which people were not interested in making things accessible. What is more problematic is they just don't know how, or they might not know the questions to ask. I would also say in our experience, it's very rare that there isn't an answer. It's more often that there's too many answers or there's too many different ways to address the problem. It's more about, "Well, how do you choose the best solution? Which resource do you look at for the way to do this?" A part of our job almost is not just connecting people to this information that they might not know is already out there, but also curating some of it. Because if you look at technology alone, and we're talking about technological solutions to some of these issues, there's an immense amount of technology out there that could solve many of our accessibility challenges. But which one is the best one to use? What situation for which group can be a very complicated question.

Josh Loebner:

Jeremy, it's great to hear about you welcoming so many different voices from the disability community. There's a saying, nothing about us without us, that's part of the disability community and really, a cultural touchstone so that whether it's brand, whether it's parks, whether it's government organizations, whomever is coming up with initiatives that support inclusion and accessibility, that hopefully people with disabilities have a voice. It's great to hear that your team not only started it during COVID, but you're continuing to listen to those voices and to gain insights. I do want to ask a little bit more about your role and the Park Service's program when it comes to accessibility. What is the history of it? We all know the history of the National Park Service from Teddy Roosevelt, and we know that the Park Service has evolved over time. What is a little bit of the history, maybe, you can share with us about accessibility at the parks? And then what are some goals? Understanding that COVID, I think, threw everybody a massive, global curveball, but are there any goals that you would like to steer back towards when it comes to accessibility for the National Park Service?

Jeremy Buzzell:

The good news about the accessibility program with the National Park Service is it is not in its infancy. I am carrying the torch forward for many folks who held this seat before I did. We really start back with the passage of Section 504 in the 1970s and those regulations. I think even then,

there was a recognition of the need to adapt to those requirements. Really, it goes back to 1968 when they passed the Architectural Barriers Act and required that federal facilities become accessible. If you look back historically in the Park Service, it's going to follow the same trajectory as most other organizations, which is the requirements for us to do things accessibly came in now since the 1970s. But what the requirements really said was, "Well, anytime you do something new, you have to make sure that new thing meets the standards. You don't really have to do anything to the old stuff until you rehabilitate." I'm not going to tell anybody every single facility and trail and everything that we have everywhere in the Park Service meets today's accessibility standards because we do have some things that date back to well before the 1960s and 1970s that we have not rehabilitated, or we also have many things where to do those kinds of upgrades would affect the historic character or would affect the natural resource. We have a balancing act involved in that. But what I would say is that if you look back at the evolution of the Park Service, we are trying to evolve away from a model where accessibility is something that you add, accessibility is something that is on top of your baseline, to where we say, "Accessibility is just baked into what you do, that you would view it the same that you view meeting plumber code, meeting electrical code." You don't design a building and then say, "How are we going to make sure it meets electrical code?" You design a building to meet electric code. We want to move culturally the same way to saying you don't think about, okay, we're going to build a visitor center. We plan and build the visitor center and then we'd say, "Okay, so how are we going to make it accessible?" We have to get a seat at the table upfront in the initial design. That is initial design not just in terms of structural, but what purpose is the visitor center going to serve? What are you going to do at the visitor center? I think that's really a goal that we have, is moving beyond the idea that accessibility is a separate thing, it's an additional thing, it's funded separately, it's handled separately. No, it's just sort of part and parcel of the way we do business. I think that is one of the shifts in the historic way we view things. I think in the past, it definitely was looked at as an extra, an addition, a change, a modification versus oh, it's just built in. I think another piece that shifts is we have tended to look at accessibility in a stovepipe way, meaning we have accessible facilities and we have a way to make our facilities accessible, and then we have a way to make our interpretation accessible. But that's not how visitors experience the park. For them, it is a seamless experience. We've been really emphasizing you have to look at accessibility from an entry-to-exit standpoint. That entry begins before you even get to the park. It's what is the experience you have on our website when you do research about the park? What is the experience when you're in the parking lot? What is the experience when you're approaching from the parking lot to the visitor center? What is your experience in the visitor center learning about what you can do in the rest of the park? What is your experience after you leave the visitor center to go have those activities that you learned about in the visitor center? Again, we haven't always looked at things like that historically. That's the other thing that we're pushing, is to say, "Look at that way," I'll tie that back to us trying to do a better job involving people from the disability community. Well, what's the best way to understand that entry-to-exit experience? Have some people disabilities come out to your park and go through that entry-to-exit experience with you and say, "This is what I would need. This is what would make the experience better for me. This is the barrier that I experienced on your website," or "This was the barrier that I experienced when I got to your visitor center or whatever it is." We're trying to keep pace with what you hear in most organizations in terms of the way they have evolved from this is about compliance with the law to this is now about equity, diversity and inclusion. Changing that mindset is a big part of what we're trying to do.

Josh Loebner:

I silently cheered when you said all that. That's phenomenal to hear of that pivot from simply compliance to something greater. That's wonderful.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, I think it's worth reiterating how taking that big picture look at the end-to-end life cycle is hugely important. It's difficult to make everything accessible to every user all the time, especially when you have these trade-offs with business and historical value and characteristics that are sometimes integral to the site itself. But I think in general, inclusive design is good design. If we get this right for those of us who need it most, it's going to be more awesome for everyone. And you're not doing this at any small scale. I mean, the parks service is quite large. You mention at the top of the call, Jeremy, that there's over 420 sites, I believe. Can you tell us a little bit more about the total scope of the sites you're servicing, how many visitors you have? Just general stats like that.

Jeremy Buzzell:

As of right now, we do have 423 national park sites. If people aren't familiar, there are entities called national parks. Not everything that we have purview over is a national park. We have national recreation areas. We have national historic sites. There is all different kinds of experiences. We have national battlefields. Of those 423, not everything is technically called a national park. Those are going to be your big... That's the Grand Canyon and the Yellowstone, the Yosemite, but then we have national historic sites and other things that I was just commenting on. And they range in size from massive to very small. They range in topic from natural to historic. We got one of everything. I guarantee whatever it is, we have one of it in the National Park Service. There's no question. We had... Well, kind of in weird place because we did have some decreases of visitation due to COVID. We're still seeing the 1.05 billion recreation visitor hours to our parks. We had 237 million visits to our parks in 2020. We're serving millions of people a year from all across the world. The way we look at it is we don't collect any data on how many of our visitors have disabilities, but we look at it and say, "All right, well if you get 200 million visitors and you assume 20% of the population is people with disabilities, that's millions of people a year who are visiting our parks who have disabilities that we need to serve." There's now a site in every state. Many states have multiple sites. We've got them in outlying territories. We've got them in Puerto Rico. We've got them in Hawaii and Alaska. We've got huge swathes of territory to cover. Some of them don't actually have any land involved. We have some sites that are just in the water. That presents a tremendous amount of challenges and opportunities because there's no formula. We can't just say, "Oh, here's how you make X accessible." We can't just say there's a standard accessible dock that we use all across the Park Service. Well, in some cases, that lake is out in the desert and the dock can be there year round because there's no freezing and it's not going to affect. In other places, well, it's going to freeze. You actually have to have a dock that you can take in and out of the water based on the season. It makes the job fun because there is no standard formula. One would hope that it gives us at least job security as well because as we evolve and conditions change and we add new things, there will always be new challenges. And then we have to adapt always to new technology that shows up that we can say, "Hey, man. That old style of the picnic table isn't the best style anymore." There was a long time where if you want an accessible picnic table, well it was just this long extension at the end which meant hey, if you're a person with a disability, you always had to sit at the end of the picnic table. Well, now they have some where they've adapted it where there's a cutout in the middle. Maybe we need to be looking at a mixture of those styles that we put out to benefit people who are picnicking. It's a constant movement and adaptation as we see basically constant growth in National Park Service visits year after year. Other than years where it's COVID-19, we are seeing just growing numbers of visitation, which means we're going to see growing numbers of people with disabilities visiting the parks. I think another really important thing to point out that a lot of people don't consider when it comes to national parks and disabilities is we have a ton of urban parks. There's a ton of

urban parks that are accessible by public transportation. While there are inherent challenges sometimes to just the air travel involved in getting to a far-flown park that's out in the west, for example, and then getting the transportation out there from the airport, Golden Gate is national recreation area right in the heart of San Francisco. We have parks in Philadelphia. We have multiple parks in New York. We have multiple parks in Boston. The national park experience is for everyone, and now we're adding different kinds of accessible transportation options. We've got two pilots going on at parks right now where they're using autonomous vehicles, for example. Well, how are we adapting to the use of autonomous vehicles in the national parks and making sure those are accessible? We've got a lot going on in a lot of different sites to serve 423 parks that are seeing millions of people a year and growing.

Toby Willis:

I think it's good visibility and to the scope and the complexity that you're faced with in providing an inclusive experience. A lot of this comes down to awareness. When you're thinking about delivering on what I call the in-trip experience, obviously inclusive design, we think about physical space and digital experience when people are looking at your website, things like that. But inclusive design extends into policy and practices, so designing policies and protocol around how we manage visitors and their needs. I'm wondering if there's training for staff at the parks and what that looks like. How are you raising awareness and making people more conscientious about the experience?

Jeremy Buzzell:

To echo what you said, for most people, the National Park Service is going to boil down to their interactions with [inaudible 00:28:44], the people who are in uniform who, when I show up at the visitor center and I'm like, "Hey, what's there that's great to do here? Can you show me where the campground is? Can you give me some tips of good places to go?" That interaction there is going to make or break your experience more so than any facility infrastructure that we have, in my opinion. Having those folks who are well informed just in general about understanding how to react to and respond to disability is very important, particularly in the sense that nine times out of 10, even if something that we have is not quite up to accessibility standards, we have an obligation to adapt. We have an obligation to figure something out, to find out, "Well, what is it that you're trying to achieve? Is there some alternate way that we can offer to help you achieve that?" That's another thing that we are really emphasizing not just through Disability Dialogues, but we actually have two other monthly trainings that we do, again, that are open to anyone in the field. We record them and we archive them. We've got our monthly Disability Dialogue which features people with disabilities talking about their experiences. We also just have a monthly topical webinar where we pick an important topic about disability policy, about accessibility, and someone who is a subject matter expert in that topic does a presentation. For example, every year we do a presentation on service animals, what they are, how to work with people with service animals, what the rights of people with service animals are, et cetera. We generally do that just before most of the seasonal hiring goes on so that our seasonal employees have an opportunity to hear about service animals and better understand, "Hey, if somebody shows up with a service animal, here's what you can do. Here's what you can't do. Here's how you work with those folks." We have those once a month available to everyone in the Park Service. In addition to that, we have what we call office hours. The office hours is the least formal of all of these where it's... Again, it's like a radio call-in show, but instead of having a panel of people with disabilities who we ask question about a particular topic, we say, "Hey, we're opening the phone lines. Whatever it is about accessibility or disability that you in the field have experienced, you have a question about, this hour's open. Our staff is going to be on the line for you to say, 'Hey, I've got this historic building. There's no access to the second floor. What should I do? Do

you have any tips? Oh, we had a visitor who came in the other day and had a challenge with this. I don't want that to happen again. Do you guys have any suggestions?" We have that array of things available every month. We archive them and then we send out monthly updates to people. We then also have an internal site for employees which is like a hub of curated information on disability and policy. There's a whole piece on it where we're sharing various guides to how you interact with people with disabilities that have been produced by disability organizations. Because again, that's one where there's plenty of information about that out there. I don't need to reinvent the wheel. What I need to do is I need to be able to connect people with that. In addition to that, we also do face-to-face trainings, certainly if a park were to say, "Hey, can you come out and spend a day doing a training with us on this?" We used to have twice-a-year, weeklong face-to-face sessions where we brought people to a park, taught them the basics of accessibility and then we'd go around the park and we'd find what are the things that are good, what are the things that are not good, and talk about those so the people could take that back to their park. We're actually just this month piloting an online version of that because nobody can travel. We do these things of progressive levels of intensity. We have an agreement with Indiana University where people can do an online self-paced accessibility certificate program. You could complete that program and then you can sign up for our weeklong, more intensive training to learn even more about accessibility, with the hope that those people are going back as accessibility ambassadors to their park to be raising the questions and saying, "Hey, I think there is an accessibility problem that we have here that we need to address," and then those people know where you go to get information about addressing. And then they can keep those skills up by attending Disability Dialogues, disability webinars and disability office hours on a monthly basis. We just cycle through that year after year.

Toby Willis:

Jeremy, that service animal training resonates so deeply with me because I work a guide dog and I love to hike. If you ever have seen how graceful a guide dog handler can navigate a trail no matter how rough and rocky it might be, it's quite amazing. It's liberating for those of us who have service animals. Thanks for doing that work. I'm curious if any of that has been externalized. Is this all proprietary content that you've created, or can our listeners go consume any of that?

Jeremy Buzzell:

I think it depends, probably, on what it is. I want to say that one of the platforms we use is YouTube. Once the training is done, we've got... When we reference people out to it, it's on YouTube, which makes me feel like it's there somewhere. I wouldn't be able to tell you, "Oh, you do this search and it shows up." What's actually interesting that's happening is I don't know that word has gotten out in terms of out to the community, but we now have other bureaus in the Department of the Interior saying, "Hey, any chance our folks can attend these trainings?" We've got people from the Forest Service who are like, "Hey, can people from the Forest Service attend these trainings?" We've definitely made it open to other federal agencies. It becomes more of a internet capacity issue. Well, how many people can you get on this particular internet platform? The one thing that we don't make available publicly are our office hours because we want people to feel comfortable saying, "Hey, I think I've got a problem. Can you help me solve this problem?" We don't want to ever deter people from sharing that because otherwise, you're not going to get it solved. The other things that we do, like I said, they're probably out there somewhere. I just don't know how to point people to them.

Josh Loebner:

This is all great, though. It's amazing [inaudible 00:35:32] the layers upon layers of listening and operationalizing that your team is being able to implement across the entire national park system. I do want to ask, with all the conversations internally, what are some conversations externally? Do you ever hear back about that family or that group or individuals who recreate in these national parks that have disabilities? Are there some positive stories and feedback that you receive?

Jeremy Buzzell:

We don't necessarily get them because again, we're at that national level. What trickles up to us are the parks who are very proud when they get something from somebody who reaches out and says, "Hi. My family had this wonderful experience." It's almost always it's a child with a disability who came and had a positive experience, and then the family wants to let them know. Or, it'll trickle up to us when somebody says, "Hey, such-and-such ranger did such a great job helping us with this thing." But what I will say is that what we are trying to do at a national level also is we are trying to collect our good examples of accessibility and put them online not just for our people, but for the public. We have two directions, which is I could say, "I want to go to X Park. I wonder what is accessible for me," or you might be a person who says, "I don't really care what park it's at. I like hiking. Let me find where accessible trails are and I'll just go to the parks that have them." We do have the first model where you can identify a park and you can find out what features do they have. What I'd like to be able to do is collect where we have good examples of accessible kayak launches and have that and employees if I'm interested in accessible kayaking and go, "Oh, look at these five parks that have these launches. And oh, there's pictures of these launches, too," so that I know which ones I'm familiar with. We've got parks that have put a lot of time and money and effort into doing audio-descriptive tours of their sites. I want those to be out there because my guess is there'll be some people who would say, "I'll go to that park, if for no other reason than to experience this audio description." I went to one of them down in Florida that had... It's triggered as you're wandering around the plantation site. The thing is triggering as you walk into a building and it's telling me all about the building and what I'm seeing and everything. This is not a place that most people would think of to go to get access. You'd associate, "Oh, they'll have that at the Grand Canyon, at Yosemite." Nope, it's a fairly small park in Florida that's got this great audio-descriptive tour. I want to be able to drive people toward going to those parks because I feel like number one, if you have visitors who are going there creating that demand, it reinforces us having it. And then number two, because we are decentralized, we do have a little bit of competitive streak where you don't want to be the park that doesn't have that. You want your park to also have its picture featured on our site to say, "Oh, but look at all the stuff we have in our park. I want you to come to my park, too. I want you to know you're welcome here." So we are trying to work on what's that catalog of the stuff that we know are doing well so that we can share it with people, which is not quite the same as having testimonials, but at the very least it's the things that we feel confident we put a lot of effort into making sure that this is something that is attractive and is accessible to people with disabilities.

Toby Willis:

I'm so excited to go revisit my local national park after this conversation. I'm really impressed with the progress that you've made in demonstrating disability inclusion and accessibility as important. Would you share any words of encouragement with listeners who are just starting their journey? I wish every destination and hotel and activity could hear this and lean in to this degree. I'm hoping that you can share some words of encouragement to give people the courage and the fortitude to get started.

Jeremy Buzzell:

The first thing that I would say, which is kind of a repeat of things I've already said, is number one, I think people—and it's people even in our parks—is they start out from this place where it feels daunting. It feels like I'm so far behind and there is so much that has to be done. There's no way I'll ever be able to make everything accessible. We experience that, too. Again, 423 sites that cover millions upon millions of acres of every different variety of experience that you can have. I am trying to boil this down to something that I think is simple and manageable. The way I boil it down to something simple and manageable is if I just knew that our people who are working out in the parks A, understood enough to go, "Wait, hold on. There's probably something we should be doing about accessibility," and then they knew, "Well, now that I've raised the question, I know where to go to get help to get this answered," that's my measure of success. If we could have that everywhere, where everyone knew to stop and ask that question and then knew where to go to get an answer, I'd say, "Hey, we're in good shape." Because while it seems daunting, like I said earlier, number one, the answer is out there. You are not going to be able to throw anything at people that somebody somewhere hasn't seen and dealt with and come up with a solution. It's a matter of being able to find the right people and find the right solutions. In most cases, it's a matter of the fact that there's too many solutions to choose from, and it's finding the right one that's the right match. And then number two is the starting point is with people with disabilities. One of the things that I think is a second deterrent besides it being daunting is people's concern of saying, "Yes, but if I go down this road, well now, what I have to do is I have to expose to people where I'm not getting it right. I have to expose to you what my inaccessibility is." While it is not impossible that you could expose yourself to a group of people with disabilities and say, "Hey, I need help. I know my stuff is not accessible," you might run across the one-tenth of 1% of people who want to somehow use that against you, but in all of my experiences, the folks that we've brought in, they want to help. They're not out to get you. They're out to say, "Yeah, there is a challenge with your accessibility. We have all this support that we can provide you to help you address that challenge. We can bring our expertise to this." It's more been a community of support than it has been at all antagonistic. The starting point has to be working with the disability community, getting their input on this to help you solve the problems. I guess the other thing that I would say is you will find a difference for all visitors. When we make things accessible to people with disabilities, we really have done a better job of making them accessible to everyone. As we add more tactile experiences for people with vision disabilities, we have increased the enjoyment that we have of our visitors who are children.

Toby Willis:

Or anyone who's a kinesthetic learner. Just some people learn by hands-on, by touching. Inclusive design is good design, so took the words out of my mouth. If we get this right for those of us who need it most, it will inherently be more awesome for everybody.

Jeremy Buzzell:

And the last thing that I generally say is there is money that you often spend to do this. However, it's way cheaper to get it right in your initial design and rehabilitation of your structure than it is to have to redo it later when you don't get it right. But you can't look at it as a compliance burden, as much as you look at it as an investment, and it is an investment not just in current visitors who disabilities. What you are doing is you are investing in future you. You very well in the future could be the person who has the mobility [inaudible 00:44:08]. I would hate to think that as I age, I will suddenly not be able to go to as many national parks because I didn't do a very good job of making them accessible for myself as I age and my vision gets a little bit worse and my hearing gets a little bit worse, and it's a little harder for me to walk. For most people, that is almost an inevitability. What you are doing is you are investing in your own

ability to go to these sites later in life. I think if you think about it that way, you're suddenly like, "Oh, well it seems like this is probably worth the money to make sure that I can come back here in 20 years and enjoy this in the same way that my visitors today enjoy this."

Josh Loebner:

Powerful words. I feel like I just heard an amazing sermon, so I'm going to say amen to all of that, Jeremy. Jeremy, where can our listeners go to find out more about the National Park Service and accessibility?

Jeremy Buzzell:

I will give you the most obvious answer, which is we do have www.nps.gov. On that site, we have a subject matter site that you actually just do a search for accessibility. You can actually get to our subject matter site and our subject matter site on accessibility actually has this map on it. And then you can pick a park and you can click on that park on the map. It's going to take you to the accessibility information about that park. Each one of our park sites has a Plan Your Visit section. Under that Plan Your Visit section, there is accessibility information about the park. You can either go straight to that park if you want because you know, "Oh, I want to visit the Everglades," so you just go to their accessibility section. Or if you're not sure where you want to go and you just want general information, you can click around on our map that takes you, then, to each individual park's accessibility site.

Josh Loebner:

This is all phenomenal information. Hopefully, we'll pass this COVID time. For our listeners that are hearing this, hopefully you visit those websites and visit a national park near you. Jeremy Buzzell, branch chief for the accessibility management program of the National Park Service. Thanks so much, Jeremy. This has been an Explorable podcast. We'll listen to you and we'll catch you next time. Thanks so much.