

Planning with (not for) persons with disabilities: Insights and opportunities

Don Carruthers Den Hoed, M.A.
Kananaskis Country – Alberta Parks

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Abstract

Many persons with disabilities want to participate in park programs or wilderness experiences but face barriers such as lack of transportation, poverty, inaccessible facilities, or lack of information. While removing these barriers to create access to parks would go a long way to promoting attendance among disability communities, it does not go far enough. People with disabilities want the same wilderness experiences, recreation opportunities, and personal challenge as able-bodied park users, and the long-term goal in planning parks and park education programs should be inclusion, not just access. This paper will outline best practices in planning for persons with disabilities and demonstrate the importance of listening to the needs of the individual and being creative in removing both artificial and natural barriers. This paper will also highlight the understanding within the disability community that parks are unique settings that should not be compromised by paving every trail or removing every natural obstacle. Finally, since the numbers of people with disabilities is increasing in Canadian society, this paper will challenge parks to see the immense possibilities offered by inclusion, especially the opportunity for excluded people to play a future role as visitors, stewards, and champions of parks.

Keywords

Accessibility, inclusion, disability, outreach, planning

Ross Watson climbed Canada's highest mountain, Mt. Logan in 2000.

Jim Milina reached the summit of Kilimanjaro in 2001.

Pippa Blake reached the Everest base camp in 2007.

Ross Watson is blind.

Jim Milina is a quadriplegic.

Pippa Blake has Multiple Sclerosis.

That these accomplishments seem more impressive when the disabilities of the individuals involved are revealed reflects that outdoor recreation – especially notable achievement – by persons with disabilities is abnormal in today's park culture. If participation by persons with disabilities was normal and pervasive, Ross, Jim, and Pippa's accomplishments would seem no more or less impressive than if they were able-bodied. And, while these achievements are indeed impressive, they are merely the tip of the iceberg in terms of the passion and interest in outdoor recreation within the disability community in Alberta.

There are many motivations for visiting parks and wilderness areas, such as connecting with nature, socializing, encouraging active lifestyles, and escaping from daily routine. Less tangible benefits range from spiritual and emotional development to self-actualization and increased empathy for non-human living things (Lais 1992; Lord 1997; Sugerman 2001). It would be difficult to find a reason to deny any individual these benefits. However, while an estimated 8 million people work, volunteer, and recreate in Alberta's Provincial Parks each year (Alberta Parks 2008), persons with disabilities are conspicuous in their absence within the parks system. The current focus on quality of life in Alberta, the raised profile of disability within the human rights movement, and the increasing prevalence of disability among Canadian society mean the timing is right to invite participation from persons with disabilities in the parks system. The recent graduate thesis that forms the foundation of this paper, *Nothing about them without them: Creating a framework of inclusive programs for persons with*

disabilities in Alberta's parks and protected areas (Carruthers Den Hoed 2007), highlights the need to engage persons with disabilities through effective and inclusive dialogue.

Before attempts are made to engage the disability community it is essential to develop an appreciation for the complexity of the group. Unlike marginalized communities defined by a single feature such as skin colour, race, sexual orientation, or age, the disability community is defined by no core set of characteristics. The *Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission* classifies disabilities into

- Hearing disabilities
- Mobility disabilities
- Psychological and psychiatric disabilities
- Vision disabilities
- Learning disabilities
- Neurological disabilities
- Disabilities resulting from chronic health problems
- Disabilities resulting from serious illness such as cancer, and
- Developmental disabilities

(Government of Alberta 2004b, 3)

While the list above is typical in defining disability, it is insufficient for capturing the nature and definition of the people it tries to represent. As the Roeher Institute (1996) explains: “disability is more than an individual condition. It can be understood as being the result of social, economic and environmental factors. There are many disabling environments and attitudes in society that need to be adjusted” (xii). What this means is that any definition of the disability community will be subject to context – based on the values held by a given culture and on the barriers or obstacles an individual faces, regardless of a technical *disability*. Viewed this way, an obese person could have a mobility impairment, as could a parent pushing a stroller. On the flipside, if the world had no stairs and no high shelves, being in a wheelchair would not be a disability.

Recognizing disability as a subjective condition opens the door to realizing that any person, at any time in their life, could become a member of the disability community. Commonly, the disabled community refers to the non-disabled population as *T.A.B.s*, or *temporarily able-bodied*, because “at some point in most individuals’ lifetimes, they or a family member will experience a significant disability” (Lais and Passo 2000, 18). Statistics Canada (2005) goes so far as to define the “disability-free life expectancy,” which lists the average Canadian life expectancy as 78.3 years, but the *disability-free* life expectancy as 68.6 years. This means the average Canadian will spend nearly ten years of their life living with at least one activity limitation or disability. The potential to be denied the wide range of benefits provided by park experiences, and the significant role parks may play in an individual’s life should be enough motivation to pursue inclusion and access.

Despite this motivation, few of the nearly 450,000 Albertans identified as persons with disabilities are regular visitors – let alone staff or volunteers – in Alberta’s park system. Persons with disabilities are not often invited to participate in park activities and they are provided with very few barrier-free opportunities if they do visit a park, even at the most basic level. As Lundell (2005) writes,

For people with a disability it is often impossible to get out into nature. Forestland generally means insurmountable hindrances with bulbous roots that lie entangled over narrow, stony and uneven paths. *The forest, with all its sounds and smells, is something alien that is glimpsed through car windows* (1).

Experiencing the wilderness often falls to the side when compared to more pressing social issues such as discrimination, underemployment, and lack of accommodation. The income levels of persons with

disabilities are far from equitable, and often incompatible with living the sorts of lives where visiting parks is possible. According to Statistics Canada, persons with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty than those without (Government of Canada 2004, 16). While poverty is related to many factors beyond the scope of parks, the cost of visiting a park is significant and is an important factor in considering accessibility. As a survey respondent to the Alberta Parks inclusion research stated:

The cost is a major factor: transportation, staffing, supplies, and cost for the campsite. This all adds up, and when we look at the big picture, camping is second to living, but it still would be nice to experience it once in my life.”

Survey Response, (Carruthers Den Hoed 2007).

Accessible Parks

To many, the requirements for barrier-free design seem incompatible with maintaining the integrity of the natural world and access invokes images of paving alpine meadows. When it comes to the natural world, though, there is a realistic understanding within the disability community that you can't remove every barrier everywhere. In fact, it is their very rugged and challenging nature that makes parks desirable destinations for persons with disabilities: “People with disabilities appreciate undeveloped nature and are not making demands that wilderness areas and other protected areas should be developed to provide easier access” (McAvoy and Estes 2001, 2). There is no expectation within the disability community that park agencies compromise the natural world to provide barrier-free access. While individuals with disabilities acknowledge this, there is still an earnest desire to be granted access to the wide array of experiences within the parks system. Fortunately, there are more ways to provide access than to build ramps.

Ross Watson used guides and GPS to navigate Mount Logan, and Jim Milina and Pippa Blake used TrailRider all-terrain wheelchairs powered by four willing companions on their respective treks; they didn't need to modify the environment to participate in wilderness adventures.

The accomplishments of these three individuals serve as a valuable lesson that the best way to overcome barriers in the natural world is often to adapt the user to the environment, not the environment to the user. These three individuals also serve as reminders that there are people in society from all walks of life who will do exceptional things and become exceptional advocates for outdoor recreation, as long as they are given the chance to try.

There is a limited literature base for creating accessible parks, and much of it is either outdated or from parks systems with much different landscapes than Kananaskis Country. Nonetheless, this body of work offers a strong foundation for future inclusion. Some key work includes:

- The *Government of Alberta's "KananAccess"* document was developed over twenty years ago to define levels of access for campgrounds, visitor centres, day use areas, and other physical aspects of Kananaskis Country. A key accomplishment of *KananAccess* was that it went beyond “handicapped visitor” plans of the time, most of which focused simply on wheelchair access to washrooms and parking lots. And, despite many of the recommendations still not being adopted to date, *KananAccess* set a high standard for access including adapting and setting aside a percentage of campground sites throughout the park system as priority sites for persons with disabilities (so that people could have an independent camping experience), as well as instigating a system for rating trails that is sensitive to the reality of wilderness terrain (Kananaskis Country and Alberta Recreation and Parks 1987).
- Efforts by the UK's Countryside Agency (2005) reflects a more agrarian setting than Kananaskis Country, but still provides a useful three-part plan to ensure access in rural parks. The first part, *least-restrictive access*, is a principle of design whereby facilities are built to the highest

possible standard of barrier-free design (11). The second part is the designation of *access standards and management zones*. These designations provide a means by which visitors can select the appropriate site to visit based on their ability. The third part is to describe the *process and barriers* encountered throughout the “access chain”, or the “chain of events that leads from a person’s decision to visit a site or route, through the journey, arrival, and visit around the site or route and its facilities and then the journey home” (13). These barriers, as addressed by the agency, include communication, transportation, programming, and trail access.

- In 2005, Lundell and the Swedish Forest Agency published *Access to the Forests for Disabled People*. Although this work does not address programmatic change, it is the most comprehensive, most recent collection of design standards for accessible trails and facilities in a wilderness environment. *Access* even goes so far as to try and tackle the divergent, often contradictory, requirements of different disability communities. Notable in the document is the focus on physical design and functionality, and it is a helpful resource for planners and operational staff alike.
- The Texas Parks and Wildlife approach to access contrasts the previous examples, and reflects the idea of modifying users instead of environments. Rather than tackling barriers at the park level, or even based on whether people have a disability or not, the *Texas Community Outreach Program* provides the means for people to overcome barriers themselves. Through a tax on sporting goods, the *Community Outreach Program* provide funds “to improve community outdoor outreach opportunities for inner-city, rural, low-income, minority, female, physically/mentally challenged, and youth-at-risk citizens” (Texas Parks and Wildlife 2005, 1).

Inclusive Parks

As demonstrated by these examples, creating barrier-free park experiences is achievable. It is also essential, since inclusion is impossible without access. Access may remove physical barriers, but inclusion is an active process of involving marginalized groups. As Schleien, Tipton, and Green (1997) write:

It is not enough merely to open programs to people with disabilities; the professionals in charge of the program must go further and actively recruit and encourage the participation of people with disabilities and provide them with successful and ongoing mechanisms of support (19).

Similarly, a participant in one of the *Nothing about them without them* focus groups said that “inclusion is about making people feel like they belong” (Carruthers Den Hoed 2007). West’s 1981 study *Vestiges of a Cage* validated that claim and exposed access as the simple act of removing physical barriers. In studies of parks with accessible facilities West “found that removal of barriers did not increase participation” (2). He went on to explain that there must be a concerted effort to increase knowledge of park opportunities and to *explicitly invite participation*. Falk (2005) expands on this idea of supporting people’s involvement in parks:

The fact that resources exist is not sufficient. The individuals in a society must be aware that those resources exist, they must know how to access those resources, they must be able to effectively and efficiently utilize those resources once accessed and they must have guidance in knowing how to mix and match resources to best effect (276).

Access is like throwing a party with all the trimmings... inclusion is about inviting people to come to the party, and even to decide what kind of food and music they’d like.

Several years ago, California State Parks lost a class-action lawsuit for not being inclusive enough.

The resultant process of creating inclusive programs was seen as an opportunity to overcome discriminatory attitudes, to demonstrate inclusion to all park users, and to allow everyone to participate in parks in their own way. From the settlement, the department recognized “equality of opportunity but does not guarantee equality of results” (Disability Rights Advocates 2002, 7). Basically, the plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit recognized that parks are unique settings with unique challenges. There was no unrealistic expectation that every person would be able to do everything, everywhere. However, the plaintiffs challenged the Department to ensure that everything is done so everyone has a chance to *try* to experience parks at a meaningful level.

Alberta Parks Inclusion Strategy

In 2005, Alberta Parks and the Premier’s Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities funded the research project upon which this paper is based, (*Nothing about them without them*). The goal of the project, as the title implies, was to engage persons with disabilities in the planning of park programming as never before. As the Alberta Parks, Recreation, and Wildlife Association implores, “too often facilities have been designed by non-handicapped persons, and thus we have not been aware of their needs and wants” (n.d., 244). Focus group, interview, survey, and literature review results contributed to an inclusion strategy that went beyond access. Specific recommendations were given, but the most fruitful results were in the form of five guiding principles of inclusion:

One: Parks can provide a range of profound wilderness experiences

Each of the six natural regions in Alberta offers something unique for the senses, whether it’s the arresting view of the Rocky Mountains, the rich smells of the boreal forest, or the warm winds of the grasslands. These regions all offer unique or “peak” experiences that can have a profound effect on an individual’s physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being (Csikszentmihalyi 1991) Parks and Protected Areas could provide a variety of inclusive opportunities throughout the province, providing that the access does not affect the nature or integrity of the place.

Two: Parks can support a variety of inclusive outdoor activities

As with traditional park users, persons with disabilities participate in a wide variety of recreational activities. An inclusive park system should provide multiple accessible outdoor experiences. For example, Kananaskis Country and other regions could set aside accessible campsites at each campground (i.e. with power for ventilators or charging wheelchairs, accessible washrooms, accessible surfacing and markings on trails and pads, and adequate width for vehicles with ramps).

Three: Parks can be flexible in stewardship and employment opportunities

Few people with disabilities are applying for, or being hired to work in parks. Although there are no conscious efforts to exclude people with disabilities, there should be a concerted effort to include people who have the passion and aptitude for work within *Parks and Protected Areas*, but who may not apply due to perceived barriers and lack of awareness. Adaptability and creativity in job-sharing, transportation, or office design can go a long way to cultivate workers who are passionate about parks, regardless of ability.

Four: Parks can offer a range of affordable high-quality programs

The cost of recreation is a major barrier to many people with disabilities. Some strategies to eliminate financial barriers could include community outreach grant funds such as the Texas Parks and Recreation fund, payment by volunteer service or flexible “pay-what-you-can” fees. An important note on cost, however, is that discounts can discriminate against a group: automatically providing lower cost facilities maintains the stereotype that a disability is a handicap.

Five: Parks can promote transportation to a network of sites

Transportation is one of the biggest barriers to persons with disabilities. As inclusive as parks may become at the site level, efforts are pointless if nobody can get there... The creation of an accessible regional transportation network has proven very successful in British Columbia, areas of Europe, and around California State Parks. Park agencies could lead discussions on regional transportation as a voice for inclusion. As an added bonus, accessible *public* transportation to parks would improve access for other groups with no transportation and provide a more sustainable option for everyone to visit parks.

These guiding principles are affirmations of the potential to foster inclusion in parks. Ideally, these principles will inform all aspects of park education – formal or informal, personal information or publications, volunteer programs or facility operations – and will help create a park system where inclusion is everywhere, not just in the *special* facilities. Inclusion is a call to accountability, to ensure *nothing about them without them*.

Conclusion

Everyone has a right to experience, learn about, and participate in Alberta's parks and protected areas, as long as such participation does not interfere with the conservation of wilderness. Ensuring all members of society can share in all the benefits outlined at the beginning of this paper is an opportunity for parks, as well as for marginalized individuals. While park agencies may not have a direct impact on improving the general conditions for persons with disabilities within society, simply providing a minimum of barrier-free park experiences can improve quality of life by building self-esteem, providing volunteer or employment opportunities, and creating settings where anyone interested in parks or the natural world can socialize with other like-minded people. Inclusion and access is also an opportunity to enhance stewardship among a broader spectrum of society, and to ensure the continued engagement of current park supporters among more than just the usual able-bodied visitors we see today.

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