



Opening the Outdoors: Accessible Trails and the Promise of Inclusive Nature

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For many Americans, time outdoors represents freedom. A quiet walk through the woods, the rhythm of bicycle tires on a trail, or the satisfaction of reaching a scenic overlook are experiences that connect people to nature and to one another. Yet for many individuals with disabilities, access to those experiences has historically been limited. The barrier has rarely been a lack of interest, more often, it has been infrastructure.

Across the United States, a growing movement among land trusts, park systems, and trail organizations is working to change that reality. By designing trails intentionally for accessibility, these efforts are opening forests, mountains, and parks to individuals with mobility challenges and other disabilities. Accessible rail trails, adaptive mountain biking networks, and universally designed nature paths are expanding opportunities for outdoor recreation in ways that were difficult to imagine even a generation ago.

As a special needs attorney, I regularly work with families navigating complex systems of care, public benefits, and long term planning for individuals with disabilities. Conversations about quality of life often focus on housing, medical care, and financial security. Those issues are critically important. Yet another dimension of quality of life sometimes receives less attention. Access to nature and outdoor recreation can be a meaningful part of independence, community participation, and wellbeing.

Outdoor Recreation Opportunities Are Increasing for Individuals with Special Needs

In the Adirondack region where I practice, the conversation about accessibility in outdoor recreation has been evolving in important ways. The Adirondack Park is one of the largest protected landscapes in the United States, but historically it has offered relatively few places where individuals using wheelchairs or other mobility devices could independently experience the landscape.

Organizations such as the [Adirondack Land Trust](#) have begun examining this gap more closely. Their work highlights how limited accessible trail opportunities remain within the park, while also encouraging land managers to incorporate accessibility when new lands are conserved or new trails are developed.

One of the most successful accessible outdoor destinations in the Adirondacks is [John Dillon Park](#). The park has become widely recognized as a national model for accessible wilderness recreation. Several miles of trails wind through forest and along ponds on surfaces designed for wheelchair use. Accessible lean-tos and campsites allow visitors with disabilities to experience overnight camping in a setting that closely resembles the surrounding wilderness. For many visitors, the ability to travel independently through the woods represents far more than a recreational opportunity.

Accessible trail design does not require eliminating the natural character of outdoor landscapes. Instead, it involves thoughtful choices that allow more people to participate. Moderate grades, stable trail surfaces, and wider pathways can allow trails to accommodate wheelchairs, adaptive bikes, and other mobility devices while still preserving the outdoor experience.

Rail trail projects across the country provide some of the most successful examples of this approach. Because railroads were built with gradual slopes, former rail corridors often translate naturally into accessible recreation spaces. In New York's Catskill region, the [Ashokan Rail Trail](#) provides more than eleven miles of scenic pathway along the Ashokan Reservoir. The trail's compacted stone surface allows pedestrians, cyclists, and wheelchair users to travel through forests and along open water views. Similarly, the [Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail](#) in Albany County offers nearly ten miles of paved pathway connecting several communities in the Capital Region. Trails such as these demonstrate how accessibility can be incorporated into regional recreation infrastructure in ways that benefit a wide range of users.

A Nationwide Effort

Across the country, similar efforts are underway. In Colorado, [Staunton State Park](#) near Denver has become nationally known for its adaptive recreation programs. The park offers track chairs that allow visitors with mobility disabilities to travel along mountain trails using specialized electric wheelchairs designed for rugged terrain. These programs make it possible for individuals with mobility limitations to experience mountain landscapes that would otherwise be inaccessible. Minnesota's [Glacial Lakes State Park](#) provides another example of inclusive design. The park includes accessible prairie trails and scenic overlooks that allow visitors using mobility devices to experience native prairie ecosystems. State Park systems across the country are increasingly recognizing the importance of designing outdoor spaces that welcome visitors of all abilities.

The [National Park Service](#) has also expanded accessibility initiatives in recent years. Many national parks now include accessible trails and visitor areas designed to allow individuals with disabilities to experience iconic landscapes. Yosemite National Park, for example, has developed a network of accessible pathways in Yosemite Valley that allow visitors using wheelchairs or mobility devices to travel between scenic areas, meadows, and visitor facilities. Similarly, Great Smoky Mountains National Park has partnered with nonprofit organizations to provide access to specialized all-terrain wheelchairs that allow visitors with mobility disabilities to travel on certain park trails. These programs illustrate how partnerships between public agencies and nonprofit organizations can expand opportunities for outdoor access.

Adaptive Mountain Biking

Perhaps the most exciting development in recent years has been the growth of adaptive mountain biking. Adaptive mountain bikes are specially designed cycles that allow individuals with spinal cord injuries, limb differences, and other disabilities to ride off-road trails. These bikes often use three or four wheels and may be powered by hand pedals or modified controls. As adaptive cycling has grown, trail builders have begun reconsidering how trails are designed. Wider trail corridors, smoother turning radii, and carefully managed slopes can allow trails to accommodate adaptive riders without diminishing the experience for traditional cyclists.

Several regions have emerged as leaders in this effort. The [Kingdom Trails](#) network in Vermont has gained national recognition for welcoming adaptive mountain bikers and collaborating with adaptive cycling organizations to improve trail accessibility. In Utah, the [National Ability Center](#) in Park City operates one of the country's most extensive adaptive mountain biking programs, providing equipment, instruction, and access to accessible trail networks.

Organizations such as the [International Mountain Bicycling Association](#) are now publishing guidance to help trail builders incorporate adaptive design principles. These efforts reflect a broader shift in thinking

about outdoor recreation. Accessibility is no longer viewed simply as a regulatory requirement. Instead, it is increasingly recognized as an opportunity to expand participation.

For families supporting individuals with disabilities, accessible outdoor recreation can have profound significance. Time spent outdoors is associated with improved physical health, reduced stress, and stronger mental well-being. Accessible trails also allow families to share experiences that might otherwise be difficult to achieve. When trails are designed with universal access in mind, individuals of different ages and abilities can explore together. A parent using a wheelchair can take a walk with a child. A grandparent with limited mobility can participate in a family outing. Individuals recovering from injury or illness can return to outdoor activity.

These developments serve as a reminder that quality of life planning extends beyond financial and legal structures. Access to recreation, community participation, and meaningful life experiences should also be a part of that planning.

Nature has long been described as a universal human experience. With thoughtful design and a commitment to inclusion, accessible trails can help ensure that the outdoors truly belongs to everyone.

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