



MELISSA PARKISH

Setting the Pace

By Kim A. O'Connell

Across the country, inclusive outdoor recreation opportunities are increasingly available to those with a range of abilities and disabilities.

ON A SPRING DAY along the Cumberland Trail in Tennessee, a group of inner-city students hikes along a paved path. Leaves rustle the trees, birds chirp from their perches, water tumbles over rocks. The forest is vivid with texture and sound, made more so by the fact that some of the children are blind.

Clinging to a guide rope, the kids carefully step off the "accessible" trail and onto a natural-surface path leading down to Rock Creek. This feeling is new. When they reach the water's

edge, it takes little prodding before they kick off their shoes and wade in, the electrifying current of cool water flowing between their toes. The experience is "transformative," according to trip chaperone Jeffrey Hunter, whether you are sighted or not.

As American Hiking Society's Southeast Trail Programs Director, Hunter partnered with the Cumberland Trail Conference, Tennessee State Parks, the Hamilton County school district, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, a local botanical garden,

and community volunteers to make this special hiking event happen in April 2005. Nearly 40 students ranging in age from eight to 18, many of whom have other disabilities in addition to visual impairment, joined family members, teachers, and other volunteers for a day of hiking and multi-sensory activities. Together, they listened to bird songs, smelled cedar and sassafras, planted vegetation, and followed a raised relief map with words written in Braille.

Beyond providing accessibility for

the disabled, this event illustrates the larger concept of inclusive outdoor recreation. On the Cumberland Trail and across the country, public agencies and private groups are increasingly providing opportunities for people with different abilities to interact as peers in the outdoors, without compromising the natural environment.

IN THE UNITED STATES, an estimated 54 million people have some kind of major disability or impairment. But this figure does not necessarily reflect the wide range of people who may not have obvious disabilities such as paraplegia. Autism, mental illness, and other disorders all may result in functional limitations. By 2030, according to some estimates, our country will be home to more than 110 million citizens over the age of 55, multiplying the numbers of people with mobility difficulties or other impairments.

For years now, the disabled have been able to get around government buildings, museums, movie theaters, and other places much more easily, thanks to laws such as the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Ramps, bars, and automatic doors are now commonplace (although far from universal). The outside world, however, remains a foreign realm for most people with disabilities. The disabled are frequently limited to paved, flat paths through urban parks, while their friends and families plan trips to remote forests and recreation areas.

To address this lack, the U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board—better known as the Access Board—convened a committee to develop draft recommendations for accessibility in outdoor facilities such as trails, shelters, and privies. Known as the Regulatory Negotiating (or RegNeg) Committee on Outdoor Facilities, the group produced outdoor accessibility recommenda-



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The USDA Forest Service's accessibility guidelines seek to broaden the range of outdoor experiences available to people with disabilities.

tions in 1999. Hamstrung by bureaucracy, however, these recommendations have yet to be made available for public comment or promulgated as federal regulations.

In the absence of overarching policy, the USDA Forest Service proceeded with the development of its own guidelines governing accessibility in

national forests—the first and only federal public land agency to do so. Following a public comment period in 2005—during which American Hiking and various trail organizations submitted extensive comments—the final guidelines were released in May 2006, and the Forest Service has since worked to publicize them to trail managers and other groups (see sidebar).

The guidelines do not mean, however, that every backcountry trail through a national forest or wilderness area will be leveled and paved—far from it. Instead, these guidelines seek to ensure that federal agencies are always considering accessibility when making decisions about trails and other outdoor facilities. Where possible, accommodations can often be made to allow a range of user experiences without damaging a place's fundamental character.

This concept is as important to many disabled people as it is to able-bodied hikers, says Janet Zeller, the Forest Service's national accessibility program manager. Zeller, who has been quadriplegic since she was injured at another job in 1988, was once an avid outdoorswoman. She still is.



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Many trails are accessible to the disabled, even without paving, handrails, or other modifications—the key is to make them known.

“My greatest frustration is that people think that because I use a wheelchair that the only way I can recreate is by motor vehicle,” Zeller says. “Just because I have a disability doesn’t change what I love to do. What I want is what other folks who love wilderness want—that solitude, that self-reliance, that peace.”

TEN YEARS AGO, Kris Gulden was a cop in Alexandria, Virginia, as well as a successful triathlete. In 1998, she suffered a severe spinal cord injury when she was hit by a car while bike-riding, which has required her to use a wheelchair ever since. She left the police force and eventually joined the staff at an REI store in Fairfax, Virginia, not far from where she lives. There, she thought, she would at least meet like-minded people.

It wasn’t long before Gulden was paddling a boat in the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore and taking cliff-edge hikes at Channel Islands National Park with the Minneapolis-based outfitter Wilderness Inquiry, which offers inclusive outdoor adventures for people with and without disabilities.

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“I had learned about them before, but I just couldn’t muster up the guts to go,” Gulden says. “I was concerned about going to the bathroom in the woods and other issues that I just wasn’t ready to tackle.”

After hearing about them again at REI, Gulden talked with group leaders until she was convinced she could handle the rigors of the two trips, for which Wilderness Inquiry staff ensured that she was partnered with others whose abilities complemented her own. “I realize we can’t take away every obstacle,” Gulden says, “and I don’t want the earth turned into a big macadam blob. But if just a portion of those places were modified or maintained in a way that is useable for someone in a wheelchair or someone who walks slowly or needs a cane, that would be really nice.”

Greg Lais, executive director of Wilderness Inquiry, is uncomfortable with the term “inclusion,” arguing that it can still connote offering charity to the less fortunate. Lais prefers the phrase “social integration.” “The whole point is to do this with dignity and as equal human beings,” he says. “If by the grace of God you were hit by a car and broke your back, you’d still be who you are. You’d still be Democrat or Republican, or whatever religion you are. Would you want all your experiences to be for ‘special’ populations? Chances are they don’t either.”

WITH THIS IN MIND, trail managers and hiking clubs continue to seek the balance between providing accessibility and inclusiveness while preserving wildness. Across the country, for example, more and more trail managers are being trained in the Universal Trail Assessment Process (UTAP). Developed by Beneficial Designs of Minden, Nevada, UTAP provides a simple process by which such aspects as slope, width, and surface stability can determine the relative accessibility of existing trails. Already countless state and local land managers are applying UTAP to their own trail systems.



Virginia resident Kris Gulden, shown above, left, with her mother, did not let a severe spinal cord injury prevent her from participating in a trip to the Channel Islands organized by Wilderness Inquiry, which specializes in inclusive outdoor recreation.

PHOTOS BY GREG LAIS/WILDERNESS INQUIRY

Guidance on the Ground

Even if trail managers can agree that providing for inclusive recreation is an important goal, accessibility guidelines can be confusing and difficult to implement. Recognizing this, the USDA Forest Service published an *Accessibility Guidebook on Outdoor Recreation and Trails* in conjunction with its 2006 accessibility guidelines. The guidebook, which is available on the Forest Service's web site, is meant to communicate accessibility requirements in an easy-to-use format, with photos, illustrations, design tips, and web links.

"We're working so hard to help folks understand that the goal is to integrate accessibility to the greatest extent possible in a way that does not change the character and experience of the setting," says Janet Zeller, the Forest Service's national accessibility program manager. "This allows all people to make a choice and a decision whether to use a certain trail or not."

Stuart Macdonald, an editor with



American Trails and longtime trail consultant, touts the Universal Trail Assessment Process and other private initiatives for also making accessibility understandable and user-friendly. He notes that private recreation interests often remain wary of top-down federal guidelines and are concerned that accessibility requirements may mean costly facility renovations along fairly inaccessible trails—a potential waste of time and money.

"I try to think about what the average person needs to know about accessibility," Macdonald says. "How can you involve people who understand accessi-

bility without immediately hiring a lawyer?"

This is the root of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's pending design guide for accessibility along the AT. "In most places the AT is almost impossible to alter for accessibility," says Teresa Martinez in ATC's Virginia office. "At the end of the day, although a trail segment might not be what I call 'Capital A' accessible, it may be more accessible to more people. We want people to have an understandable tool to aid in that process."

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American Hiking Society and many other organizations have offered inclusive outdoor trips to their members and worked to build and maintain accessible trails, where appropriate. American Hiking's Jeffrey Hunter is now part of a planning effort for a new Braille trail in Chattanooga. In Wyoming, Teton Valley Trails & Pathways will upgrade a heavily used trail segment in the Jedediah Smith Wilderness to a primitive, non-paved standard, which will be accessible to wheelchair users, elderly hikers, and others.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), for its part, will soon publish a design guide with four case studies illustrating ways the organization has converted sections of the AT (or spur trails)

for use by a broader cross-section of people. "The trail is going to retain a primitive backcountry experience," says Teresa Martinez, program manager in ATC's Virginia regional office. "But the trail is also a diverse experience, which is true to Benton MacKaye, who thought of it as America's trail."

Accessibility Web Resources

USDA Forest Service Accessibility Program:
www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/accessibility

American Trails Accessibility Resources:
www.americantrails.org/resources/accessible

The Universal Trail Assessment Process:
www.beneficialdesigns.com/trails/utap.html

As a younger man, Marc Levin, a Norfolk, Virginia, resident, used to hike the AT in New York and Massachusetts. Today, he has a disorder similar to multiple sclerosis that confines him to a wheelchair. Being disabled, as Levin could tell you, often means accepting limitations and adjusting your wishes accordingly. But it is not the end of wishing, or of wondering what's around the bend. "I'd like to go to Mount Rushmore," he says. "I understand there are some accessible trails there. That happens to be one of my greatest wishes in the world."

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