



**New England Journal of Environmental Education**  
**SEPTEMBER 2005**

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*By Marcy Marchello*

The New England Journal of Environmental Education is published by the New England Environmental Education Alliance. The views and opinions expressed in the articles are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of the *New England Environmental Education Alliance*.

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[www.neeea.org](http://www.neeea.org)

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## The Widening Circle — Integrating People With Disabilities into Nature Programs

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### **Birding for Everybody**

On a sunny mild February day, a group of individuals met in the parking lot at the Great Falls Discovery Center in Turners Falls, Massachusetts for a bird watching program. Introductions were quickly made, along with visits to the restroom, and a plan was laid out for a short trip to a local spot where waterfowl congregate and a screech owl had been reported. So far, this sounds like a typical start of a birding program, however, there was a significant component added right from the planning stages - inclusion.

The promotional information that people had read described the program as “wheelchair accessible” and “gentle paced for people of all ages and abilities”. In the mix of participants who arrived were two women with knee problems, one woman using a power wheelchair, a young man with autism who came with his aide, and another man with a mild cognitive impairment. In addition, one of the program leaders could not walk far due to a past leg injury. The needs and limitations of these individuals were identified through advance registration and the program was modified to accommodate everyone.

The outing was sited in a wheelchair accessible location in which easy-to-view birds could be seen in large numbers without having to walk far. Luckily the day was warm enough for people to be physically comfortable in the outdoors, and snow on the site was properly groomed to allow wheelchair passage from the parking lots to the building and the birding area.. The program leaders avoided abstract language and worked with individuals on a one-to-one basis to help them with their birding skills. Lightweight binoculars and viewing scopes were provided for use - select models that are easier to see through and use. A large print bird guide was available as a teaching aid and folding chairs were brought along so people could take turns sitting throughout the program. Had it been needed, a listening kit was also available for use.

These factors in combination with the positive attitude of the program leaders towards people with disabilities set the stage for successful inclusive interpretation. As people found their niche in the group experience and grew excited by the presence of many birds on a nice day, any issues about disability faded from consciousness. People delighted in leisurely views of an eastern screech owl sunning itself in a tree cavity. Other highlights included comparing dabbling and diving ducks, watching gulls bathing and swans feeding, and using a scope to identify a great cormorant by its white chin patch. Although the young man with

autism was too restless to focus on birds and his aide elected to take a walk on their own, this was seen as a viable choice. No expectations were placed on participants to stay for the full program and it was understood that autism can require repeated visits to a program before a new activity will be attempted.

### **Expect Challenges**

This program was an idyllic inclusive experience. With advance planning and the right tools and training, many nature programs could be just as accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities. Of course, some people with disabilities are highly independent, mobile, and social and can easily be spontaneously integrated. Often though, there are many challenges that can become awkward when a person with a disability calls or shows up. How to accommodate a blind person in a birding program? What happens when a mother comes with her young son who walks very slowly and prevents the rest of the group from reaching the program's destination? How to accommodate a large woman using a scooter who wants to participate in an exploration of fresh water creatures when the trail to the wetland is not wheelchair accessible? What to do when an excited participant talks too loudly and continually interrupts the educational process? These are just a few examples of the broad range of situations that can arise when programs become more inclusive.

How can we balance the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act - that all Americans should have equal access to public facilities and programs - within the limitations of budget, staff and operations so prevalent in our times? The answer lies in advance planning, readiness, and a holistic approach that relies not just on staff abilities, but on the entire organization or agency creating greater accessibility for all, one step at a time.

### **A Holistic Approach**

First, it is vital to address the basics of accessibility on site and maintain functional access. Knowing your site's accessibility and being able to communicate this effectively will help callers and visitors gain an accurate understanding of what to expect. Locating and learning how to use accessible features on site is also critical for staff readiness. Activate the captions for videos. Know how to operate wheelchair lifts and request American Sign Language interpretation. Make sure audio elements or listening devices are charged and working properly. Assess your teaching resource for their inclusion potential. Are there books or resources with larger print and pictures? Are there tactile objects, listening opportunities, ways to engage all the senses? What route is the most accessible for people using wheelchairs or canes? Are printed materials available in large print, Braille, and audio cassette?

The spectrum of disability is so broad that any organization or agency must begin to develop and implement a wide range of inclusion strategies into all core functions, from the development of publications to the delivery of programs. Whether an entity is a place-based nature center or an agency with land holdings across the state, there should be an ongoing

intention and plan under implementation to address accessibility. This plan should address not only people with mobility impairments, but also those with visual, hearing, and cognitive impairments. Ideally, people with disabilities should have a part in shaping an inclusion plan for any organization.

Inclusion training for staff is vital, preferably training that will expose staff to people with disabilities and increase their sensitivity, comfort level, and range of response. Seek out disability service providers for recommendations on trainers. Staff should know how to be a sighted guide for someone who is blind. They should know how to communicate effectively and respectfully with people who have severe or multiple disabilities, who are hard of hearing or deaf, and who have cognitive impairments. With basic disability awareness and etiquette skills in place, staff will be able to respond more confidently when they meet individuals with disabilities at their programs.

Consider your program calendar. Which programs are already scheduled in wheelchair accessible locations? Which programs might be relocated to an alternate site or route and still be able to fulfill the objectives should someone show up in a wheelchair? Which programs are introductory and could accommodate people moving at a slower physical or mental pace? Could a more intermediate program draw upon an additional staff person or volunteers to work with beginners or people moving at a slower pace? Can you allow people to drop out of the program early or leave and return to the program as they need too? If so, you'll be able to accommodate people who are managing pain, fatigue, or behavioral issues. If a program can allow for someone to be present even though they may not participate fully, people with severe or multiple disabilities may benefit.

People with disabilities can be referred to programs that have this type of flexibility. You can also invite people to meet you at the site 15 minutes prior to a program to get familiar with their needs and goals for the experience. You might invite them to consider meeting you for a separate custom tour if the program format is unable to accommodate them. You can also refer people to similar programs on a more accessible site or programs offered by organizations that specialize in inclusive recreation. It is worth finding out who is offering inclusive programs nearby and draw upon them as a resource for your own facility. Investigate the possibility of collaboration with other organizations to provide greater opportunities for access. Inclusive recreation providers in particular make great partners for canoeing and hiking programs and may be able to provide adaptive equipment to support a wider variety of participants getting deeper into natural areas.

Above all, you need to determine what is realistic for your own organization to accomplish. What is a reasonable accommodation and what isn't? If including a particular individual is going to change the fundamental nature of a specific program so that the program will no longer be what it was advertised to be, then inclusion is not viable. If a given program can be modified to include everyone with minimal disturbance, then a reasonable accommodation is possible and should be made.

Inclusion is a means of widening the circle of who can attend, and it may well be happening already in your programs. Assume that some people with hidden disabilities will simply not

self-identify. If you are using good interpretation - activating all the senses, using simple clear language, engaging participants to share observations and make comparisons - you will be doing a lot to support inclusion. Add to this some additional supportive techniques - such as the ability to be a sighted guide, or a portable assistive listening device that allow individual's to adjust the volume of your voice, or another staff person or volunteer to provide walking support - then you've widened the circle of inclusion even further.

### **Creative Responses**

So, what about that woman who wants to go ponding and get her hands in the water too? Until an accessible boardwalk project gets funded for the wetland at the local nature center, the staff there may not have a perfect solution for her passion to dip a net in the water. Inclusion doesn't always have to be perfect, or satisfy completely, to still be inclusion - it may in fact involve a compromise. In this case, the teacher naturalist may facilitate a group experience in which some participants enter the wetland to collect pond creatures while others make observations of the environment from the last accessible spot on the trail. By having everyone return there with collections and observations to hold a group discussion, all participants will be included. The woman in the scooter can get her hands wet and hold a frog for closer examination if buckets are used for transport.

Compromise is always easier to accept if we are treated with the same friendliness and respect as everyone else. Attitude is everything in inclusion - it can enhance the quality of experience for all participants and sometimes even transcend the physical limitations on site. Program staff can role model an inclusive attitude just by being friendly and respectful and addressing everyone present equally, even if some group members avoid eye contact or drool or are difficult to understand. Doing so will help everyone feel more comfortable and accept each individual as part of the group. If the program leader also responds with willingness, flexibility, creativity, and patience to accommodate everyone present, then inclusion is truly alive in the mission of the organization.

Environmental educators also need to know their limits - to communicate what is and isn't possible accurately and with authority in order to be good program leaders. One leader can only do so many things during a program. If more than one or two individuals with a disability are present, depending on the nature of their disabilities it is likely that additional support staff may be needed to ensure a successful experience for everyone. If only one staff person is available to facilitate the program, their primary responsibility is program delivery, and individual support has to be secondary. In some cases it may be possible to draw upon another participant in the group to help out.

Some people with disabilities may attend with an aid or companion who will support their presence and help manage their situation. Many disability organizations or groups often sponsor outings. These groups will typically show up with support staff who will push wheelchairs, provide communication assistance, tend to personal needs, be the sighted guide, and/or manage behavior. Any large group on a nature trail benefits from additional interpretive staff to work with people in smaller clusters - a strategy that works quite well

for disability groups. If such groups have called in advance of coming, it will be easier to prepare for accommodating their outing. If additional interpretive staff simply aren't available, tap into your community and identify volunteers who have experience with people with disabilities. Students and retirees are classic volunteer material and many may either be studying or have years of experience in a related field. Recently I co-led an inclusive bird walk with a woman from a local bird club who had just retired from the field of psychiatric care. I had no worries about addressing any unusual or unexpected behavior from participants that day!

Learning how to make successful program accommodations is a vital asset to serving a broader public, and an individual's or organization's ability to stay fresh and receptive will depend upon the frequency of attendance by people who need accommodations. Committing to inclusion means being willing to meet and flex with the ever changing flow of who comes in the door. Advance planning, staff training, good interpretive techniques, developing an additional staff plan, and knowing your site well will all help you succeed. Still, people with disabilities and the people who serve them may not even know about the door to your programs unless you provide the appropriate cues.

To complete a widening circle of inclusion, you'll need to indicate accessibility in your promotional materials. Use standard icons to indicate programs that are accessible. Use the phrase "Reasonable accommodations available upon advance request" followed by a phone number to welcome inquiries from people with disabilities. If your facility is on public transportation or available via special transportation services, indicate this on press releases and flyers. Draw upon standard phrases to describe accessibility at your site, such as "850 foot wheelchair accessible boardwalk through wetland to viewing platform with bench". Be creative! Make sure that the public is getting the word about accessible programs at your site through all publicity channels. Then, make sure your publicity gets out into the disability community - put disability agencies and service organizations on your mailing list. Develop a contact list for disability groups in your area and keep them informed of upcoming programs. In this way, you'll draw toward you the very people you are preparing to serve.

***Marcy Marchello** has worked with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation since 1995. She teaches inclusion techniques to park interpreters and coordinates year round accessible recreation opportunities in Massachusetts State Parks.*

## List of resources

### *Equipment used in Birding Program:*

- Portable folding chairs: [www.GCIOutdoors.com](http://www.GCIOutdoors.com) (~\$30)
- Helpful Optics: Swift Ultralight Binoculars 8 x 42 (~\$200)
- Canon Image Stabilizing Binoculars 8 x 25 (~\$270)
- Peterson's Eastern Bird Guide, large print edition, ISBN 0-395-96371-0 (\$24)
- Assistive Listening Devices
- Easy Listener by Phonic Ear - [www.phonicear.com](http://www.phonicear.com) (~\$500 in kit form)
- Sonic Ear - available through Acorn Naturalists - [www.acornnaturalists.com](http://www.acornnaturalists.com) (~\$35)

### *Site Assessments throughout New England:*

- Everyone's Invited, Laura Grunfeld, 413-229-2476, [everyonesinvited@aol.com](mailto:everyonesinvited@aol.com)
- Deborah Ryan & Associates, 617-268-9423

### *Disability Awareness Training and Information:*

- **Project INSPIRE** (Initiative for National and State Park Inclusive Recreation Expansion) is a federal grant project offering training opportunities and information through September 2006 - contact Bryce Fifield at 413-527-8980 or Marcy Marchello at 413-545-5758.
- **Massachusetts Office on Disability**
- One Ashburton Place, Room 1305, Boston, MA 02108, 617-727-7440, 800-322-2020 (V/TTY) [www.mass.gov/mod/](http://www.mass.gov/mod/)
- **Outdoor Explorations**, 98 Winchester Street, Medford, MA 02115, 781-395-4999

### *Inclusive Environmental Education Specialists:*

- Kathy Amberosini - Director of Education, Mohonk Preserve, New Paltz, NY – NatureAccess: proactive inclusion in environmental education for school groups since 1995. 915-255-0919 x 233 or [kamberosini@mohonkpreserve.org](mailto:kamberosini@mohonkpreserve.org)  
More info at: <http://mohonkpreserve.org/about/education/#access>
- Marcy Marchello - Accessible Recreation Program Coordinator, DCR Universal Access Program - Amherst, MA - Accessible Recreation in Massachusetts State Parks - [www.mass.gov/dcr/access](http://www.mass.gov/dcr/access) email: [marcy.marchello@state.ma.us](mailto:marcy.marchello@state.ma.us)

### *Adaptive Recreation Service Providers:*

- All Out Adventures, Easthampton, MA, 413-527-8980, [www.alloutadventures.org](http://www.alloutadventures.org)
- Northeast Passage, Durham, NH, 603-862-0070 [www.nepassage.org](http://www.nepassage.org)
- Outdoor Explorations, Medford, MA, 781-395-4999, [www.outdoorexplorations.org](http://www.outdoorexplorations.org)
- Venture Into Well-Being, Amherst, MA, 413-259-0009

### *Other:*

- Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibitions and Publications – great website with accessibility icons.  
<http://www.si.edu/opa/accessibility/exdesign/contents.htm>