

# HOW THE WHITE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST IS ADDRESSING ACCESSIBLE RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVERYONE

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The White Mountain National Forest recently began a new direction in improving accessibility of outdoor recreation opportunities for people of all abilities. For 25 years under mandate of existing laws the Forest made facility and site specific efforts at accessibility. A Forest proposal in 1990 to construct motorized vehicle access for people with mobility disabilities to a backcountry pond proved the catalyst for a review of our accessibility policy. The result is a more wholistic and participative direction in providing accessibility of outdoor recreation opportunities for everyone.

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## General

People are searching for links to the land, it is our job to help them find those links; we must ask ourselves, will what we are doing reconnect american people to the land? (G.Elsner, 1991 NERR Conference)

Specific mandates of law and regulation on accessibility has existed for 25 years. The Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) of 1968 requires buildings constructed or renovated with Federal money be accessible to and usable by people with disabilities. Based on this Act, Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) were developed and are enforced by the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (ATBCB). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Rehabilitation, Comprehensive Services and Developmental Disabilities Act (1978), added "handicap" to the more commonly known list of prohibitions against discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age and national origin. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in all public accommodations and transportation.

Under these laws, especially the first two, the Forest addressed outdoor recreation opportunities for people with disabilities. Early efforts were simplistic, we assumed we knew what people with disabilities wanted for outdoor recreation opportunities and how to provide it. Law and the specifications in UFAS provide the basic standards and reinforced our assumptions. Some campgrounds, picnic areas, and day use areas were made accessible by altering the toilets and tables to meet the standards. It was thought that some roadside facilities were what people with disabilities desired and would use. The specifics of Law were met, but not the intent.

In addition, managers seemed to lack the sensitivity to recognize, evaluate and correct the many invisible barriers to people with visual, audio, mobility, and other disabilities.

## Why Change?

The need to expand our concept of accessibility was recognized and acted on when the decision and subsequent controversy on accessibility to a backcountry pond brought it to the forefront. This began in 1988 when the Forest, in response to a public request, proposed to improve sections of a seven mile route for motorized vehicle access by people with mobility disabilities into a backcountry pond (Flat Mountain Pond), adjacent to a Congressionally designated Wilderness Area (the Sandwich Range Wilderness). In February 1990, following a study and public response, the Forest announced its decision to improve the route to Flat Mountain Pond. Several organizations and an individual appealed the decision. Following lengthy discussions with the appellants, in November 1990, the Forest Service withdrew its decision. In the decision Rick Cables, Forest Supervisor, said:

During discussions on the appeals, the Forest Service concluded that they did not understand as fully needed the outdoor recreation needs of the disabled and had not done all that should have been done to help others understand them as well. The Forest will, therefore, try to learn and help others to learn more about that issue before taking any further action. The first step in doing that will be to invite persons from the disabled community and others who are knowledgeable in the field of outdoor recreation for the disabled to form a work group and meet with the Forest and discuss the settings, activities, and facilities that might be suitable components of the Forest's recreation program.

## How is Change Identified?

The Forest then developed a strategy for accessible recreation on the Forest. That strategy stated the need for more information. The information should answer the questions, 1) who are the expected users? 2) what types of recreation opportunities would these users like to share? 3) what on-the-ground conditions are necessary for a recreation opportunity to be available?

The strategy would be consistent with existing policies, particularly the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) framework. ROS is a nationwide system for managing recreation in the Forest Service. Recreation on the Forest is more than just camping, fishing, and hiking. Research has shown that people choose a specific setting for each of these activities in order to realize a desired set of experiences. For example, camping in a large undeveloped setting with difficult access and few facilities offers a sense of solitude, challenge, and self-reliance. In contrast camping in a setting having easy access and highly developed facilities offers more comfort, security, and social opportunities.

The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, or ROS offers a framework for understanding and managing these relationships and interactions. Maintaining a broad spectrum of ROS classes is very important to provide people with choices. The end product of recreation management is the experience people have. The key to providing most experience opportunities is the setting and how it is managed. The primary setting indicators are type of access, remoteness, naturalness, facilities, social encounters, visitor impacts, and the visitor themselves. The ROS system is used by managers in guiding on-the-ground actions that facilitate (or hamper) various recreation experiences.

ROS classes range from primitive to urban. In general, the primitive end of the spectrum provides recreation experiences that are derived from a natural appearing environment with no motorized vehicles and low visitor interaction. The basic recreation experience is isolation, remoteness, independence, closeness to nature, and self reliance with a high degree of challenge and risk.

At the other extreme, the urban recreation opportunity class is facilitated by an environment that is highly modified and developed, more like a traditional urban park. The recreation experience is primarily built around affiliation with others. Challenge and risk opportunities are unimportant. The classes between primitive and urban are: semi-primitive non-motorized, semi-primitive motorized, roaded natural and rural.

As a starting point for the strategy, the Forest solicited and is considering consumer generated recommendations for making White Mountain National Forest recreation accessible to persons with disabilities. To do this we formed an Accessibility Work Group with the New Hampshire Governor's Commission on Disabilities. Members were also drawn from Maine and Massachusetts, and reflect a variety of disabilities and recreation interest. Their role is to; 1)research and report population of disabled citizens within the Forest market area, 2)recommend criteria for on-the-ground conditions to be met in providing a wide range of accessible recreation opportunities, 3)recommend goals for recreation opportunities and associated improvements to meet the need for accessible recreation choices and 4)recommend education and accessibility awareness training programs for Forest Service staff and the Forest user community. It is anticipated that this work will be completed by Fall 1991.

At the same time the Forest began to implement this strategy on a local level the Forest Service National Office was going through a similar examination. An Accessibility Task Force was formed at the National Office in 1990 which identified a series of "key policies" defining a strong foundation upon which a long term program serving persons with disabilities could be built. These policies aren't a serious departure from current policies but a clearer articulation of current law and regulation within the framework of accessibility for all. This work didn't gain attention until we became involved in our local effort - and they provided excellent direction consistent with our local effort. They can be summarized as follows:

All recreation visitors, including persons with disabilities, should have the opportunity to participate in or use the benefits, services, and information available at buildings and facilities open to the public.

The Forest Service should strive to provide a diversity of recreation opportunities for persons with disabilities comparable to that offered other visitors.

The Forest Service should strive to provide programs and services in a setting that allows persons with disabilities to interact with other visitors and does not separate them from the able-bodied population.

In the provision of recreation programs, services, and facilities, the Forest Service should strive to achieve the highest level of access to persons with disabilities practicable considering the experience level, capabilities of the area, nature of the program, and cost.

The Forest Service should involve persons with disabilities in the planning, construction, renovation, and operation of recreation programs, activities, and facilities to establish the optimal mix appropriate to each specific geographic area.

The Forest Service must develop and maintain reliable information on the accessibility of recreation facilities, services, and facilities for use by persons with disabilities.

## **The Results**

The output of the work groups has been very valuable and worthwhile. The development of the strategy, the implementation of the work group process and involvement in the work groups were also important in increasing our accessibility awareness. The results, arranged by work group tasks are:

### **Research and Report Population of Disabled Citizens Within the Forest Market Area**

This task was an effort at getting an expression of demand, we wanted to know how many people with disabilities were going to use the Forest. A common theme at the meetings was that people with disabilities have the same needs and mirror interests for outdoor recreation opportunities of the public at large. The concept of National Forest Recreation management is to maintain the greatest range of recreation opportunities consistent with the resource so as to provide the greatest diversity of recreation experience opportunities to the public. Persons with disabilities are really a part of the public. They are not to be looked at as a separate demand group but as part of the public demand as a whole. If we maintain a range of ACCESSIBLE recreation opportunities we meet the FS recreation management policy and make Forest recreation opportunities available to people of all abilities.

This means that 1)program accessibility and activity accessibility need to be included in our planning, information and implementation 2)the ROS framework the FS uses for recreation management is consistent with accessibility as we don't change the setting to bring in accessibility we build accessibility into what's there and 3)we must make sure all our sites facilities are considered for accessibility. We need inclusive design, planning and construction. We need to change the "design bias" from one of exclusivity to one of inclusivity.

### **Recommend Criteria for On-the-ground Conditions to be Met in Providing a Safe Range of Accessible Outdoor Recreation Opportunities**

In the group discussions it became apparent the Forest didn't take the wholistic view in relation to accessibility. We looked at this facility or that facility but didn't look at the entire area for accessibility. An example, at one particular roadside stop we made the toilet accessible and we made the short path from the toilet to the parking accessible. But we failed to recognize that in this particular location there was also a gated road easily travelable by wheelchair labeled "foot traffic welcome". But there was no way for the person in a wheelchair to access the gated road (although they could easily get to the gate) because the design of the gate effectively prohibited wheelchairs. Another example, we sometimes take the person with disabilities partially into the area and then make it impossible for them to get to the main attraction. We did this at the Rocky Branch Scenic Area where the parking lot and toilets are accessible but people with disabilities cannot get on the bridge for a scenic vista of the falls. We have to lengthen our view to include the entire area not just specific facilities.

We used UFAS which doesn't translate to the woods. We've missed the boat using these standards alone to design our facilities. The work group discussed the national effort to establish design standards for accessibility - the interim draft Guide. The group focused on the the guides content and identified several shortfalls in that guide. Some of the groups concerned that surfaced were, 1)the use of motorized prosthetic appliances was not well addressed, 2)some of the terminology was weak, - they recommended several places where wording should be changed from "should" to "will" or "shall", 3)some of the legal references were not inclusive - they recommended others, 4)there were several technical drawings and specification they though were inconsistent with the real need, 5)there was lack in some places of identifying the needs of people with visual or audio impairments etc. It was a very worthwhile exercise, we are continuing with the review of the Guide.

It was also identified that providing recreation opportunities in the more primitive, rustic or less developed areas provides a new challenge for the manager and for the recreationist with disabilities. Until this time accessibility has been measured against standards such as barrier free architectural designs, ramps and paved paths designed for urban areas. In more natural areas these standards are difficult to apply, and in most cases would require such serious alterations or changes to the recreation environment that the desired recreation experience would be destroyed. As we have discovered one of the key elements to the manager and recreationist alike in providing and participating in recreation in a backcountry environment will be a higher level, and more accessible information about the travel condtions and situations that will be encountered.

#### **Recommend Goals for Recreation Opportunities and Associated Improvements to Meet the Need for Accessible Recreation Choices**

This is a distinct and separate step from the work group. The work group will write the "text book" and the next step is applying the information in our practices on the ground through our usual decision processes. But, they can be a pool of experts to assist as long as they are given access to our usual decision process. When we get to the point of action, doing things on the ground, we must provide opportunity for our full spectrum of users including this particular community of users to provide input. The group expressed a willingness to become involved in Interdisciplinary Team reviews of proposed projects and evaluations. This would serve an additional role besides expert advice, that of instilling accessibility awareness in our employees.

The Forest Plan and other Forest policies need to be examined in the light of accessibility to see if there are adjustments to be made. There most likely are inadvertent biases against people with disabilities. One example that came up in the group discussions was the direction given for closing system roads, no consideration was given to their use, motorized or wheelchair, by people with disabilities.

#### **Recommend Education and Accessibility Awareness Training for Forest Service Staff and the Forest User Community**

It was stated at the meetings that the manager seems to have a problem of perspective. We haven't accepted the person with disabilities as a person and we haven't trained and educated our staff to this end.

Including people with disabilities in our planning and public involvement processes will not only give us a better job it will provide accessibility awareness as well. The mixing of Forest employees with this group of experts will undoubtedly increase our sensitivity to people with disabilities. In addition to this informal training the work group is planning to help the Forest in presenting more structured accessibility awareness training programs.

How does what we've learned in this new direction match with what our earlier view of accessibility? Our early efforts were shortsighted in matching only certain recreation facilities to people with disabilities as opposed to the longer view of providing a wide range of accessible recreation opportunities, from developed camping and picnicking to general undeveloped backcountry. Until recently most managers were oblivious to the relationship between recreation opportunities and people with disabilities. People with disabilities are looking for the same kinds of recreation experience opportunities as the millions of visitors without disabilities on the Forest. We only need to make sure they have access to these opportunities.

What was wrong in providing access to toilets and tables at campgrounds and picnic areas? - nothing! but it addresses only part of the spectrum of outdoor recreation opportunities. About half of the 6,000,000 recreation visits provided by the Forest are road related; campgrounds, picnic areas, driving for pleasure, etc. The other half are backcountry kinds of recreation opportunities of all kinds from those near the road to those miles from any road. Many times these are the same activities but are being done in different settings. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) is used to define this range of settings, relating them to outdoor recreation opportunities.

What is needed for a course correction to make outdoor recreation opportunities accessible to those people with disabilities? UFAS standards were not enough. What's needed is a sensitivity to all types of disabilities, a close working relationship with all kinds of experts including experts who have learned by being. Managers were relying too much on published specifications without a real insight of what was desired and necessary by those who are looking for these outdoor recreation opportunities and what information is communicated to recreationists. Information communicated in traditional ways does not make the recreationists that is disabled aware of the opportunities nor doe it provide sufficient information for the recreationist with disabilities to match his or her skills and desires to the situation.

This new effort, addressing a participative and wholistic view of accessibility appears to fit within the framework of Forest recreation management principles while having the ability to improve accessibility for outdoor recreation opportunities for everyone, people with and without disabilities.