

United States Forest Service

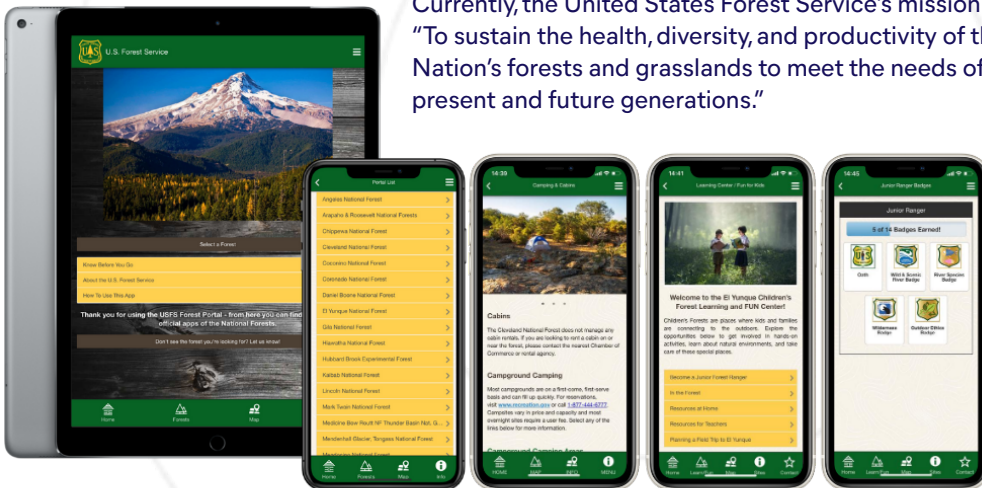
July, 30 2020

Overview

The United States Forest Service (USFS) is an agency of the Department of Agriculture that manages 154 national forests and 20 national grasslands spanning 193 million acres of land in total. The organization employs about 35,000 employees while their sites attract about 300 million visitors per year.

Since its founding in 1905 by President Theodore Roosevelt, the Forest Service has been committed to sustainably managing the land, although their policies and practices have evolved over the years. Until the 1960s, the USFS's primary mission was to provide the nation with a continuous supply of timber and quality water. With the cultural and policy shifts in the 1960s and 1970s, the Forest Service pivoted from sustainable management of a harvestable resource to environmental protection and conservation.

Currently, the United States Forest Service's mission is "To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations."



The Challenge

Meeting the needs of present and future generations means that the USFS was facing another shift toward a more technologically focused engagement strategy. In order to effectively communicate the value and importance of environmental conservation, the organization realized that it could no longer rely on static interpretive panels placed within the sites to educate and inform visitors.

An increasing demand for guided tours coupled with the need to quickly and effectively communicate safety alerts to visitors made it clear that it was time to pivot again; however, staffing levels, workload, and budget along with other factors made an in-house solution difficult to create.

"I know lots of people come to the forest service because they are interested in trees and wildlife, not necessarily in building technology," said Toby Bloom, National Program Manager of Travel, Tourism, and Interpretation at the USFS. "That's why I picked STORY, because I knew that even the tree huggers like me would be able to use the app building platform. It's very simple and easy to build a beautiful app with excellent functionality that serves a range of needs for our visitors."

Key Features & Functionality

App Highlights

El Yunque National Forest
Children's learning center

Ozark-St. Francis National Forest
Employee portal

Cleveland National Forest
Available in 10 different languages

Key Features

Favorites Button
"Things to see & do"
Safety Alerts & Warnings
Trip Planning Information
General Site Information



Key Functionality

Interpretation (audio guides, tours)
Push Notifications
Geo Alerts
Interactive Mapping
Online and Offline Capabilities
Gamification (badges & quizzes)
Bookings & Passes
Educational Resources

The Solution

STQRY created the National Forests and Grasslands Explorer app to meet the needs of the individual USFS sites and their visitors. The dynamic, budget-friendly, secure app gives administrators full control over content (unlike other user-generated content apps) while STQRY provides compliance with the latest operating systems along with updated features and services.

"Because the platform is so easy to use, our public affairs and recreation officers are able to upload current information in a moment's notice, without having to go through the long process of having our IT team make a change," said Bloom.

The Explorer app is a portal that allows each of the USFS sites to create their own individual content and experiences within the larger context of the app. Visitors only need to download the Explorer app to gain access to all of the enrolled USFS sites.

The app can be used entirely offline and without cell service, making things like charting a hiking path and receiving notifications about potential danger a more streamlined experience. "I have no doubt that the alerts and the app have helped reach users and save lives on the trails, as well as tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars," said Joey Martin, Assistant Recreation Officer of the Cleveland National Forest. Many forests have also integrated extra features like multilingual translation, gamification, and virtual tours to reach new users. El Yunque National Forest features a Junior Ranger section where children can earn virtual badges for answering quiz questions, which is perfect for digital learning, while other sites like Cleveland National Forest created their app in 10 different languages to facilitate enhanced accessibility and interpretation.

Digital tours have proven to be particularly effective during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many of these sites have had to shut down in-person operations and needed a creative way to maintain engagement with visitors.

"...the platform is so easy to use, our public affairs and recreation officers are able to upload current information in a moment's notice, without having to go through the long process of having our IT team make a change."

- Toby Bloom, National Program Manager of Travel, Tourism, and Interpretation at the USFS

The Result

The USFS's Explorer app immediately received positive reviews from users in the App Store, as well as internal praise from staff who appreciated the ease of use. One major site, Ozark St. Francis National Forest, even uses their app as an employee portal.

"As a company, STQRY has...helped our field units solve small and large problems, and create new methods for doing our work that both streamline and reduce work for our staff, but also increase the enjoyment and understanding of visitors to our national forests," said Bloom.

In the first 7 months of 2020, there have been over 12,000 new users for the portal app and over 100,000 pageviews (up from 62,000 in 2019) – an impressive turnout considering the COVID-19 pandemic closed down many sites.

Ultimately, the National Forests and Grasslands Explorer App is helping advance the environmental conservation mission of the USFS by keeping the organization technologically up-to-date, while adding in educational elements and making sites more accessible. Thus going above and beyond in meeting the needs of current and future generations.

If you are interested in setting up a free demo, please contact us to schedule an appointment.

Kyle Pierce, Sales Manager for the USFS: (+1) 585-443-0966

Josh Gilbert, Account Manager for the USFS: (+1) 585-229-6526