



What We Have Learned About Barriers to Enjoying Nature for People with Disabilities

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. This is not a small or marginal problem, or one specific to any one type of disability. Separation from nature is a loss to all those who experience it.

Through town hall and focus group meetings and numerous conversations in 2021 and 2022, PPA has distilled these key points that we must address through *The Pinelands Is for Everyone*:

- a. **People with disabilities want to enjoy the physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits of natural places just as much as the able-bodied:** We have heard a consistent message—just because you do not see a lot of people with disabilities out in the woods, it does not mean they are any less eager to experience these places. It just means they lack the means, the knowledge or the experience to undertake such trips.
- b. **There is a hunger to see people with disabilities as equals in natural places:** People with disabilities are not typically acknowledged and accommodated by society as explorers of nature. Most people with disabilities appear to infer or assume that natural places are not for them. It is important to represent and elevate people with disabilities through photographs and videos on web sites, media and social media about nature and recreation, and events that bring people of all abilities together for shared experiences.
- c. **Too few beautiful places are easy to get to and enjoy:** Disabilities vary greatly, and not all trails will ever be accessible to all people, but individuals with a disability generally benefit from having a smooth path, short trip options, accessible signs and restrooms, and similar facilities. Few trails in South Jersey meet these criteria.
- d. **Information on accessible nature sites is woefully lacking.** There is no comprehensive, detailed and reliable guide to accessible sites, making it difficult or impossible for the disabled and their caregivers to plan a safe, enjoyable excursion.
- e. **There is little if any nature-based public programming in this region designed for people with disabilities:** Public park agencies and nonprofits rarely if ever advertise programming for people with disabilities. Schools and adult programs for people with disabilities want nature-based programs, but do not have partners with the knowledge and equipment to offer these benefits to their clients.
- f. **There is a tendency to become isolated, but a desire to be part of the community, for families and individuals:** We have learned that having a disability can be isolating for individuals and families. 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, 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.
- g. **People with disabilities are also each unique:** People with disabilities, and particularly those with intellectual and development disabilities, are each as unique as the Pine Barrens ecosystem. So there is no one solution to making natural places accessible, appealing, comfortable, safe and fun. Allies need to hear from people what they see as important, and then to speak to as wide a range of capacities and needs as possible.

- h. Many parents or caregivers of people with disabilities have too little time, energy or funds to take advantage of nature:** 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 activities as well). The cost of trail-ready wheelchairs, moreover, is prohibitive for most, adding to the reasons families are not using trails in natural areas.
- i. Today, no agency or organization is leading an effort to improve access to and enjoyment of nature for people with disabilities in our region:** There is a demand for leadership in tackling this challenge that PPA and its partners can provide.

For more information visit www.pinelandsalliance.org/the-pinelands-is-for-everyone