



The Pinelands Is for Everyone

A Report on Learnings from Town Hall Meetings and Focus Groups About Access to Natural Places for People with Disabilities

The Pinelands Is for Everyone is an initiative that aims to make more natural places in the Pinelands accessible to people with disabilities, so everyone can enjoy the physical, emotional and spiritual benefits of the wonderful public open spaces that the people of New Jersey have preserved for our benefit.

As a key starting point and foundation for The Pinelands Is for Everyone initiative, the Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA), Disability Rights New Jersey and Hopeworks held two virtual “Town Hall” meetings and several focus group conversations to learn about the challenges and solutions to making natural places in and around the Pinelands accessible for the use and enjoyment of people with disabilities. These conversations included individuals with a variety of physical and intellectual/developmental disabilities, caregivers, and professionals who work in the disability healthcare and services fields. Recordings of the Town Hall meetings and videos PPA has produced with individuals with disabilities are available on PPA’s web site at <https://pinelandsalliance.org/the-pinelands-is-for-everyone/>.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who has shared their experiences, ideas and wisdom with us. We hope this report captures their contributions to this conversation. **We also hope that anyone with their own experiences and proposals to share, and anyone interested in getting involved in this project, will contact us!**

Legal Background

In New Jersey, two important legal schemes require places open to the public to make reasonable modifications to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities. Most people are familiar with the federal Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), while fewer have heard of New Jersey’s Law Against Discrimination (LAD). Both laws put the onus on the owners and operators of public spaces (including parks, trails, and businesses) to remove physical or policy barriers that might prevent people with disabilities from accessing these spaces. Neither law requires modifications that would create an undue burden in terms of exorbitant costs, or those that might fundamentally alter the nature of the space (such as paving a rugged mountain trail). Both federal and state laws encourage a constructive dialogue with people with disabilities to resolve any barriers to access. Lawmakers included this dialogue in both laws so that modifications could be as effective as possible in as many spaces as possible.

Voices from the Disability Community

In the course of these discussions, we learned that accessibility issues and solutions are not always obvious to those who have not lived with the unique aspects of each disability. Moreover, people with disabilities vary in their adventurousness and conditioning just as do those without. If we are to ensure there are beautiful natural places for everyone, we must hear and heed the experiences and wisdom of many individuals dealing with each kind of disability situation.

The following is a synthesis of the key points that we heard in these conversations.

1. There are many practical aspects to the barriers discouraging people with disabilities from enjoying trails and other natural places: The most obvious barrier is the lack of many sites with firm, flat and stable surfaces for wheelchairs, walkers and people who are not steady on their feet. But the obstacles go well beyond trail surfaces. Here is a list of the obstacles we heard about:

a. Information: For people with disabilities and caregivers, it is especially important to have the right information ahead of time to plan a successful trip. People must have detailed information to make reliable decisions for their OWN circumstances. People's mobility, eyesight and stamina vary widely, so information must address all these concerns to be truly useful. There is virtually no information available on accessible trails and scenic sites in South Jersey, and where some information is provided, it is generally not detailed enough to meet this need. Information needs to address all aspects of a trip: where to park, what the parking conditions are like, available facilities, quality of cell service in case of an emergency, the condition of a trail or sand road, its length and whether benches are provided along the trail. Information should include photographs and video, if possible, as well as narrative descriptions.

Even a trail one knows was accessible in the past may become difficult or impossible to navigate with a wheelchair or scooter due to erosion or puddling over time. It was suggested that permanent "trail cams" could help people see the current conditions of a trail. People with disabilities need current information before investing considerable time and resources, such as arranging transportation, securing a caregiver, and mobilizing medical equipment, only to find that spring rains or off-road vehicles (ORVs) created an impassable washout or impassable puddle down the trail.

b. Trail surfaces: To accommodate most wheelchair or scooter users, trails need to be firm, stable, flat and wide enough for the wheelchair. These features also help people using walkers and canes. A trail may appear at first to be firm and flat, may be inaccessible on closer examination due to puddles, erosion, tree branches or other obstructions. A trail is only as accessible as its least accessible spot.

For some people, only a paved trail will be comfortable, but there are few if any paved trails in forested or wilderness areas of the Pinelands. This fact arises in part from a basic premise or assumption that paving a path is inconsistent with a natural setting and degrades a natural area. In many areas, government regulations and policies entirely forbid paving a trail.

It was noted that rail trails can work well for accessible trails, because they are developed on already altered, flat and firm rail beds. There seems to be less reluctance to use paving-type surfaces on these trails.

- c. Parking and path to trailhead:** Even a good trail may be inaccessible because there is not an adequate parking area and good path to the trailhead. A parking area may be neglected and become unmanageable due to the ravages of weather and time, or an obstacle may lie between the parking lot and trailhead (perhaps placed there on purpose to discourage off-road vehicles like ATVs and motorcycles). Parking is an especially acute problem at the Shore, as many towns discourage visitors by having little or no parking close to the beach access.
- d. Signs and maps:** Signs and maps are essential to most people exploring a new location, but they are often placed in kiosks that make them difficult or impossible to read for a person in a wheelchair because one cannot get close enough to read and see the details. Signs may be unclear to a person with reading challenges because they use small print or lack sufficient contrast.
- e. Restrooms:** Most nature sites that do have restrooms at a trail head use port-a-johns that are usually not handicap accessible. Accessible restrooms that are open and maintained are a great benefit to all users, but are especially vital to many people with disabilities. Restrooms need to be large enough to accommodate an aide. They must also provide stalls that are not gender-specific, so a person and an aide of a different gender are not inhibited from using the facility.
- f. Equipment:** All-terrain and beach-ready wheelchairs are extremely expensive to purchase, and it can be impractical to rent and transport the simple beach wheelchairs that are available in some areas. Regular, thin-wheeled wheelchairs and scooters designed for sidewalks will not work on most sand trails, even ones that are well-maintained, and certainly not at the beach. Swimming areas with lifeguards need to be flexible in allowing specialized PFDs with which they may not be familiar.
- g. Kayak facilities:** Kayaking can be a great form of recreation for many people who have mobility challenges but do have good use of their arms and hands. There appear to be no accessible kayak launches in this region. There are a variety of designs for docks and slides on the market to help people with disabilities get safely into the water.

- h. Facilities for the blind and visually-impaired:** There are few if any trails in our region that include some of the additional elements needed to make a trip safe and enjoyable for a person who can walk but is blind or visually impaired – such as handrails, braille signs, audio guidance, and bright trail markings.
 - i. Guided trips designed and led with disabilities in mind:** There are few, and at most times no, guided nature trips offered by public agencies and nonprofits that are designed and marketed as suitable for people with disabilities. We have not heard of any agency offering regularly-scheduled trips that are led by people with disabilities. Physical limitations like the need for a wheelchair can present very different challenges than intellectual and developmental disabilities, so successful guided trips require sensitivity to differences like these. These facts tend to make people with disabilities feel that they are not welcome on guided trips, which otherwise can be the best way to become comfortable exploring nature.
- 2. It is important to elevate and amplify the situation of people with disabilities:** People with physical disabilities and I/DD have the same reasons for wanting to enjoy nature and have the same needs for outdoor experiences as anyone else, yet their presence and situations are not typically acknowledged and accommodated by society in this field. It is important to represent people with disabilities through photographs and videos on web sites, media and social media about nature and recreation, not just in specialized forums. It is also important to find other ways to raise awareness and inclusion, perhaps through media and events that bring people of all abilities and their friends and family together for shared experiences. Greater recognition and inclusion can lead to policy changes that make nature more accessible and comfortable for individuals with disabilities and their families.
- 3. People with disabilities often miss out on experiences that our society thinks of as fundamental to childhood, because places and activities are not accommodating to everyone.** One participant noted that she had never been on a swing as a child, and only when she later found a wheelchair-accessible swing set did she get to enjoy that wonderful experience. Another recounted helping her brother find a unique place on the Jersey Shore where a boardwalk was built all the way from the street to the water, letting him touch the sea for the first time. Exploring the outdoors and nature can be a vital experience that most people take for granted, but that many children and adults with disabilities simply miss out on.
- 4. There is a tendency for families and individuals to become isolated even though they want to be included as a visible part of the community:** Having a disability, and perhaps most often having an I/DD or caring for a person with I/DD, can be isolating. It can feel like being on an island, separated from the people and civic life around you. Isolation can prevent people from connecting with all kinds of opportunities and activities that are not essential to daily life and acute medical care, including the enjoyment of natural places. Yet

people want to be a part of their community, not separated, and that includes engaging in the same kinds of outdoor activities that others enjoy.

5. **It is just as important for allies to recognize that people with disabilities are unique individuals:** People with disabilities are each as unique as the Pine Barrens ecosystem. We heard this theme most from people who have and care for people with I/DD. Each person has their own needs arising from their unique conditions or situation, so there is not one solution to making natural places accessible, appealing, comfortable, safe and fun. Not all trails or sites will work for everyone, but the goal should be to speak to as wide a range of capacities and needs as possible – and ensure there are some places that work for each person.
6. **At the same time, there is a lot of intersectionality in the situations of people with various kinds of disability.** Intersectionality means that making trails stable and flat will help a wide range of people. For example, individuals with I/DD often also face mobility and sensory issues that call for the same kinds of facilities, like wheelchair-accessible trails or handrails, as are needed for people without I/DD.
7. **Individuals with disabilities and their caregivers often form early habits and assumptions that natural places are not for them, and they stop thinking about going to these places.** The public presentation of nature recreation, the lack of accommodations and facilities, and the expected reactions of other people to their presence often leads families not even to consider going out to natural areas (and other public places). Conscious efforts to make the Pinelands more welcoming and accessible can prevent the negative experiences that might reinforce these assumptions.
8. **Transportation challenges:** Transportation to natural places can be a challenge for families, schools and service programs. Some families may not always have a suitable vehicle available for an expedition, and buses and vans are often in short supply for schools and adult programs.

Many people with disabilities that affect their ability to drive rely on public transportation, which becomes patchy or non-existent in many parts of the Pinelands. AccessLink, NJTransit’s accessible paratransit service, only serves destinations within a three-quarter mile radius of a NJTransit bus route or light rail station. Accessible rideshare options like Uber or Lyft do not always service non-business and non-residential destinations (such as a trailhead) and may be difficult to summon for the return ride if cellular service is unreliable at the site.

9. **Some disincentives are especially acute for people with I/DD and their families, such as:**
 - a. **Isolation:** The sense and reality of being isolated can be especially powerful for families with a member with I/DD and can stop people from seeing natural places, like other

public amenities, as being there for them to enjoy just as much as they are there for the wider population.

- b. People with I/DD and their families look for places that are presented or advertised with people who look like them, and nature sites are not presented this way.** All of the places we see images of people recreating in nature present typical people (usually exceptionally fit as well). The rare exceptions tend to be social media feeds or web sites specifically devoted to people with disabilities, not those that create our general cultural norms and expectations.
- c. Discomfort and stress when other people are annoyed or critical of a person's behavior arising from their I/DD:** Many families choose to avoid public settings because they feel embarrassed or are even criticized by other people when their loved one acts "abnormally." Even though the vast majority of people want to be welcoming and helpful to people with I/DD, it only takes a few sidelong glances or disparaging comments to make a bad and discouraging experience. If you are stressed by worrying about how others will react to your child, for example, you may be less likely to go into public spaces when you don't absolutely have to.
- d. Many parents or caregivers of people with I/DD have too little time, energy or funds to take advantage of nature trips:** It was reported that an exceptionally high percentage of individuals with I/DD are being cared for by a single parent, apparently due to the special stresses that caring for a person with I/DD can place on a marriage or a family. In some cases, adult siblings are caring for a person with I/DD for many years. For many caregivers, the need to provide for the family and manage the logistics of daily life leave too little time, energy and money for adventures in nature (and other recreational activities as well).
- e. Cell phone service:** Some individuals with I/DD are subject to seizures or other medical emergencies, so caregivers are reluctant to take trips where there is any doubt about the quality of cell service in case of an emergency.

10. Actions we should consider taking to address these issues:

- a. Bring people with disabilities into our decision-making and leadership processes:** It is important not just to listen to people with disabilities but also to provide opportunities for self-advocates to lead and influence decision making. Doing so will produce better decisions and will provide stronger role models for others to become advocates and outdoor people.
- b. Create visual content like photos, videos and memes to use on PPA's web sites and posts, but also to share with other public and private agencies:** PPA and other public and private agencies that promote natural areas and recreation need to collect and post images of people with disabilities enjoying nature (with their permission). PPA can use

its own web site and the Pinelands Adventures and Rancocas Creek Farm web sites and social media posts. We can encourage sister organizations and park-owning agencies to use them as well, so the public and land managers get used to the idea that everyone has a place in nature. We should also put out press releases and organize events that highlight the partnerships among different kinds of organizations, like our existing partnerships, working together on this issue. Communications and events can include local and state leaders, giving them an opportunity to pitch in and a basis for holding them to account if they don't use their influence for good.

- c. Connect with organizations and groups working with individuals with disabilities:** For example, it was suggested that the Special Olympics organization, which has unparalleled networks of families and volunteers, as well as great expertise, may be interested in helping to promote nature recreation. In addition, caregivers of individuals with I/DD tend to form tight support circles via social media and friendships, so finding ways to contact such circles can be an effective way to engage people and get the word out about opportunities for nature recreation. Other possibilities would be local businesses where Kingsway students and clients are already going as part of their programs.
- d. Form new partnerships:** Just as PPA, Disability Rights New Jersey, Hopeworks, and Kingsway are working together now, new partnerships can bring more kinds of expertise, resources and perspectives to the cause. PPA has begun working with the Rowan Integrated Special Needs (RISN) Center and the MOCEANS Center for Independent Living, and we are making contact with the other centers for independent living in the region. More partnerships bring new assets, areas of expertise and energies to a cause that cuts across many fields.
- e. Train ourselves, our partners and our sister organizations in the etiquette of working with people with disabilities and their caregivers:** PPA staff are not experts in this field and bring little or no past experience, so it is important that we be thoughtful and undertake a learning process to ensure we have positive, respectful and caring interactions with people with disabilities when we work together or share an outdoor adventure. We need to recognize that the concerns, experiences, and sensibilities of people vary regardless of lived experience with a disability. Training should cover the wide spectrum of disabilities, including those related to intellectual and developmental disability.
- f. Provide guided trips that are tailored to be safe and enjoyable for individuals and families:** Many people are not enjoying places like the Pinelands because these places are unfamiliar and intimidating to venture into for the first time. Everyone more likely to get into nature recreation if they can participate in a well-designed trip with competent leaders who make it fun and comfortable. This is all the more true for individuals with I/DD and their families. Guided trips designed with disability in mind

can help break the self-perpetuating cycle of not trying natural places, not knowing whether they will work, feeling these places are not right for them, and so not trying them.

- g. Organize guided events designed for everyone, including people with disabilities:** It helps to normalize the fact that people with a range of physical disabilities and I/DDs are part of our communities and families when people of all abilities, ages and situations share experiences. Outdoor trips and events can be a great way to bring people together who usually are not sharing space or activities. It is possible to design nature trips and events that are suitable for everyone, and be sure to market them in a way that makes this clear. Such events could be less stressful for caregivers and individuals with I/DD because they are consciously designed to accommodate everyone in an open, outdoor setting. With confidence that the experience will be accessible, the time and effort needed for individuals with disabilities and their caregivers to arrange transportation and make other preparations will be a less significant barrier to participation in such events.

As part of the design of guided trips, we should consider creating accessibility and sensory guides to provide participants with foreknowledge of what to expect during outings and events, so they can be prepared for what is to come.

- h. Provide trip opportunities that are free:** It was noted that many families caring for people with disabilities, especially in the context of severe or multiple disabilities, are financially pressed, so it is important to include guided trips and experiences that are free, with no stigma or embarrassment for those who wouldn't be able or inclined to pay a fee for the trip.
- i. Include produce farms in the mix of outdoor experiences:** Farms are a special kind of natural setting that can bring special benefits to outdoor experiences. Experience hosting people with I/DD at Rancocas Creek Farm has shown the value of the farm environment for providing experiences that are at once fun, healthful, and also useful to the farm. Farms can be less challenging to navigate and less intimidating than a forest trail; provide enjoyable activities like planting and harvesting; and can be a source of useful volunteerism and employment for individuals with disabilities, including those with I/DD, who enjoy those activities.
- j. Find ways to increase transportation options:** There is virtually no public transit in the Pinelands region and few municipalities provide even local services. Organizations like schools and adult programs for people with disabilities struggle to obtain their own transportation resources, because vans and buses are extremely expensive. Vehicles with modifications to accommodate wheelchairs are even more expensive. These vehicles are prohibitively expensive for most individuals and families.

One important option to consider is to actively identify sites along existing transit lines and close to neighborhoods that can be developed with signs and trails, rather than just assume we can only work with existing preserves.

- k. Help address safety worries:** Since many caregivers worry about getting help in an emergency if they are out in the woods, we should explore ways to ensure they can reliably reach help when needed. This includes providing information on cell phone service levels, but could also include lending GPS-enabled emergency beacons that are connected to local 911 or EMS services.
- l. Provide guidance to land managers on improving their signs and other facilities:** We should share what we learn about the information and amenities that people working with different kinds of disabilities need to provide a safe and fun experience. We can also provide our own labor and volunteers to help other agencies and organizations carry out these improvements. One area to explore is urging land managers to adopt a universal system of symbols relevant to outdoor recreation for their signs.

Additional Resources:

Some additional resources that came to our attention during the virtual town hall meetings and conversations are listed below. This list is certainly not comprehensive of all the valuable resources on this subject.

Syren Shveta Nagakyrie, founder and director of [Disabled Hikers](#), provided a great deal of wisdom to us based on their extensive experience exploring nature as a person with a disability and as a leader in the effort to promote nature recreation for all.

[Access Advocates](#)

Bay Area [Outreach and Recreation Program](#)

[British Disabled Angling Association](#)

California State Parks, [Accessible Trail Design Standards](#)

GlobalGiving, [Empowering People with Disabilities Through Nature](#)

Illinois Department of Public Health, [Disability Health Program](#)

Mass Audubon [accessibility project and map](#)

Michigan Department of Natural Resources, [Accessibility](#)

National Audubon Society's [Birdability program](#)

National Center on Accessibility, [Best Practices of Accessibility in Parks and Recreation: A Delphi Survey of National Experts in Accessibility](#)

National Recreation and Park Association, [Parks for Inclusion Resources](#)

Oregon's [Outdoors for All Foundation](#)

Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, [Universal Access Trails and Shared Use Paths](#)

Penn Trails, [Trails for All People](#)

Rochester [Accessible Adventures](#)

United States Access Board, [Outdoor Developed Areas, Access Full Access and Inclusion for All](#)

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