DISABLED PEOPLE WANT WILDERNESS, TOO

GOING IT TOGETHER

KERRY A. DRAGER

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 can't, 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 outdoor 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, swim 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

24 MAY/JUNE 1980
and nearby, offers rock climbing, white-water canoeing and a rope course. Other activities are camping, hiking, backpacking, map and compass work and swimming.

And do disabled participants enjoy the course?

"The Outward Bound course is not always enjoyable," says Susan Kaplan, coordinator for disabled persons. "It can be hard, but I think they have a sense of accomplishment after it's completed that isn't readily available in everyday life. And the course gives the disabled a chance to learn that they can be outdoors on their own, doing what some have said they couldn't do."

At Outward Bound, disabled students are not segregated from the others. Groups of eight—four ablebodied and four disabled—participate together. The reason, according to an Outward Bound policy statement, is:

"We believe that when the ablebodied and the physically disabled share in stress and adversity, three things happen. First, it becomes clear that every person has a disability—it's just that some are more obvious than others. Second, it demonstrates that a disability is frequently not as limiting as a person assumes it is. And third, both the ablebodied and the disabled recognize that they have more in common with each other when emphasis is placed on abilities rather than disabilities. The question, then, is not whether you can or cannot do it, but whether you are willing to try."

Another group, Berkeley Outreach Recreation Program, Inc. (BORP), originated because few of that city's programs were available to disabled people. BORP is designed to offer innovative kinds of recreation programs. For many years, recreation for the disabled meant only crafts, which participants came to loathe. So BORP concentrates on active events.

On BORP ski trips, one woman uses a walker with skis attached. She can ski and steer it and, according to one BORP member, gets up quite a lot of steam going downhill.

More common—for amputees or people with partial paralysis—are "outriggers," also known as Canadian crutches. With short skis attached, they provide support and can be steered. Another device, the "pulk," similar to a toboggan, has been developed for paraplegics. For blind skiers, a guide is necessary. A sighted person skis behind and gives directions and warnings of bumps, trees and other skiers.

BORP participants include their friends on outings, so not all people on the trips are disabled, a situation that's encouraged. Desegregation of this sort is a goal of many parks, because most disabled visitors neither need nor want exclusive trails.

Hiking trails designated for the disabled frequently are paved for 100 to 200 yards around, and are essentially foolproof. But, as Rick Reynolds says, who wants to walk a hundred yards and look at a few signs? Most people want, within the limits of their capabilities, to take some chances. They don't want to be catered to. They don't want to be segregated on special trails—that's patronizing, and most disabled hikers wouldn't be caught participating in such an affair. Yet solutions are not really hard to come by.

Nelson W. Chadwick, a Maryland Park Service naturalist, recommends providing trails that can be used by the handicapped without special arrangements. The qualification here is subtle. Because disabled park visitors do not want to be confined to special paths, some trails should be designed to eliminate barriers to those with specific handicaps, remain open to general use.

For example, Nimtiz Way, a paved, four-mile stretch of a former military road now part of the Skyline National Recreation Trails across the bay from San Francisco, is often used by disabled people. A park-district resource analyst termed it a multi-use trail, adapted by replacing half the pavement with gravel as a surface for horses and hikers. The solid half is for bicycles and the disabled. But
it was not specifically designated a trail for the disabled.

Albuquerque, New Mexico, has Paseo del Bosque (Pass in the Forest) Bicycle Trail, also a national recreation trail. The five-mile path—for foot, bicycle and wheelchair traffic—follows an irrigation channel along the east side of the Rio Grande. Separated from the river by forest, the trail passes several parks near the downtown area, but it also meanders into the more rural North Valley. The area supports many birds and small mammals, even occasional roadrunners, and, because the trail is accessible at only a few points, it seems isolated and far from the urban center.

In Ohio, the Cleveland Metroparks District sponsors "trails for all people, regardless of ability or disability." Paths there can accommodate children, mothers with strollers, senior citizens, people in wheelchairs or on crutches, the visually impaired and those with hearing disabilities. One path, the Rocky River Woodland Trail, follows the river through an area rich in plant and animal life and in geologic history. Near the trail's interpretive center is a cliff of Devonian shale, once deposited as mud in the bottom of a great sea where armored fish and sharks swam more than 300 million years ago.

Jacquie Beechel, who wrote "Interpretation for Handicapped Persons" for the National Park Service’s Northwest Region, reports that trails already prepared for wheelchairs are relatively few. There are, however, many more trails that would be usable by the disabled with minimum alteration.

Some trails, for example, are wide and flat, and even long enough, but their length requires accessible water and restrooms.

Another problem with long trails is financial: surfacing suitable for wheelchairs is not within the limits of most park budgets. However, portions of long trails can be designed for use by the disabled, a strategy that was used in construction of the Tollantusky Trail. Named for a distinguished chief of the Arkansas Cherokee Indians, it follows the Arkansas River in Caddo Settlement Park, about five miles west of Conway.

According to Doug Shields of Inner City Outings, the trails of many state park systems can already be used by the disabled; the state trails tend to be wide enough—a lot of people tramp them—and they are usually well maintained. A person in a wheelchair can easily follow quite a number of them.

Many such park-system trails are
within an hour's drive of California's Berkeley-Oakland area, only a few of them built specifically for the disabled. They're mostly level and they're in scenic regions where any hiker would like to travel. Minor modifications have been made, of course, where necessary—tree roots and other small barriers removed, and sections evened out. Once these small changes are made, it's just a question of identifying and publicizing the routes.

A group calling itself Sequoia Challenge has created an unusual trail suitable for the disabled by converting an old mining ditch in the Sierra Nevada foothills. The ditch, which carried water to hydraulic mines in the 1800s, is now a hard-packed dirt trail a little more than a mile long. It was designed primarily by naturalist John Olmsted.

For the visually impaired, trails present problems not encountered by those in wheelchairs. Braille signs and recorded-message stations have often been vandalized and guide ropes relocated, but such highly adapted trails are often neither needed nor wanted in any case. The trails enjoyed most by visually impaired people are those left in as natural a state as possible; if a trail is interesting to all the senses of a sighted person, it will be interesting to the blind.

The outdoors is not, after all, only visually stimulating. A blind person, too, feels the slopes of the terrain and takes in the sounds, the heat and the smells. However, people with impaired vision may find unchallenging the flat trails where wheelchairs are most easily maneuvered.

The answer is to provide trails that vary in type and magnitude of difficulty. One sort would be level with a fairly smooth surface to accommodate wheelchairs—this would also suit some people with temporary disabilities, some senior citizens, the mentally retarded, visitors with small children and anyone desiring an "easy" trail. Another sort of trail would cross varying terrain, minimally altered to eliminate obvious hazards.

Nina Bunin, a planner for the Lake Central Region of the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (formerly known as the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation), says: "The HCRS is the banker for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which provides matching funds for almost all the outdoor recreation facilities in the country. So we're in a position to influence what gets built and how. Another influence now is the '504' regulations being completed by the Department of the Interior, which are like a Bill of Rights for handicapped people." (Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination as evidenced by a lack of equal programs.)

"What we want to do," says Bunin, "is to make clear to the park and recreation directors all over the country—the recipients of our money—that designing a facility so it will be accessible is as easy and cheap as designing it inaccessible. All you have to do is to be aware ... and to draw the line this way instead of that way. And, for the most part, it's not going to cost anything extra."

This new direction in park planning does not mean plans are afoot to pave the Pacific Crest or Appalachian trails. When trails of varying difficulty are available, hikers, disabled or not, will choose those best suited to their own requirements. But, whether hiking, skiing or rafting, the disabled do want the chance to know nature, too.

—Kerry A. Drager is a writer and photographer specializing in outdoor recreation.

More Information on Resources for the Disabled

Here are a few sources of information on trails and programs for the disabled:

- Other public agencies: Local and state parks and recreation departments have programs suitable for the disabled. Also, U.S. Forest Service offices can give information about trails in national forests.
- Private organizations: Many local chapters of "traditional" organizations, such as the Muscular Dystrophy Association and the Easter Seal Society, sponsor outdoor programs. Various wilderness outings groups also have programs for the disabled. Even the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts can accommodate disabled young men and women.
- The American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities is a nationwide "umbrella" association of 86 national, state and local groups of disabled people. ACCD was set up to help safeguard the civil and human rights of Americans with disabilities. For information on activities in your area, write the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, 1200 15th St. NW, Suite 201, Washington, D.C. 20005.