

I. ACCESSIBILITY: WHAT IS IT?

Accessibility Background

In describing the A.T., words like remote and winding are often used. Described by Harold Allen, “the Appalachian Trail should be remote for detachment, narrow for chosen company, winding for leisure, lonely for contemplation, the Trail leads not merely North or South, but upwards to the body, mind, and soul of man.” There is a growing desire among trail partners to provide opportunities for persons with disabilities to utilize the Appalachian Trail where appropriate and feasible, so that they too may experience the Trail described by Harold Allen. However, a pedestrian trail that meets accessibility guidelines is a highly designed path, generally with imported surfacing and a gentle slope. It avoids both man-made and natural obstacles. Accessible trails require more involved construction and maintenance techniques and resources.

If it hasn’t already, accessibility will become a permanent part of the list of design considerations for trails and facilities. Awareness of access issues in the trail community has increased, fostered by congressional legislation and societal realities. As the aged population grows, the disabled population grows correspondingly, and as interest in nature, wildlife, physical exercise continues to be strong, public demand for opportunities along the Appalachian Trail continues to grow. This increasing desire is reflected by increased information requests to A.T. partners for accessible recreation opportunities along the Appalachian Trail.

For over a decade, the outdoor community has wrestled with the challenge of increasing recreational opportunities for persons with disabilities on public lands. The challenge for recreation managers is accommodating this goal while at the same time ensuring that such opportunities do not alter the settings of these recreational experiences. National policy guidance on integrating accessibility with outdoor recreation management on public lands, including the Appalachian Trail, resides with the U.S. Access Board. In the 1990’s, the board convened a group of outdoor recreation stakeholders, including ATC, to develop new guidelines for accessibility on trails and outdoor facilities. While the work of that group has been completed, the resulting guidelines have not yet been adopted as “the law of the land.” The USFS, as one of the stakeholders in the process, decided to develop its own set of guidelines to provide direction and tools for land managers to address increasing requests and inquiries regarding opportunities for persons with disabilities on National Forest Lands, and to attempt to demonstrate its compliance with other federal laws regarding persons with disabilities.

In 2006, after a long public process, the USFS developed a set of guidelines to be utilized on all USFS lands. The USFS Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG) and the Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines (FSORAG) define how and when accessibility along trails and at facilities on U.S. Forest Service lands will be considered. Both FSTAG and FSORAG are nearly identical to the Access Board’s draft guidelines. Their adoption created a need for information regarding their application on portions of the A.T. located on National Forest lands. Because FSTAG and FSORAG are so close to the Access Board’s draft guidelines, their adoption also created an opportunity to become familiar with application of the

I. Accessibility: What is it?

Access Board's guidelines, which will apply to the entire A.T. when and if they are adopted. With requests for information about opportunities for persons with disabilities on the A.T. continuing to arise, ATC and its partners felt an overarching need to provide direction on accessibility. FSTAG and FSORAG currently provide the best practices for trail managers considering accessibility.

Some might ask, "Shouldn't we wait until the release of the Access Board Guidelines in case they are different from the USFS guidelines?" FSTAG and FSORAG are virtually identical to the draft guidelines for trails and outdoor facilities developed by the Access Board in the late 1990's. In the meantime, FSTAG and FSORAG offer the trail community a framework to consider increasing opportunities for access in preparation for the potential and likely adoption of the Access Board guidelines.

What does an accessible trail look like?

Trails that meet the FSTAG have a broad range of appearance. While some Accessible trails may be paved or surfaced, some are natural surfaced and just wide enough to allow for passage of a person using a wheelchair. In either case, the images conjured up by the mention of a fully accessible trail are not usually in a primitive or backcountry setting like the Appalachian Trail. *Accessible trail design is in some respects less about accessibility and more about sustainable trail design.* Both the draft Access Board guidelines and the FSTAG follow what are called universal trail design standards. These standards are not new to trail



Disabilities take many forms, and not all persons with disabilities use wheelchairs. This gentleman uses a cane while enjoying the outdoors along the A.T. in Boiling Springs, PA.

managers and partners of the A.T. community; they encourage designing trails in sustainable locations, resulting in less maintenance while providing high quality trail experiences. These design principles and considerations make sense for any project and generally provide standards that work in frontcountry or remote backcountry settings. While fully accessible trails require wider tread widths and fewer obstacles, simply applying the universal design standards will create trails that are more sustainable and accessible, even if they do not meet all accessible trail guidelines.

Increasing access to the Appalachian Trail is not appropriate or possible everywhere along the trail. But trail partners and managers can now consider opportunities for accessibility, and where possible and appropriate increase the level of access of the A.T. while ensuring the protection of the A.T. experience described by Harold Allen. This design guide is intended work toward that end by:

- Helping trail managers address access issues and make decisions regarding accessibility;
- Guiding managers through the process in a way that encourages increased development of opportunities for all people to use the Appalachian National Scenic Trail; and,
- Protecting the primitive and remote nature of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

Accessibility Awareness

At the time of the 2000 census, 54 million people, or 1 in every 5 people in the U.S., had a disability that significantly limited one or more major life functions such as walking, seeing, hearing, or breathing. Of that number, 4% used wheelchairs and 7.4% use crutches, canes, walkers, or other mobility aids. And the U.S. population is aging. By the year 2030 more than 31% of the population will be over 55 years of age. As people age, disability increases. In 2004, 42% of people over age 65 had a disability. There's a lot of truth to the saying that if you live long enough, you are sure to join the ranks of people with disabilities, and that will not only affect your own abilities, but that of your family and friends as well.

If anyone in a group has a disability, accessibility is an issue for the whole group. It influences where the group can go and what they can do. Ski areas learned many years ago that each skier who has a disability is usually accompanied by 3.8 additional skiers who don't have disabilities. Just as there are varying preferences among the general population, not every person who has a disability enjoys outdoor recreation. We must make sure that our trails, facilities, and programs allow everyone, including people with disabilities, to choose their own recreational activities.

Terminology and Definitions

Establishing the appropriate terminology and developing awareness are important foundations for any conversation about accessibility. People who have disabilities refer to themselves in many different ways, and it can be difficult and nerve-racking to know if the terms you might use are "politically correct" or considered acceptable by the majority of people. The

I. Accessibility: What is it?

1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) uses only the terms, “**persons with disabilities**” and “**accessible**” and these are the same terms that Federal agencies use in their regulations, policies, and other documents. Words in this section marked with an * have a definition taken from FSTAG, FSORAG, or the access board’s guidelines.

Accessible facilities or trails – comply with the accessibility guidelines and standards. A facility or trail is either accessible, or it is not accessible. There are no shades of accessibility. The only way to evaluate accessibility is by using the legal standards and guidelines. For instance, an accessible privy meets the requirements and a privy that doesn’t meet **all** the standards and technical provisions is not accessible. “Almost” doesn’t count.

Terms sometimes used to describe facility accessibility that are **not correct** include “partially accessible”, “accessible with assistance”, “barrier-free”, “ADA accessible”, and “handicapped accessible”. The first two terms are incorrect because a facility is either accessible or it is not accessible. If the facility is not accessible, the visitor or employee needs to know what specific portion(s) or area(s) of the facility are not accessible. “Partially accessible” and “accessible with assistance” imply that there are some accessibility problems, but do not provide enough information to be helpful. “Barrier-free” is not legally defined or commonly understood. “ADA accessible” confuses laws with accessibility standards. “Handicapped accessible” is a self-contradictory term meaning “barrier-no barrier”, which of course makes no sense. The best terms are simply “accessible” or “not accessible”.

All that said, it is certainly possible to enhance a trail’s accessibility to a broader range of the public by including accessibility as a trail design goal. **Designing and creating an accessible trail (as defined above) without altering the character of a trail and/or the environment around it is very challenging. A trail that has a moderate grade with no rock steps will be accessible to a wider segment of the population than a steep trail up the fall line with rock steps.**

Accessibility Guidelines – include several documents: A building is not considered accessible unless it meets the Americans with Disabilities Act Guidelines/Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADA/ABAAG). These are the standards that govern accessible door widths and ramp grades, among other accessible features. In 1999, the U.S. Access Board developed draft accessibility guidelines for trails and outdoor developed recreation areas. As of November 2006, those Access board guidelines had not completed the public comment process required to make those guidelines legally enforceable. In May of 2006 the Forest Service completed public comment on their guidelines for trails and outdoor recreation areas, the FSTAG and FSORAG, based on that Access Board draft. While use of those Forest Service guidelines is only required within the agency’s boundaries, because the guidelines have been fully reviewed by the public, the FSTAG and FSORAG serve as accessibility guidance both where the A.T. crosses Forest Service lands and along the rest of the trail.

Alteration* – a change in the original purpose, intent, or function for which the trail was designed.

Constructed feature* – A structure built for a specific public use in the natural environment such as a tent platform, privy, shelter, picnic table, fire ring, parking lot, etc. Also called a facility.

Construction* – building a new trail or segment of trail where there was no trail before.

Developed Recreation Site* – a discrete site with a concentration of public recreational facilities and services, such as a campground, picnic ground, trailhead, scenic overlook, or parking lot, and evidencing a significant investment in facilities and management under the direction of an administrative unit in the National Forest System. Generally has public vehicular access.

Disability – a medically definable condition that causes a limitation in one or more of a person’s major life activities such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, thinking, etc.

Person-first terminology is the preferred language to use because the person is more important than the disability. Examples of person-first terminology include: “the person who is blind” - not “the blind person” or “the person who uses a wheelchair” -not “the wheelchair-bound person” or “the wheelchair person”.

Drainage lens – a quantity of coarse gravel wrapped in geotextile and used as base material for a section of trail that sees enough diffused water moving across the tread to warrant special treatment, but not enough to require a culvert. Similar to a sausage or burrito turnpike.

Element – This term can be found in some of the FSORAG technical provisions. In the context of the provisions, it generally means the item or thing a user is trying to reach.

Fall Line – See page 56

Feature – A place or object of cultural or natural interest such as a waterfall or an historic farmsite.

Geotextile – Also called landscape fabric, geotextile is a water permeable synthetic fabric that is laid down before a gravel base material is added. The geotextile supports the gravel and prevents it from sinking into saturated soil.

Grade – See page 55

I. Accessibility: What is it?

Handicap – a barrier or circumstance that makes progress or success difficult, such as a flight of stairs that may be impassable for a person using a wheelchair.

It is important to understand that there are negative connotations to the term “handicapped” when referring to a person who has a disability. The word has been around for centuries, but was not used to refer to people with disabilities until the late 1800s. Many people believe that the term “handicapped” was first used in relation to individuals who have disabilities when Civil War veterans whose injuries prevented them from working were begging on the streets with “cap in hand.” Standard references do not support this story. But because the story has become legend describing people with disabilities as “handicapped” is offensive to many people. It may be useful to think of handicapped as the “H” word and eliminate it from your vocabulary, print materials, and outreach.

Maintenance* – routine or periodic repair of existing trails or trail segments to restore them to the standards or conditions to which they were originally designed and built. **Maintenance does not change the original purpose, intent, or function for which the trail was designed. Trail maintenance work does not trigger the accessibility requirements.**

Maintenance includes, but is not limited to:

- Removal of debris and vegetation, such as downed trees or broken branches on the trail; clearing trail of encroaching brush or grasses; and removing rock slides.
- Maintenance of trail tread, such as filling ruts and entrenchments; reshaping a trail bed; repairing a trail surface and washouts; installing rip rap rock to retain cut and fill slopes; and constructing retaining walls or cribbing to support trail tread.
- Erosion control and drainage work such as replacing or installing necessary drainage dips or culverts; and realigning sections of trail to deter erosion or avoid boggy areas.
- Repair or replacement of deteriorated, damaged, or vandalized trail or trailhead structures or parts of structures, including sections of bridges, boardwalks, information kiosks, fencing and railings; painting; and removing graffiti.

Outdoor Recreation Access Route (ORAR)* – A continuous, unobstructed path designated for pedestrian use that connects constructed features (such as a camping unit and water source or picnic tables and a toilet building, etc.) within a picnic area, camping area, or developed trailhead. ORARs are required only in developed recreation sites. ORARs have technical requirements that are similar to accessible trails. However the slopes on ORARs are required to be less steep than those allowed on accessible trails.

Prominent feature – a natural, cultural, or historic feature located along or adjacent to a trail that has national, regional, or local distinction or significance. It might be the focal point,

main attraction, or destination of the trail or it may simply be an interesting secondary feature such as a boulder outcrop, waterfall, grouping of old or unique trees, cultural or historic structure, a wildflower meadow, an area popular for wildlife viewing, or a scenic vista.

Reconstruction – a term that is not used in Federal accessibility guidelines or the FSTAG, even though it is frequently used in the trails community. For the purposes of the FSTAG, actions are categorized as *alteration, construction, or maintenance*.

Trail* – a pathway designed for the purpose of recreational hiking.

Trailhead* – a site designed and developed by the Forest Service or other government agency, a trail association, a trail maintaining club, a trail partner, or other cooperators to provide staging for trail use.

For purposes of the FSTAG the following *do not* constitute a trailhead:

- Junctions between trails where there is no other access
- Intersections where a trail crosses a road, or users have developed an access point, but no improvements are provided by the Forest Service, trail associations, a trail maintaining club, a trail partner, or other cooperators beyond minimal markers for health and safety.

Universal Design – is often associated with accessibility and is a great way to approach planning trail and facility projects. Universal design is simply designing programs and facilities to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without separate or segregated access for people with disabilities. However, universal design does not necessarily meet the stringent technical specifications of FSTAG and FSORAG.

Universal Trail Assessment Process (UTAP) – measures a wide range of factors that affect the potential accessibility of a trail. That detailed information on trail conditions is then synthesized and can be presented to a user. Armed with a UTAP assessment, a user, regardless of the presence of a disability, can decide for themselves if a trail is right for them and their own ability. The advantage of UTAP is that it gives the user the information they need to make the choice for the setting and type of recreation. For more information on UTAP go to:

www.beneficialdesigns.com/trails/utap.html

Federal Legislation

The Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) became law in 1968. It mandates that all facilities built, purchased, rented, altered, or leased by, for, or on behalf of a Federal agency must be accessible.

In 1973 the Rehabilitation Act became law. Section 504 of the act applies to programs and activities that are conducted by Federal agencies and by entities that receive funding from, or operate under a permit from, Federal agencies. It requires that these programs and activities provide an equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities to participate in an integrated setting, as independently as possible. The only exception to the requirement is if providing accessibility would fundamentally alter the program. An example of a fundamental alteration to a program would be allowing use of a motorized vehicle in a wilderness area.

7 CFR 15, which was finalized in 1994, is the USDA implementation guideline for Section 504. Subpart 15e applies to programs conducted by the Forest Service.

Subpart 15b applies to programs operating with Federal agency funding, under special use permits, or under other agreements with the agency. If a building or structure must be entered in order to participate in the activity at the site, it must be accessible.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990. Except for Title V Section 507, the ADA does not apply to Federal agencies' facilities and programs, because they were already required to be accessible under the ABA and Section 504. The ADA applies to State and local government services and to public accommodations, which are businesses and organizations that are open to the public. Title V Section 507c applies to congressionally designated wilderness. It reaffirms the 1964 Wilderness Act and clarifies that agencies aren't required to change the character of wilderness areas in order to provide accessibility. It also defines a wheelchair and states that wheelchairs meeting that definition can be used in congressionally designated wilderness.

More information about key federal accessibility legislation is available at the US Access Board's website: www.access-board.gov

Accessibility and the A.T.

Some may be surprised that many folks with disabilities have visited and even spent a lengthy amount of time on the Appalachian Trail. Often our first image of an individual with a disability is a person who uses a wheelchair; in fact, many individuals deal with a wide variety of disabilities. While some disabilities offer more challenges than others to moving along the Appalachian Trail unaided, conditions found along the Appalachian Trail are challenging to many people who are able bodied and in the prime of their life. After all, isn't that the point of why the A.T. was designed as a backcountry, primitive trail? A.T. users are expected to challenge their abilities, and in some cases, realize their limitations, and either decide to overcome them or decide not to. That is a choice any trail user must make. In recent years, several A.T. users who are also persons with disabilities have determined to overcome their own

challenges along the Appalachian Trail.

Just before Thanksgiving in 1990, Bill Irwin, a hiker from North Carolina who now lives in Maine, became the first known person who is blind to thru-hike the entire Appalachian Trail. With the help of his service dog, Orient, and a network of supporters, Irwin was able to do what had previously been unthinkable. His web site is: www.billirwin.com

In 2004, Scott Rogers of Washburn, TN. completed all but approximately 100 miles of the A.T. In 2005, he completed his missing sections of A.T. and became a 2,000-miler. Scott's left leg is amputated above the knee. His website is: www.onelegwonder.com

Other thruhikers with disabilities:

- Sally Burgess, Ann Arbor, MI. 1990 thru-hiker. Amputee- arm.
- Carl Moon, Powder Springs, GA. 1991-1992 thru-hiker. Amputee- foot.
- Bob Barker, Sandstone, VA. Thru-hiked three times (1977, 1981, 1986). Multiple Sclerosis.
- Mike Schank, Tell City, IN. Thru-hiker. 1991-'92. Stomach, and portions of liver, esophagus, pancreas, and intestine were removed after cancer diagnosis.
- Henry Tanner, James Island, SC. 1995 thru-hiker. Stroke survivor.

Multiple hikers with the following conditions have also completed the Trail: deaf, HIV-positive, cancer, diabetes, hip replacement, knee replacement, and overweight by as much as 80 pounds.

Galehead Hut and AMC

In 1999, the Forest Service notified the Appalachian Mountain Club that under the ADA, AMC's Galehead Hut, located along the A.T. in the White Mountains of New Hampshire was to be made accessible during a major renovation. At the time, many decried this requirement as an excess. Why should a hut, 4.6 miles up a steep, rocky, and rutted trail, and perched at the edge of the largest federal wilderness in the Northeast be made accessible? In 2000, after the renovation was complete, three hikers who use wheelchairs made it to the hut after a grueling all day effort. Their journey to the hut was supported by volunteers from Northeast Passage, an organization that facilitates access to the outdoors for persons with disabilities. The volunteers accompanied and assisted the three at every turn, however the hikers who used wheelchairs were never carried. When they all arrived at the hut that evening, they were able to use Galehead's accessible features and wheelchair ramp, which many had said were a waste of money and would never be used.

Every year, adaptive technology for persons with disabilities increases opportunities for accessing the outdoors. Fat tire wheelchairs now allow the folks who use them the opportunity to access places that were beyond reach just a few short years ago. Folks like Bill Irwin and the Galehead visitors have shown that society's perceptions about the abilities of the disabled are now being outstripped by reality.