



Val at Wahclella Falls.

Q&A WITH “VOYAGES WITH VAL”

Your social channels, primarily Instagram and TikTok, started out focused on travel and outdoors, but this year you’ve begun using your platform more for environmental advocacy. What inspired that shift, and was there a particular moment you realized you could use your platform that way?

My goal has always been to inspire people to get outside, especially to visit National Parks since they’re so accessible. When thousands of National Park employees were laid off in February, I didn’t feel like I could stay silent. I’ve seen firsthand how understaffed many parks already are, and I was horrified thinking about the impact additional cuts could have.

Today, more creators are using their reach to mobilize followers around conservation and policy. How do you think they play a role in shaping public opinion on environmental issues?

Social media can feel like an echo chamber, and it’s easy to assume there’s “no point” in posting because you’ve already seen a lot about an issue. But every time I share something about an environmental concern, I get messages from people saying they had no idea. Whether you have a large or small audience, it’s meaningful to share. Raising awareness for even one person matters.

Many of your posts touch on the importance of protecting public lands. What do public lands represent to you personally, and how can we help more people—especially younger generations and those historically excluded—develop that same sense of connection and responsibility?

Public lands are part of what makes our country so special. U.S. National Parks and Forests are unlike anywhere else. If we don’t protect them, they will be developed, and we’ll lose so much natural beauty and some of the last truly wild places. I’ve been to countries with beautiful landscapes but less protection, and you can feel the difference: less wildlife, more crowds, and fewer opportunities to really connect with nature. The only way people build a connection to the outdoors is by getting outside. Social media is a great tool for reaching people who may not otherwise be exposed to nature. When they see a beautiful place online, they think, “How can I get there?” I didn’t grow up hiking, but I fell in love with it on a National Parks road trip. That’s why I share accessible trails and destinations, because once you start getting outside, it’s hard to stop.

A growing number of digital creators are beginning to speak out on climate, conservation, and policy. What advice would you give creators who want to use their platforms for good but feel intimidated or unsure where to start?

A good place to start is by sharing posts to your stories, especially if you can add a link with direct actions people can take. There’s a lot of misinformation online, so when a new environmental issue comes up, I try to verify what’s happening through several news sources before sharing. When I make my own posts, I stick to sharing the facts and explaining what can be done. This helps people quickly understand the issue, take action, or pass the information along to family and friends.

You’ve spent time exploring the Columbia Gorge over the years. What draws you most to this landscape, and do you have favorite trails or experiences here?

The Gorge is so special to me, as it’s where I first started hiking. It’s accessible, even in winter, and every season has its own draw. I especially love the waterfalls in the fall and the wildflowers each spring. My favorites are Wahclella Falls, the Wahkeena–Multnomah Loop, and Tom McCall Point.