

Unlocking the Outdoors: How Virginia's 'Explore the Wild' App Connects You to Nature

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There's a lot of public land out there waiting to be used for fishing, hiking, camping, hunting, wildlife viewing, and much more, but as communicators, we're faced with a unique challenge. How do we make people aware of these opportunities?

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) took on this challenge and developed a database and web app to put the information right into the public hands. As presented by Max Goldman during the 2024 ACI conference, the Virginia DWR's "Explore the Wild" web app connects the public with the outdoors by showing them what public lands are out there and available for which activities.

The internet has made it easier than ever to find information about recreational activities, but it has also made it overwhelming with how much information is out there and scattered on so many different websites. "Explore the Wild" alleviates this problem by consolidating that information in one place. As Goldman explained, it's like *Yelp* for the outdoors.

The app is straightforward. Users start by filtering what they're looking for by activity (paddling, hunting, primitive camping, etc.) and distance from their desired zip code. "Explore the Wild" then generates a list of public lands that meet those criteria, providing helpful details such as available amenities.

What's particularly noteworthy about this web app is that it is a valuable resource for seasoned outdoor enthusiasts looking to discover new places and for beginners seeking encouragement to explore the outdoors.

As Goldman explained, while using the app may be simple, the journey to develop it was anything but. One of the biggest tasks was creating the database of public lands. It began internally with the Virginia DWR compiling existing data from previous efforts to build a complete list of all DWR properties. The project then expanded to include other public lands, such as federal areas. Goldman highlighted the importance of teamwork and partnerships in this process, noting that good communication was essential for obtaining accurate, up-to-date information. However, it was rewarding, as Goldman mentioned how he even discovered public lands that were new to him during this process.

Once the database was complete, the next step was to develop it into a user-friendly web app. This phase involved considerable creativity, testing, and refining. Goldman mentioned that, in many ways, this is an ongoing process, with continual improvements needed to serve the public better.

The success of the "Explore the Wild" web app stands as a testament to the incredible impact that innovation and collaboration can have in the realm of conservation communication. Max Goldman's presentation reminded us that by leveraging technology

and fostering partnerships, we can transform the way people connect with the natural world. This web app is not just a tool but an opportunity to change how we approach engaging the public with the outdoors. As we continue to champion these efforts, let us draw inspiration from this success and remain committed to making natural resources accessible. After all, the outdoors are truly better together.