

# Improving Access to America's Great Outdoors Through Partnerships and Volunteers: A Call for Involvement<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Significant improvements can be achieved with a minimal amount of funding. The holistic approach used by the Los Padres National Forest to improve the opportunities of persons with disabilities is described. Participation by management and employees in a diverse program of attitudinal training, employment practices, public service, and construction projects has been very effective. The enthusiasm generated by "internal" partnerships has made it easier to find "external" partners to help accomplish projects. Support is available in the form of grants and volunteers to assist public agencies that may not have the budget to make desired changes. Examples from various parts of the country will demonstrate that once there is a will, there is a way to get the job done.

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America's Great Outdoors, Americans with Disabilities Act, Universal Design, Partnerships, Accessible Recreation and many other labels have been heard frequently by managers, all in an attempt to focus attention on how we provide recreation experiences in today's urban and nonurban settings. Now that I have gotten most of those labels out of the way let me say that what I share with you is not unique to access programs, but could apply to any or all aspects of how we do business.

What I value most from my experiences on the Los Padres National Forest is the relationships that have been established. I will share how an access program is evolving on Los Padres, some information on partnerships, the importance of communications, and pass on my thoughts on what remains to be accomplished.

## Los Padres' "A" Team

The formation of a new Access Team, soon to be called "The 'A' Team," began in early 1990. We began with lots of questions. Why had similar groups failed? What makes groups work? What is it that we are being asked to accomplish? With answers to these there was then the "how to" questions to follow. We began the search by approaching employees that had participated in volunteer employee programs in the past but had dropped out after only short periods of time. The bottom line is that participants had entered these programs with expectations, both for themselves and for the program, that were not being met. What if we could learn about these expectations and promise that they could be met? The courtship began with all employees that had expressed even the slightest interest in addressing the issue of accessibility. We began a conversation to become organized with only one topic on our agenda, how can we help you get what you want? Our first get together was with eight people, representing all Districts of the Forest. Currently, about 20-24

people regularly participate, and others drop in when a particular topic meets their needs. Most of the team are looking for ways to enhance their careers, gain satisfaction from their accomplishments, and make a difference in the forest environment. The "A" Team can do all of this together.

The vision of the group was the next step. In short this vision is that Los Padres is accessible to all, and people set their own limitations. Accessible to all includes everything, employment as well as facilities. The program of work is an easy step after identifying a vision; find the most effective ways to make that vision a reality. The outcry from the group was that we can't do it alone, we need the whole forest and the help of many others. One additional challenge was placed in front of each team member. We are all expected to be active in reaching accomplishments and must bring something to the party. No one turned down this request.

The process of establishing a relationship with management, representing the entire Forest, began the same way, how can we help you. From a list of possibilities, we helped management identify real opportunities that support our vision. Now it was time to enroll management in the vision and the same vision was adopted as part of the culture statement for the Forest. The communication with management has continued ever since; it is their program and any accomplishments are theirs. The idea of not being separate from the forest program is important if any real changes are to be made. Access must be the way of doing business not a special program or temporary emphasis. With management seeing an opportunity by adopting a program of work that includes access and by making it their program the "A" Team was better able to focus on being advocates and influence an established forest program rather than being advocates for incorporation of access.

Enthusiasm mushroomed as visibility increased and management began to consult with members of the team. A report of activities from each District of the Forest took about 5 minutes when we started and now takes about 2 hours to complete. Not only are people more aware of the concerns of the disabled, but ideas started to come out of the woodwork on what and how to make Los Padres accessible. Many of these ideas led us to realize that we were still playing too small and needed the support of an even larger group. Enter our first steps outside into the community. Guess what, the same thing works. How can we help you? A conversation that once again begins with relationships being established, followed by identification of possibilities, zeroing in on opportunities, got us rolling. All of this takes place prior to making any requests.

With the enthusiastic support of new players we were in better touch with the disabled community and equipped as a forest to take on projects that were out of reach earlier. The

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construction of a new interpretative trail, the development of fishing facilities, and a comprehensive look at how to improve existing facilities, in our developed recreation sites would not have been possible without the thousands of hours of donated efforts. We have also noticed, or maybe only been more aware, of the number of forest recreationists with disabilities. The project work and the relationships formed in accomplishing them has brought about the satisfaction many of the team members seek.

The team of forest employees and all the wonderful people and relationships that have been formed is still evolving, at times it appears that we are more disorganized than organized, but we are producing results, and all of us are enjoying playing the same job together. I declare that success.

## Partners, Friends, Volunteers, Relationships That Work

If the idea of partners, volunteers, etc., is how to get a specific task accomplished or for donations of some kind, you may find it works once. Success in partnerships is based on relatedness with people. Ever wonder why it is so easy for a parent to grant a request to their children? A relationship must exist. A system that works is to establish friendships, making the friendship the most valuable reason for the partnership. This is time well spent, and we seem to forget about it so often. As communication develops around this friendship, possibilities, opportunities, common interests and yes, common goals surface that might lead to helping each other out on one or more projects. The partnership will not last if relationships have not been established and both parties don't see an opportunity out of the project.

Once a partnership is established there are no assigned roles, it is no longer an agency and other people, it is just people doing a job that needs to be done. One of the biggest adjustments to make is that we will find ourselves working on common projects that were not part of our (agency) original thinking. We may find ourselves working on a project for a city agency or a neighborhood or even on our own Forest because it fits as part of a common vision and helps to maintain a valuable relationship. The leaders for projects like this may come as volunteers or as volunteers from within the agency.

Payoffs for these partnerships are great. Understanding increases with participation, imagination finds solutions to problems that seemed too difficult to deal with earlier, coordination comes from devotion, and satisfaction develops mutually. Partnership creates an ever expanding pool of resources, the most valuable of which is the partnership itself. Your partners have

such ownership in what they are creating that they spread the word much more effectively than we ever could.

Sometimes we do remember the need to find the payoff for our partners but often forget to even notice the payoff for ourselves. I am not talking about a new facility or the accomplishment of some goal on the job, but rather what we get as individuals for our participation. A payoff I get every time I see a facility I helped establish being used by recreationists is a great feeling of warmth and giving to know I was part of making it happen. What does the development of partnerships have to do with employees? Look towards morale, the eagerness to go to work each day, and the overall work environment. What a difference it is going to work with partners rather than employees.

## Conversation

As I began to gather my thoughts for what to share about partnerships and the team spirit that exists on Los Padres I noticed how similar the process is to successful conversation—seven parts that lead to success. Each of these parts require completion prior to moving on to the next one. First, establish a *relationship*. Don't proceed without relationship. Second, explore within this relationship the *possibilities* that might be developed together. This may come from questions and informal discussions as you get to know your potential partner. At some point in this discussion one or more of the possibilities will appear as mutual interests with the commitment to become *opportunities*, the third part of conversation. When opportunities have been agreed upon we can begin to make *requests*. This fourth step is where we often want to start, and is actually closer to the end of the process than a place to start. We might make requests for anything that fits within the scope of the opportunities we mutually agree upon. The request can be canceled anytime from here on. Questions and answers could appear at anytime in the conversation.

After a request has been made the *promise* follows, the fifth step. Other options include declining the request, or committing to commit later, or a counteroffer. When a promise is made there is agreement and the sixth step of a conversation appears, *conditions of satisfaction*. These are the nuts and bolts of who does what and by when that often go into action plans. As the conditions are completed, a conversation has one final step, *declaration of completion*. This step, often left out, is important because it allows a new conversation or opportunity to begin.

As managers for all people we need to develop further information about the things that recreationists find interesting, interesting enough to have all people become partners in providing recreation for everyone. Just as importantly, we must identify what captures the imagination of our employees and make that our way of doing business.