

Access to Public Recreation Facilities and Universal Design¹

R. Brian Kermeen²

Abstract: This paper will establish the need for an integrated management approach that addresses the needs of all customers. The discussion will highlight but not be limited to the needs of persons with disabilities in outdoor recreation activities. Barriers to participation and legal requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws will be discussed. The need for a range of activities and challenges for both programs and developed facilities will be established. "Universal design" is an ideal that enables all users to participate in recreation activities regardless of their ability level. The application of universal design to developed facilities and programs will be explained. The evolving USDA Forest Service Access Program will be used as a reference on how agencies may improve their situation.

Like most areas managed by the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, the central Sierra Nevada has steep and mountainous terrain. Most of our facilities evolved over time or were designed 30 years ago with no consideration for the needs of persons with disabilities. This is also true of the nearby communities. I am frequently asked why we should bother to build special facilities for people with disabilities. "They never come here anyway." I wonder why! It's as if people think we are doing this for somebody who does not exist.

The main thrust of my presentation will relate to the needs of people with disabilities, but there are many aspects of access that go beyond them. The needs of people with mobility impairment, those in wheelchairs, come to mind first when thinking of disabilities. Like the spotted owl, these folks are the "indicator species" of the human race (fig. 1). If their needs are taken care of in our facilities and programs, the needs of many other users are also satisfied better. So that we may establish a common vocabulary here I offer the following definitions:

Access—The means by which an individual acquires information or an experience. Access management can be used to encourage or prevent access depending on our objectives.

Barrier—free access—An ideal that strives to eliminate situations that prevent access. Barriers can be attitudinal, physical, social, or communicative.

Isolated barrierfree access—Segregated facilities or programs that remove the individual from the mainstream of activity. This is what we did in the 1970's.

Integrated barrier-free access—Facilitates participation into the mainstream for all participants through careful consideration of their different physical, mental, and social needs. This is the "one size fits all" approach to serving the people, which we call universal design.

How many of you have an official disability? Who can't read without glasses or contacts? Do you have a hearing aid,

bladder bag, AIDS, epilepsy, or any other medical condition? Are you pregnant? Have you ever been burdened with the care of a dependent? Are you under 5-feet tall? You are vertically impaired! Have you ever broken or sprained a foot, leg, or arm? Were you born? You spent the first several years of your life totally dependent on others, but you probably forgot what it was like. Congratulations ... you are all members of the club! Most of us are lucky enough to be temporarily able-bodied most of our lives. We must remember that we didn't start that way, and we may not finish that way. With improved health care and longer lives, most of us in this room will outlive our ability to get around and about in a normal way (fig. 2).

Universal Design Benefits Everyone

Access for all! If we are not accommodating these folks in our programs and facilities, we are ignoring most of our customers. **Customer satisfaction** has been discussed a lot in recent



Figure 1—Indicators of how well we are doing our jobs.

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²Landscape Architect and Forest Access Coordinator, Stanislaus National Forest, USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus, California.



Figure 2—The three stages of a lifetime.

years. Effective access management is a vital prerequisite for success here. We cannot ignore 57 percent of our customers (fig. 3). **Universal design** is subtle when it is done correctly. Careful planning and good design prevent obtrusive "special" features. Are all of you familiar with the two biggest lies? "I'm from the Government and I'm here to help you," and "One size fits all." When it comes to universal design, these statements are truth, to the extent possible anyway. The "one size fits all" approach to design is quickly being recognized as the norm. The design guide soon to be published presents specific criteria that can be easily applied. Through the access program we will build on this base incorporating access concepts into many other programs.

Expanding to Include Cultural Considerations

Multiculturalism has replaced the melting pot social theories of the past. One way of looking at persons with severe disabilities is that they are members of a distinct culture. People born deaf think differently than the rest of us, for example. Universal design in combination with ROS (recreation opportunity spectrum) gives us a planning tool to incorporate the known needs of first generation emigrants who desire to recreate in larger groups. If our facilities are designed for the able-bodied nuclear family of the Ozzie and Harriet era, then we have a conflict. Once this is known and incorporated into the planning process, we may accommodate the need, enabling use by different cultures without conflict.

Universal design facilitates participation, freedom of choice, and **integration**. Much progress has been made in the use of

information. International signing is helpful to non-English speaking customers. We are beginning to understand and research can help. Our President recently visited Australia and made a mistake. He flashed the "V" symbol to a crowd and they were shocked! In Australia that means something very different ... here we use only one finger! This illustrates the need to more fully understand the cultural context of our symbols, gestures, and words. When we have a relationship with our publics, this naturally occurs. At the field level, it is possible to have a rich and rewarding relationship with the public, not unlike a marriage. This is very different than a "public affair" a one-night stand where familiarity is shallow.

Integrated Administrative Approach

For an agency to most effectively develop an access program there must be collaboration and a holistic focus. In the Forest Service this means a team composed of recreation, civil rights, engineering, and information managers. The fragmented approach can not implement the vision shared here today. We can not ignore our own internal policies while we seek to implement a program for the public. If our own offices and employment policies contain barriers, how can we be effective with our partners and the public? When we advance both employment and public issues simultaneously, there is **synergy**. The President supported the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Chief of the Forest Service wants the agency to be the employer of choice for persons with disabilities. When you consider that we lag far behind the private sector, this is a worthwhile goal. When it is understood that more money is spent on welfare for unemployed persons with disabilities than is spent on the National Defense, it makes both good economic and moral sense. Joe Meade in the Washington office chairs a committee that is structured in this way. Joe is also the national access coordinator.

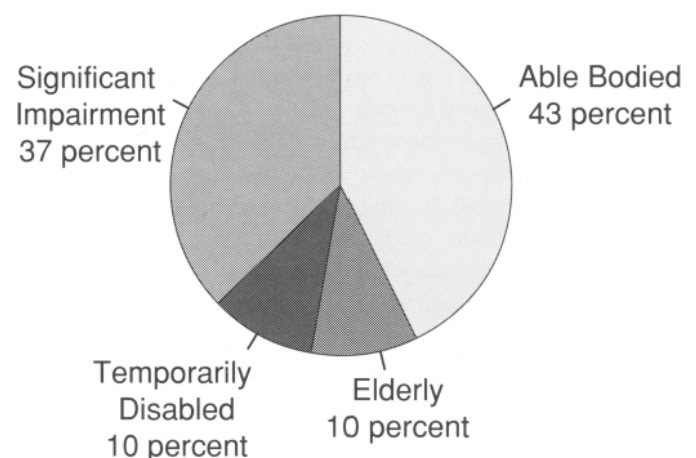


Figure 3—Segments of U.S. population benefiting from accessible programs, services and facilities.

The Access Program

The Access Program evolved out of the Chief's "Recreation Strategy" initiative of the late 1980's. It has been incorporated into the President's AGO (America's Great Outdoors) program as a major theme for the 1990's. This program will provide funding to improve existing facilities and build new facilities consistent with the universal design approach that you will hear about in this session. In addition to facilities, interpretive programs will be designed to work for everyone. Diverse recreation opportunities will be managed in such a way that they are accessible to new segments of the public. New tools are going to change the way information is communicated. The Access Program will act as a catalyst to bring about a new awareness and excellence in both public service and recreation management.

The Law

Just in case I have not yet convinced you that we must use universal design because it's the right thing to do ... by the way, it's the law. We have no choice. For 24 years we have had laws directing us to make our facilities accessible, but progress has been slow. This is especially true in the outdoor environment since regulations have focused on urban situations. The ADA

extends the law to all privately owned public facilities. The design guide will for the first time spell out what must be done **and how** to do it in outdoor recreation settings. These are exciting times!

Conclusions

I believe this approach has depth—three dimensions.

Development and planning with the needs of all customers in mind.

Design using universal concepts.

Delivery of desired recreation experiences enabling freedom of choice.

This "3-D" approach results in dignity and satisfaction for the recreationist. Is that not the best we can do?

Winston Churchill said "First we shape our houses and then they shape us." I will broaden this concept. We shape our programs and facilities, and they in turn define our life experiences. These experiences collectively define American mass culture. Are freedom of choice, dignity, and the ideals of integration to be fulfilled? If so, then each of us has a role to play. Remember, we are all members of the disabled community. Either we manage access or it manages us!