

Disabled People Want Wilderness, Too

Going It Together



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BOB AND DENNIS are white-water enthusiasts from way back. They often run the Stanislaus River in California's Sierra Nevada. Bob is physically disabled; his friend Dennis is blind but otherwise able-bodied. So Dennis does the rowing and Bob sits behind and gives directions, and when they go down the river together, it looks like a ballet.

Such scenes are becoming more common these days. Until recently, park agencies geared their programs and trails to the "typical" visitor, who invariably had full use of physical and mental faculties. As a result, quite a few people—the disabled—were left out.

William J. Whalen, director of the National Park Service, explains: "The traditional role of the National Park Service has been to stand at the park gate and welcome visitors. Since a lot of people came, we were not overly concerned about those who didn't. Today, we are becoming acutely aware of those who don't come—or who can't. Among them are the economically, the socially and the physically disadvantaged."

Since Whalen wrote that in 1978, more and more agencies—federal, state and local—are at work providing opportunities for the disabled, who desire out-

door experiences just as much and perhaps more than the physically fit. And various private organizations are helping the disabled benefit from this new sensitivity.

The Sierra Club's Inner City Outings (ICO) program, for example, sponsors trips for disadvantaged people—mostly urban youths, although ICO works with many special-needs groups. The program has arranged trips for both blind and deaf hikers, and is developing more such outings.

ICO often works with Environmental Traveling Companions (ETC) of San Francisco, which sponsors backpacking and skiing trips and a lot of river rafting with the disabled. Why the emphasis on rafting? Because, ETC's Rick Reynolds explains, it's a good way for people with physical disabilities to get into the wilderness with maximum independence.

River trips, though, do take special planning. Deaf rafters, for example, need both a guide and an interpreter. The paddle guide sits in the back of the raft and the interpreter in front. The guide gives directions to the interpreter, who in turn relays them to the deaf paddlers.

"We do our trips a little differently than a lot of other groups," Reynolds said. "We really involve everyone. It's not us taking them on a trip, we all do it together; otherwise, why go? They help

plan the trip, and once we're there, they do a lot of the work. It's designed to help some of them eventually travel independently."

The Stanislaus is a favorite river with the disabled. It's within a few hours' drive of millions in north central California, it's not overly dangerous or difficult, and it has convenient overnight campgrounds.

Many disabled persons are involved in the fight to preserve a stretch of the Stanislaus as a white-water river. A dam has been built, but so far its reservoir has not been allowed to fill completely. Need for the water has not been proven. No other river in that region is as accessible. The Stanislaus affords one of the few ways disabled people can be totally away from civilization without using paved pathways or other adaptive measures.

Groups throughout the nation sponsor programs similar to those of ETC. Bedford, New Hampshire, for example, has Camp Allen. Its activities include camping, nature walks, swamp walks, pond study, swimming and many more. About 75 disabled people of all ages attend Camp Allen at a time, about half of them in wheelchairs.

And in Minnesota, the Outward Bound School sponsors courses for the disabled. There the main mode of travel is canoeing. The school establishes a home base

