

BY VICKI WILKINS, PH.D.

## PATHWAYS TO CREATING ACCESSIBLE TRAILS

In the woods where I live and play, we are between winter and spring in what we affectionately call mud season! Out come the hiking boots as we put away snow shoes and cross-country skis. It's the season for the NYS Inclusive Recreation Resource Center (IRRC) to help make trails more accessible to people of all abilities and to suggest some useful resources.

My involvement with accessibility began almost 30 years ago starting with trails. Small groups of students and I would head to Shaver's Creek Nature Center and "work on the trails." Our intent was never to post a sign stating "this trail is accessible;" nor was it to convince administrators to pave the trails. We were there to figure out what made trails inaccessible and see what improvements we could make. We studied the literature available at the time and listened to and observed members of a local support group for individuals with visual impairments, as well as a friend who uses a wheelchair, by coaxing them onto the trails. Little has changed in the way we look at trails, but what has changed is this:

*We now know that people need information - accurate, specific, descriptive information to make recreation participation decisions based on their interests and abilities. We learned that we needed to focus on trail edges, incline, cross slope, surface, width and length, and overhead clearance.*

Here are some helpful resources; all of which describe trail characteristics in detail and all give trail users decision-making choices.

### **Universal Trail Assessment Process (UTAP)**

[www.beneficialdesigns.com/trails/utap](http://www.beneficialdesigns.com/trails/utap)

Much like NYS IRRC's Inclusivity Assessment Tool, UTAP is concerned with providing land managers and trail users with accurate and detailed information. UTAP describes trail conditions and features (e.g., boardwalk, picnic table) and then posts the information for potential users to decide for themselves. Stations are established at the beginning and end of each trail or trail segment and then along the trail whenever there is (1) a visual change of about 15 degrees or more in trail direction, (2) 5% or more in grade or cross slope, (3) a significant change in tread width, (4) a change in surface; or when (5) the previous station will be out of sight for more than about 100 feet, or (6) the trail branches or intersects another trail. Measurements are then taken at the station, from one station to the next, at a typical or representative point between stations, at maximum grade and cross slope, and minimum clearance width.

### **Parks & Trails New York (PTNY)**

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

Accessible Parks and Trails Program's mission is to make New York's parks and trails accessible to people with physical limitations. To do this, PTNY decided to create a group of trained volunteers to gather the necessary

information for their Trail Finder Maps. They hosted two-day UTAP Certified Coordinator Trainings from 2006 through 2008 to develop a group with the knowledge, skills, and commitment needed to assess New York's trails. Learn more about this program and the names of the UTAP-trained volunteers, Trainers, and Coordinators on their website.



*NYS DEC's Black Pond Trail*

### **NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)**

[www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov)

Led by Carole Fraser, Statewide Access Coordinator, and by regional access coordinators, DEC accessible facilities provide hiking and other outdoor recreation choices for all visitors. On the DEC website, find the names of the regional access coordinators as well as links to their inclusive facilities. Also link to John Dillon Park ([www.johndillonpark.org](http://www.johndillonpark.org)), a fully accessible wilderness area facility.

### **Access Board**

[www.access-board.gov/outdoor/](http://www.access-board.gov/outdoor/)

Trails are addressed in the Draft Final Accessibility Guidelines for Outdoor Recreation Areas for addition to the Architectural Barriers Act – Americans with Disabilities Act Guidelines. Technical provisions address surface, clear tread width, passing spaces, obstacles, slope, cross slope, resting intervals, gates and barriers, and trail signs. The guidelines suggest that trail signs include: trail or segment length, surface type, typical and minimum tread width, typical and maximum running slope.

Spring brings us new things to see in our woods, and trails will get us there – all of us. Make every effort to make the trails comply with the three resources' guidelines above. Provide descriptive information about the trails so that people with disabilities and their friends and families can make better trail choices. Help the NYS IRRC promote opportunities for people of all abilities to recreate and play wherever they choose! 🦋

For more information and questions about trails, please visit [www.nysirrc.org](http://www.nysirrc.org).