

# Rish Park is on the road to a healthy recovery



**Your Turn**  
JR Harding  
Guest columnist

Rish Park is one of the few outdoor parks with accessibility as its primary mission. It was nearly five years ago when Hurricane Michael blasted the shores of the Panhandle.

The bullseye for this CAT 5 storm was Mexico Beach, St. Joe Bay, and our beloved Rish Park. The devastation across this stretch of Florida was significant, but with the start of the summer season, Rish Park is on the road to a healthy recovery.

It has been a long time coming, but on June 9th, the Florida State Parks System fully reopened Rish Park. For those of you unfamiliar with Rish Park, it is a 98-acre piece of paradise dedicated to outdoor recreation for persons with disabilities, and their families. It was originally envisioned by the late Billy Joe Rish (a legendary legislator from St. Joe) in the early 1970s. With his leadership and the support of the Florida Legislature, our state created outdoor access for PWDs, long before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990.

This unique parcel of land has been providing distinct experiences along the Gulf of Mexico and the St. Joe Estuaries for thousands of Floridians with disabilities, until that horrible day on Oct 10th, 2018, when Michael hit.



Guests enjoy the renovations at Rish Park. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Thanks to the leadership of the governor's office, legislature, and state park system, overnight stays at Rish Park are available once again. Day visitors have been enjoying the accessible pool and beach since Jan 30, 2022. The family cabins have been refurbished, accessible parking has been installed, beach access has been restored, and new accessible experiences will be offered soon (nature trail, kayaking, RV/camp-

ing, and more).

The new and improved Rish Park offers a fresh perspective called inclusion. No longer is the park limited to just persons with disabilities, but it is shared by all citizens. It was most enjoyable to experience the sun, the waters, and the fresh air with *all abilities*. For the first time in 25 years, I had the opportunity to roll down some nature trails, pick up seashells, and access both sides of the

water independently.

However, as the park continues to modernize and add additional accessible experiences, an essential key to retaining this unique mission of the park is to prioritize PWD access while blending usage. Another key element will be to exceed minimum accessibility standards whenever appropriate. Five years was a very long time for a full reopening but based on the number of cars in the parking lot, it was much appreciated.

Some of the things that jumped out at me during my recent stay, was that I met people from Australia, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Alabama, and Georgia, all on the same day. Each one of my new friends all expressed the same viewpoint, that this mission is unique and that it should never lose its focus.

One gentleman stated that he could "access the beach from six different locations, but this is the only place in which you [I] can access it."

There should be more places like Rish, not less. The Australians indicated that their beaches are quite beautiful but had nothing like this across their coasts and for their visitors with disabilities.

The Friends of Rish Park (FRP) will continue to serve as a voice for greater access and more experiences for the community. We hope that you will join us in expressing our sincere appreciation to the Florida Park Service and others who helped restore the "open for business" to our beloved paradise.

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