

Accessible Trails

People with disabilities seek out hiking opportunities—but still face obstacles

Elizabeth Scriven can't recall a single vacation from her childhood where her family didn't go camping. So, it seemed only natural that when she graduated high school, as a celebration of her independence, she go on a solo camping trip with her younger sister. In retrospect, her parents' permissiveness has surprised her, and not just because she was in high school: Scriven has spina bifida, and has used a wheelchair since early childhood.

She has, she says, never really let the wheelchair stop her. An avid hiker and camper, she is now program manager for Outdoors for All, a Seattle organization that provides a variety of outdoor adventures for those with disabilities. Scriven knows—not just through her own experiences, but also through her work—that people with disabilities can face tremendous hurdles when seeking rich recreational opportunities.

These barriers can take a variety of forms, from limited access to transportation and appropriate equipment to internal beliefs about how difficult such an excursion might be. In 2007, Dr. Robert Burns of West Virginia University completed a study examining how people with disabilities perceive they are limited in their outdoor opportunities. Dr. Burns discovered that these individuals had the same desire to enjoy wildlands as their able-bodied peers, but only as long as they felt "unconstrained" by their disabilities. Sadly, the percentage who pursued those opportunities dropped off significantly as a person perceived his or her disability to be a greater barrier to entry. The respondents cited many reasons for choosing not to pursue outdoor recreation, including poor health, lack of transportation, lack of income, lack of companionship, and, sadly, "fear of the outdoors."

In our conversation, Scriven echoes Dr. Burns' conclusions. The largest challenge people with disabilities face, she says, is combating both internal and external assumptions about what is possible, given a major physical disability. "A big piece of the puzzle is your level of education about living with disabilities. Those who grew up using a wheelchair will probably have an



easier time going hiking or camping than those who became disabled later in life."

Outdoors for All bridges this gap, enabling people with disabilities to have unique experiences in wild places. Evidence from Dr. Burns' study shows that all people—regardless of their physical ability level—benefit from spending time in the woods, because these experiences offer physical, emotional, social and sensory stimulation. Says Scriven, "I like hiking for the same reasons anyone else does. I like the physical challenge, I like spending time with friends or family, I like seeing beautiful views." In addition, learning how to camp and hike on her own has given her a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment, reaffirming her independence.

If organizations like Outdoors for All can match people with recreation opportunities, the question is whether there are sufficient opportunities for those with disabilities. Land management agencies in Washington state are tasked with juggling many demands for use at any given recreation area. To ensure all users

Outdoors For All volunteers demonstrate a TrailRider at WTA's 2008 TrailsFest at Rattlesnake Lake. Despite increasing opportunities, people with disabilities still face numerous hurdles to getting out on trails.

Eleanor Pachaud

Eleanor is WTA's spring editorial intern.

Accessible Trail Resources

Guidebook

Accessible Trails in Washington's Backcountry: A Guide to 85 Outings, edited by Dan Nelson for The Washington Trails Association, published by The Mountaineers, 1995.

Websites

Accessible Trails for Wheelers & Slow Walkers

www.accessibletrails.com

An encyclopedic website that covers the majority of accessible trails in Washington and Oregon, organized by region.

Washington State Accessible Outdoor Recreation Guide

www.parks.wa.gov/ada-rec/

This website is assembled by Washington Parks and Recreation, and it lists abbreviated information for trails and parks that are "wheelchair doable" or ADA accessible.

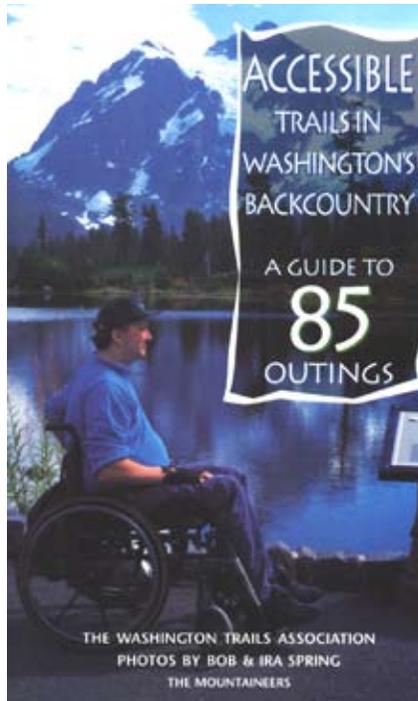
Outdoors for All

www.outdoorsforall.org

This organization plans fun outdoor excursions for people of all ability levels.

Trails such as the Iron Goat along Highway 2 (top right) and Rainy Lake near the North Cascades Highway (bottom right) offer well-graded routes in wild settings.

In 1995, WTA helped create a guidebook to accessible trails in Washington (below). It's still in print and available through The Mountaineers Books.



can find a broad diversity of ways to enjoy the landscape, the Forest Service adopted the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). The ROS dictates that land managers provide a varied array of recreational opportunities for every given site. This can include a hiker trail, a mountain bike trail, a picnic area, a fishing dock, and so forth. The idea is that by providing specific opportunities for each recreation user group, the recreation area is more likely to meet the needs of all users.

The ROS extends—in theory—to the population of disabled users as well. That said, there is still clearly a gap between theory and practice. Of the 23,400 miles of trail in the US Forest Service Region 6, only 131.3 miles meet the standards for ADA accessibility. The Washington State Park system may have proportionally more accessible trail, as they manage most of the rails-to-trails areas in the state, but they have no clear catalogue of which trails meet ADA requirements. Of all the accessible trails across Washington, a great many are short, mile-or-less interpretive trails, with a dearth of longer, more varied hiking trails.

"I have a fifteen minute mile [in my wheel-

chair]," says Scriven. "I'm not going to drive an hour to visit a half-mile interpretive trail." When she seeks out new trails, Scriven looks for longer trails that will present some physical challenge, while still being navigable. Campgrounds produce other issues: Scriven needs wheelchair accessible facilities, but she is no fan of sleeping on the concrete pads provided at wheelchair-accessible campsites.

As Scriven's experience demonstrates, providing rich opportunities for those with disabilities is a tricky balancing act for land management agencies. Diane Bedell is the Trail Programs Director for WTA. She explained the difficulty of managing these demands: "there is substantial confusion [among land managers] about what is permitted between the Wilderness Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. (ADA)." The Wilderness Act explicitly prohibits wheels in wilderness areas, and declares that the fundamental character of a wilderness area shouldn't be altered just to permit access. In practice, this means no paved roads and no access for bicycles or ORVs—and potentially wheelchairs. The ADA clarifies this usage to allow assistive devices, but also upholding the right of land

managers to keep wilderness “untrammled by man.”

Congress reaffirms that nothing in the Wilderness Act prohibits wheelchair use in a wilderness area by an individual whose disability requires its use. The Wilderness Act requires no agency to provide any form of special treatment or accommodation for those with disabilities to construct any facilities or modify any conditions of lands within a wilderness area.

The ADA goes on to define a wheelchair as any device that would be appropriate for “indoor locomotion”—that is, wheelchairs or similar devices are permitted, while bicycles or ORVs are not.

Land management agencies are under no requirements to include ADA trail development in their programs, though ADA language does specify that all new federally funded facilities must include wheelchair access.

For now, agencies pursue accessible recreation development when it is reasonably feasible for a location. “We would love for all new trails to be accessible,” says Bill Koss, head planner for Washington Parks and Recreation, “but the biggest challenge is whether the topography will allow it.” The Universal Design Guide for Outdoor Recreation is a publication put together by the US Access Board, and it codifies standards for ADA development, including trails and paths. In order to be considered ADA accessible, trails must adhere to very specific restrictions on trail grade and surface stability. In effect, this means that areas appropriate for ADA trail development are flat and low-lying, resulting in a high number of shorter interpretive trails.

Though ADA legislation specifies that cost can't be cited as a factor in whether to make new construction accessible, the truth is that with new trails, it can't be ignored. Bedell says that the expensive part of ADA trail construction is the modifications that make a trail safe and navigable. She says, “most wheelchair accessible trails require surfacing” such as gravel, which must be trucked to the worksite, “but stream crossings present problems too. Fords aren't enough—you must build a bridge with decking.” In smaller ranger districts, Bedell adds, there are fewer dedicated funds, and such projects become more difficult.

One way around the challenge of creating trails that meet strict ADA accessibility guidelines is to expand the definition of a trail that is suitable for those who use assistive devices—even if a trail doesn't meet with ADA approval. Chuck Frayer, accessibility specialist for USFS Region 6, says that it is very easy to muddle the language around trails that might be accessible.

He admits, “One of the things we're struggling with is how do you tell, or describe, to a person what's accessible and what isn't?..What type of terminology do you use? How do you be consistent?”

One solution, says Frayer, is to move towards a universal method of accurately surveying trails. He thinks that the adoption of UTAP—Universal Trail Assessment Process—will allow agencies to see at a glance which trails are good candidates for increased accessibility. UTAP, while thorough, has some shortcomings. Two surveyors chart a trail's grade, slope, and surface hardness—in addition to any barriers—in 50 foot increments. The results are much more detailed than standard GPS trail surveying, and the process is both expensive and time consuming. The other drawback here, says Frayer, is that the Forest Service currently has no way to publicly share the information on the few trails it has already assessed.

Different organizations have found less structured ways to label non-ADA compliant trails that could still be successfully navigated with minor assistance. Outdoors for All has developed three broad classification categories for their activity guides: accessible, mostly accessible and not accessible. Scriven introduced this system to Outdoors for All, based on her own experiences. “I love the Rainy Lake Trail, and it is a great example of a fully accessible trail. The Big 4 Ice Caves, on the other hand, are more of what I would call ‘wheelchair doable’. A few years ago that trail was redesigned to remove steps and other obstacles, and though it isn't strictly accessible, I can get up to the top of the hike without help.”

Longer trails often remain out of reach for many who use assistive devices. Rails-to-trails such as the Iron Goat Trail offer much longer paths at easy grades, though they rarely get hikers into truly wild, remote country. On any non-ADA trail, equipment can become the limiting factor. “If someone on rollerblades couldn't navigate a trail, neither could a wheelchair,” Scriven points out. To get around this, some use motorized wheelchair scooters with larger wheels. Scriven is herself looking forward to adding a detachable fifth wheel to her chair which will give her higher clearance and increased mobility on uneven surfaces.

For the intrepid hikers with disabilities, another choice is the TrailRider, developed in British Columbia by the Tetra Society. It is a folding single-wheeled chair that permits two or more able-bodied people to sherpa an individual up a trail. Outdoors for All owns a TrailRider which they rent out, and it can be a great option for

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Selected Barrier-Free Hikes

Iron Goat

Highway 2, Skykomish

Up to 6 miles round trip

Gravel, ADA accessible from Windy Point to Wellington

Hurricane Hill

Olympic National Park

0.5 miles round trip
“wheelchair doable”

Artist Point & Picture Lake

Mount Baker area

0.25 mile round trip (each trail)

Both trails are fully ADA accessible

Rainy Lake

North Cascades Highway

1.5 mile round trip
ADA accessible

For more info on these trails, visit www.wta.org.

More Barrier-Free Hikes

Iron Horse

I-90 between
North Bend and
Yakima

105 miles of well-
graded gravel trail
Not strictly acces-
sible, but well-
graded

Trail of Two Forests

Mount St. Helens
National Volcanic
Monument

0.25 miles round
trip
ADA accessible

Thelel Wetlands

Hood Canal
3.8 miles round
trip
ADA accessible

Nisqually Vista

Paradise, Mount
Rainier National
Park

1.2-mile loop
Most of this trail
is paved, but very
steep—assistance
required on some
sections of trail.

**For more info
on these trails,
visit www.wta.org.**

those who want to get deeper into the backcountry than ADA trails typically allow.

The TrailRider has its critics, though. Scriven showed it to me, and it became obvious quickly that although it is better than nothing, the device still leaves much to be desired. "It's a little clunky, and it really requires three or more people to make it safe," she explained. The TrailRider is heavy, too, and it can become unwieldy once a rider—who can't assist with maneuvering—is strapped in. "Honestly, though the TrailRider is meant for people like me, I am probably the least likely person to use it. I don't like being so dependent on other people for my needs, so I wouldn't use it unless there was a remote place I couldn't get to any other way."

Still, she admits, the TrailRider can be a very useful tool for giving people with disabilities greater options.

Ben Parson, a hike leader for Outdoors for All, was much more enthusiastic about the TrailRider. "I had a chance to use it a month ago, as a sherpa, and it was way easier than I had expected, especially going up hills."

It took him a half mile to get accustomed to how to maneuver it, as the person at the front has a very different job than the one at back, he says, "but after that it was great." Shannon Westlake of the British Columbia Mobilities Society (BCMOS), the organization that has pioneered the use of the TrailRider, she says the device has been transformative for clients who never dreamed that they might get into the backcountry. Citing stories where the TrailRider has been used to summit Mt. Kilimanjaro and ascend to the Base Camp at Mount Everest, Westlake says, "The TrailRider shows people that they CAN still do things that an able bodied person does."

"They can summit peaks, go on a family camping trip, go bird watching in the woods—you name it. We've found that the TrailRider can go almost anywhere. We will lift it over logs, take it down and up stairs, rocks, and through sand. If the TrailRider wasn't available, I know that many of our clients would not be able to experience these adventures and access the wilderness like they can with it. This could drastically impact their quality of life and cut them off from certain social opportunities."

The TrailRider isn't necessary for positive outdoor experiences, however. For Scriven, the learning curve is not which device to use, but where to go and who to go with so she can have an enjoyable time—as she is. "I love Rasar State Park because it has everything I

want—wheelchair-accessible facilities and great campsites." Rasar, situated on the shores of the Skagit River and outfitted with a variety of campsites and amenities, is a great example of success with the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum.

It is this tweaking—shifting existing sites so that they are more accessible—which will ensure that parks and wild areas meet the needs of everyone who wants to enjoy them. According to US Census data, 20 percent of the US population has some kind of disability, but that number increases to 50 percent in people over 65. For Frayer, of the US Forest Service, this is potentially a good thing. The demands from this older population will drive the development of more accessible trails, he says. "They are telling us that they don't want challenging trails anymore, they did that when they were younger. What they do want are easy walking trails. And they want those trails to be in locations that are fairly easy to get to, where they can do a day hike and be back in time [for dinner]."

The issues around accessibility in the outdoors are complex and no one individual or agency has all the answers. Parks and national forests do their part—and there

are certainly areas for improvement—but users must also find ways to make recreation areas work for them. As Scriven points out again and again, hikers with disabilities want the same things as their able-bodied peers: to relax with good people in a gorgeous landscape. Her advice for planning excursions sounds remarkably similar to my own considerations for a weekend in the mountains: "I use websites, guidebooks—and recommendations from friends for finding places to camp and hike." For those who don't know where to begin, she suggests that they "form a team of people you already know and trust to join you." Creativity and flexibility go a long ways towards having a great trip.

The best strategy, perhaps, is keeping in mind that hiking and camping are really about experiencing the joy and wonder of being in the outdoors. For Westlake, helping people with disabilities get into the woods underscores how empowering these experiences are, regardless of physical ability level. She tells of one client with multiple sclerosis, whom she took out hiking last year with the assistance of the TrailRider. He was so isolated, she says, that he hadn't left his house in two years. "We took him out on a hike and he was moved almost to tears as we passed through the woods. ... For many people with physical disabilities, [we have] opened up a world of possibilities that they would otherwise not have known." ♦

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