



PINELANDS
PRESERVATION
ALLIANCE

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AccessNatureNJ.org is Now Available!

A mobile-friendly website released by the Pinelands Preservation Alliance and partners makes it easier to find accessible nature spots in South Jersey

In 2020, the Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) launched an initiative called The Pinelands Is for Everyone to work with people with disabilities to make natural places more accessible, spread information about accessible trails, and create inclusive guided trips for the public. Since then, PPA staff have been making new friends and viewing the natural world from a new perspective.

One key part of this project is to create a mobile-friendly website that uses an interactive map to show people where they can find trails and scenic places in and around the Pinelands that are, at least to some degree, accessible. PPA has now launched that website:

[AccessNatureNJ.org](https://www.accessnaturenj.org).

“The people of New Jersey have done a phenomenal job creating beautiful nature parks, and this is especially true in the Pinelands and the rest of South Jersey,” said Carleton Montgomery, executive director of PPA. “But all this work was done with little attention to the situation of people with disabilities and their families. Too few trails and scenic sites are accessible for people with mobility challenges and other disabilities, and there’s very little solid information about the places that are accessible.”

“At Human Services, we believe that by being more inclusive we can improve our communities and the health of all New Jerseyans, and this extends to our trails and scenic sites,” Human Services Commissioner Sarah Adelman said. “This website, [AccessNatureNJ.org](https://www.accessnaturenj.org), makes it easier for individuals with disabilities to access information about accessible trails. We look forward to New Jerseyans working together to improve this site as they provide feedback on accessible trails to create a better experience for all.”

The AccessNatureNJ.org website aims to provide enough reliable information for people with different kinds of disabilities so they can make plans and have great experiences in nature. The website evolves and improves as people provide feedback, PPA learns of additional sites to include, and land managers add more accessibility to nature preserves.

Through many conversations with people with disabilities and their allies, PPA has learned that accessibility means different things to different people. That makes detailed, accurate information vital to individuals and families trying to plan nature trips that work for them. Most of the trails identified on the website are not paved. Most are either well-maintained sand roads or trails that are sufficiently flat and compact that a person using a wheelchair, walker or cane can use the trail in comfort and safety. There are some routes that one can drive along and enjoy in a regular car.

Sometimes equipment can also be an important issue. Few people have wheelchairs designed for trails, so people may worry that a given trail won't work for their wheelchairs. The website tries to indicate whether a trail is well-maintained with compacted soil and fine gravel, so a person using a "regular" motorized or non-motorized wheelchair can safely navigate the trail. PPA is also working to create a fleet of trail-ready wheelchairs that people can borrow on its guided trips.

A lot of work must be done to create more trails that are more accessible for more people. For example, none of the trails PPA has found so far have handrails on their entire length, and none have signs in braille. PPA hopes to encourage and help land managers to create better facilities going forward.

"We are trying to include detailed information on the state of each trail, the parking situation, whether restrooms are available and accessible, whether there are signs that can be read from a wheelchair, and so on," said Carleton Montgomery. "But the information may not always be as complete as we think it is, or the situation in a particular area might change without our realizing it. We also haven't gotten everywhere to find all the accessible sites. So, we are hoping that everyone who uses the website will also let us know about their experience with it – the good, the bad, and the improvements it needs."

This project was made possible by an Inclusive Health Communities Grant from the Division of Disability Services, New Jersey Department of Human Services. For more information about the Inclusive Healthy Communities program, contact Peri L. Nearon, MPA, Executive Director of the Division of Disability Services at the New Jersey Department of Human Services.

PPA's key project partners in this initiative are Hopeworks of Camden and Disability Rights New Jersey and Hopeworks. Hopeworks is a social enterprise that uses technology, healing, and entrepreneurship to transform lives. Its unique trauma-informed approach, combined with high-demand, high-wage technical training and paid work experience helps young people get jobs and keep them. Learn more at www.hopeworks.org. Disability Rights New Jersey (DRNJ) protects, advocates for and advances the rights of persons with disabilities in pursuit of a society in which persons with disabilities exercise self-determination and choice and are treated with dignity and respect. Learn more at www.disabilityrightsnj.org.

PPA is inviting everyone to provide feedback or ideas for improving the website by contacting Carleton Montgomery at carleton@pinelandsalliance.org.

The Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) was established as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization in 1989 by environmental leaders and Pinelands residents, with the goal of preserving and protecting the more than 1 million acres of the New Jersey Pinelands. PPA remains the only private organization dedicated solely to environmental protection throughout the Pinelands.

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