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PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE FINDING THAT OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES ARE MORE AND MORE ACCESSIBLE—BUT IT'S A SLOW PROCESS.

BY MARCUS WOOLF

THE YOUNG AGE OF 21, CANDACE CABLE LAY IN A HOSpital bed thinking that her life was over. She looked up at doctors as they told her that a car crash had severed her spinal cord, and she would never walk again.

"My first thought was I will never feel the grass underneath my feet again," said Cable. At the time of the accident she was living near Lake Tahoe and loved hiking in the Sierra. "The accident was so devastating because I couldn't go back to what I knew, and I didn't know how to approach what was ahead of me."

Little did she know that what lay ahead was not a life of disappointment, but one of thrilling victories. After earning a degree in physical education, she worked with disabled athletes and discovered her own competitive spirit. She would go on to be a competitive swimmer, an Olympic wheelchair racer and a member of the U.S. Disabled Ski Team. Now 50 years old, Cable has spent the last 10 years competing with the U.S. Disabled Cross Country Ski Team.

Cable represents the growing population of people with disabilities who are turning to outdoor sports and recreation to live healthy and whole lives. While traditional sports such as basketball have long been available for people with disabilities, activities like hiking, kayaking and snowsports have also now emerged as viable options.

The country is experiencing a sort of cultural shift, said Mark Andrews of Outdoor Independence Training Centers, a non-profit group that promotes access to adaptive outdoor recreation. "In the past, rehab tended to focus more on traditional recreation activities. But I see people getting most excited about outdoor activities," he said.

A growing number of organizations have emerged to link the disabled community to the outdoors, while agencies such as the USDA Forest Service and National Park Service are making public lands accessible. Also, inventive companies continue to develop adaptive gear, which plays an important role in enabling disabled people to enjoy the outdoors.

Despite these advancements, the movement toward accessibility remains a slow and steady push. To understand just how slowly the wheels turn, consider the government's efforts to create accessibility rules for the likes of trails and picnic areas in parks and forests.

RULES AND REGULATIONS

For 37 years there have been laws on the books concerning access for the disabled. In 1968, the government passed the Architectural Barriers Act, which requires that facilities designed, built, altered or leased with federal funds be accessible to people with disabilities. The American Disabilities Act of 1990 established access laws for state and local government facilities, as well as public accommodations and commercial facilities. In addition, there is a federal agency called the Access Board that establishes minimum guidelines for access. However, in all of the rulemaking over the years, there have been no laws passed governing accessibility for campgrounds, picnic areas and trails.

Realizing there were no laws on the books, the USDA Forest Service created its own guidelines and took these to the Access Board in the early 1990s, said Janet

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Zeller, the national accessibility program manager for the USDA Forest Service. But Zeller said the Access Board did not accept the guidelines, and it had a difficult time making uniform rules that could apply to the wide variety of parks and forests across the country. After all, nature is not uniform, and neither were people's notions of how they should adapt areas for the disabled. There was a false perception that making the outdoors accessible meant paving it. Even those who did not share this perception disagreed on just how to go about adjusting natural areas.

To address the problem, the Access Board created a committee to determine minimum guidelines. But committee meetings were contentious, said Peggy Greenwell, an accessibility specialist with the Access Board. A major sticking point concerned the formation of accessible trails. "Previously, people thought a certain percentage of trails in any area should be accessible. And we moved away from that approach," said Greenwell. "Some said only certain types of trails should be accessible, like front-country trails, and we moved away from that." Finally, the committee members settled their differences and submitted their finished report in 1999. However, the guidelines for federal areas may not become law until some time in 2005. After this is done, lawmaking will proceed for state areas, local governments and private operators.

"It has been a very long and difficult rule-making process," said Greenwell. "A step that has caused delay is cost analysis." The White House Office of Management and Budget must approve the costs. But Greenwell said, "It's hard to determine what a trail will cost. It's different in Maryland than in California." According to Zeller, the cost of building a mile of accessible trail ranges from $6,000 to $46,000, depending on terrain and trail surface.

In the absence of national laws, the USDA Forest Service has once again created its own guidelines, which are now going though a rule-making process. That may seem redundant, but you have to admire the organization's doggedness.

In addition, the USDA Forest Service and the National Park Service (NPS) have made accessibility an integral part of their regular maintenance. Zeller said that in 2004, National Forests invested $85 million that resulted in improving accessibility to 946 recreation facilities. Dave Park, accessibility program manager for the NPS, said, "When we spend money on rehabilitating a scenic overlook, we build accessibility needs into the project, rather than making access a special project."

The National Park Service has the chal-

learning to FLY

SKIING HELPED THIS FORMER BUSH PILOT RECOVER FROM A DISABLING CRASH.

FLYING IN SUMMER TWILIGHT OVER THE ALASKAN PENINSULA, BILL CRIPE'S Super Cub went into a stall spin while attempting to land, plunging toward the forest below. Upon impact, a pile of gear in the rear of the plane flew forward, pinning the bush pilot in his seat. Unable to move, Cripe would have to wait five days before the National Guard in a helicopter spied the green plane camouflaged by the remote forest.

But, by that time a blood clot had formed, injuring his spinal cord. Also, Cripe had to have four vertebrae below his neck fused, and leaking gas damaged nerves in his arms and hands. "The doctors thought it was a complete spinal injury," said Cripe. "They thought I would never use my arms again." The accident occurred in 1991, when Cripe was just 21.

Two months after he was rescued, his arms returned to life, and doctors determined that he had a C-7 incomplete spinal cord injury. Still, he was unable to walk, and the accident dealt a harsh blow to the Montana native who loved the outdoors, camping and fishing in the backwoods since he was a boy. "Everything I did was outdoors until I got hurt," Cripe said. "I didn't have any idea what I was going to do with my life."

But a year after the crash, Cripe began skiing with the Alternate Mobility Adventure Seekers in Boise, Idaho. Now, at the age of 34, he not only skis, but also bikes and camps when he's not busy managing a business jet company in Southern California.

He is a great example of the new generation of people who refuse to let disabilities sever their ties to the outdoors.

Though Cripe started in a toboggan-style sit-ski, he quickly switched to a bi-ski when he joined a program called Recreation Unlimited. Eventually mono-skiing became his greatest passion, because it really lets him fly down the mountain. Mono-skiing also proved to be more convenient.

"Bi-skiing requires you to ski with a couple of your friends. It's pretty hard for them to ski with you because you have to be lifted onto a chair lift. The mono-ski is more independent because I can get on the chairlift easier by myself. It allows you to do more things, and it's heavy duty, with a shock, so it won't break as easily," he said.

Cripe's current ski rig is a New Hall's MT-Extreme, which he has modified to reduce weight and reinforce the structure. His outriggers (forearm crutches with ski tips attached) are the Super-light model made by Enabling Technologies. Cripe said he has spent about $3,000 on the ski suspension, bucket seat and outriggers. As for the main ski, his favorite right now is the K2 Public Enemy.

Cripe said that setting up the equipment wasn't easy, but the actual skiing proved to be a challenge in itself. "It takes a lot of strength to mono ski," he said. "You have to hold yourself up, it takes a lot of balance, and you have to push yourself in line." But he was driven to develop his strength and balance because he knew skiing would provide him the access to the outdoors that he craved.

Over time, he discovered that skiing provided much more than an entryway to nature. He regained his confidence and a greater sense of independence, which helped him adjust to all aspects of his new life. "Because you could do all kinds of things outdoors, you realized you could do all kinds of stuff indoors as well. I guess you could say the outdoors saved me."

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lenge that much of its infrastructure was created before the 1968 Architectural Barriers Act. "We have a lot of infrastructure we need to retrofit," said Park. As for trails, he pointed out, "We have accessible trails throughout the park system, and have had them going back 20 years ago. They just didn't meet any nationally adopted definition of what an accessible trail is. The major land management agencies are well into programs to make facilities as accessible as we think we can."

However, many state park mangers feel hamstrung due to the lack of national guidelines. "We've been working diligently the last three years on what will be a 14-year transition process," said Linda Canar, program manager for accessibility for California State Parks. "Not many states have come very far, partially because there is a lack of guidance and codes for them to utilize."

Zeller said that states are so anxious for guidelines that the Federal Highway Administration has given the USDA Forest Service funds to write an accessibility guidebook for outdoor recreation and trails, which should be published in 2005.

Agencies do realize that a growing number of disabled people are seeking outdoor recreation. "There is a significant increase in visitation by people with disabilities," said Park. Consequently, the mindset of those who manage forests and parks has changed dramatically. "People would say years ago, 'Why should I make my park accessible? I have never seen a person with a disability here.' That's not the case anymore," Park said.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Fortunately for the disabled community, access to mountains, lakes and trails does not wholly rest on the glacial rule-making process in Washington, D.C. Rather, it depends largely on the work of an eclectic mix of organizations and individuals.

The National Sports Center for the Disabled in Colorado is a non-profit organization that introduces disabled people to 20 different sports, from skiing to kayaking. Last year it taught 17,000 lessons to almost 3,000 people. With an operating budget of $3 million, NSCD employs 55 people during the peak winter season. Beth Fox, operations manager, said the non-profit keeps track of sports trends, and adopts activities that are exciting, and have rehabilitative value. "We look where there's a void," she said. "When we saw there was a void in paddlesports, we added it to our program. We started canoe camping in the summer of 2003, and have added kayaking."

Based in Minneapolis, Minn., Wilderness Inquiry is one of the larger providers of outdoor excursions for the disabled. In 2004 it hosted overnight outings for about 1,200 people and led day trips for about 10,000. Michael Miller, outreach associate for Wilderness Inquiry, said the non-profit's Boundary Waters trips are among the most popular.

Trips cost about $100 per person per day and they are open to people of all abilities. "Our strategy is to make the trips integrated," Miller said, noting that people with disabilities often want to travel with able-bodied folks. On any given Wilderness Inquiry outing, people with disabilities will comprise about 40 percent of the group. Like other types of therapy, outdoor recreation serves as a means to help disabled people integrate themselves into society. But outdoor recreation has special advantages. "The wilderness is a great leveler," said Miller. "A key to (an outdoor trip) is the cooperative nature. People are working together for common goals—to get the fire set up, the dinner cooked or to get across the lake."

within reach

ERIK WEIHENMAYER SAYS CLIMBING'S NOT OUT-OF-REACH FOR THE DISABLED.

IN 2001, WHEN ERIK WEIHENMAYER BECAME THE FIRST AND only blind person to reach the summit of Mount Everest, he garnered widespread media coverage, from Time Magazine to Good Morning America. This was perhaps the most widely publicized account ever of a disabled person participating in an activity core to the outdoor industry.

But this winter, Weihenmayer may have done something even more laudable in his efforts to inspire the blind. In October, he led six visually impaired Tibetan teenagers in an attempt to climb 23,000-foot Lhakpa Ri. While media coverage of the climb was helpful, the most important moment of the expedition occurred long before the New York Times published its account. It happened at Advanced Base Camp, when Weihenmayer wrapped an arm around 19-year-old Tashi, who was sick and throwing up.

"I am weak—not strong like you," Tashi said.

"You've made it to 21,000 feet, a place few of your peers will ever go," Weihenmayer replied. "You're not weak. You're stronger than you know and only getting stronger." Describing this scene in a message on his website, Weihenmayer added, "Somehow, maybe because of the way he leaned his head on my shoulder, I felt he believed me."

Weihenmayer said he hopes he can find more opportunities to help disabled people believe in their own strength. GearTrends® caught up with him as he was preparing to leave to climb in the Andes, and we asked whether he thinks climbing is really becoming more accessible to the disabled in the United States. "Oh yeah, there are a lot of opportunities," he said, noting that organizations such as Challenge Aspen and the Colorado Center for the Blind teach the disabled to climb.

He mentioned the efforts of Mark Wellman, the disabled world-class climber who has created adaptive climbing gear, such as ascenders and a climbing harness for paraplegics and quadriplegics.

Rock gyms have really made climbing more accessible, Weihenmayer noted. "A blind person just has to have the courage to show up. The gym doesn't have to have a formal program. It just takes a nice person there who is willing to help."

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Willie Benegas, finding balance in his Mountain Guide Jacket.
Nuptse, Nepal. Photo: Damian Benegas.

Thanks to Wilderness Inquiry, people with physical or mental challenges have more opportunities to explore nature than ever before. "We're offering more international trips on a regular basis," Miller said. "We go to Kruger National Park in South Africa; Hawaii has been popular, and we just got back from New Zealand."

Miller has seen a steady increase in the number of organizations offering trips for the disabled. "There are plenty of opportunities for folks," he said. "What's been lacking is the marketing and letting people know these things are available."

A lack of information remains a major obstacle to access. For example, if a person goes through rehab at a clinic that does not partner with an outdoor program, he or she might not even realize that outdoor activities are an option. Further, it's difficult to find good information on accessible trails and facilities in parks and forests. A rule passed in 2000 requires federal agencies to use electronic media, such as websites, to inform the public. Still, if you surf the websites for various National Parks you'll see glaring inconsistencies.

It seems that information is spread most effectively at the local level. To its credit, the American Canoe Association (ACA) has stepped up efforts to help outdoor programs provide adaptive paddling programs for their local communities.

WATER WORKS

If you saw her sitting in her kayak, you could hardly guess that Janet Zeller is a quadriplegic. "When I'm paddling I look like a paddler who has very good posture," she said with a bright voice. Paddling appeals to her because those moments in her boat allow her to appear like everyone else on the water. That feeling of fitting in, combined with freedom of movement, makes boating especially appealing to people with limited mobility.

Zeller now works with the ACA to share that feeling with others. In 1990, she developed the non-profit's Adaptive Paddling Program and conducts workshops to help organizations establish their own outings and instruction.

The Adaptive Paddling Program has had a great effect on the Rutabaga paddle shop in Madison, Wis. Nancy Saulsbury, Rutabaga's director of outdoor programs, said that after employees participated in the ACA instruction, the store helped the University of Wisconsin conduct an adaptive fitness and personal training course. The school brought in disabled adults from the community, and then Rutabaga helped students provide instruction in adapting paddling.

Saulsbury said the store has a core of five to six staff members who support Rutabaga's ongoing effort to integrate disabled people into the paddling community.

Bill Corson, owner of Northwest Kayaks in Redmond, Wash., has for years utilized an outings program to reach disadvantaged kids in the Seattle area. Now he's turning his attention to another group in need. Last year, his company launched a program to take people with disabilities on day kayaking trips, and his employees help kids kayak in swimming pools during the school day. This year, he actually changed the company's mission statement so that a primary goal is to serve the disabled.

This winter the employees of Northwest Kayaks have locked themselves in the shop, working diligently to manufacture a kayak seat and other accessories for adaptive paddling. The seat will fit into a variety of boats and conform to any body size, said Corson. It has wing attachments that stabilize a person laterally, plus an inflatable system to

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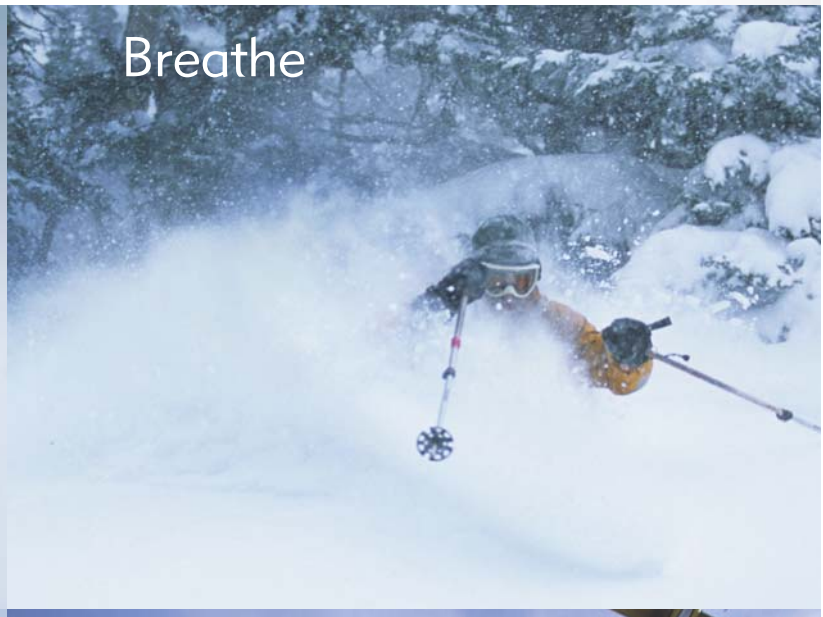

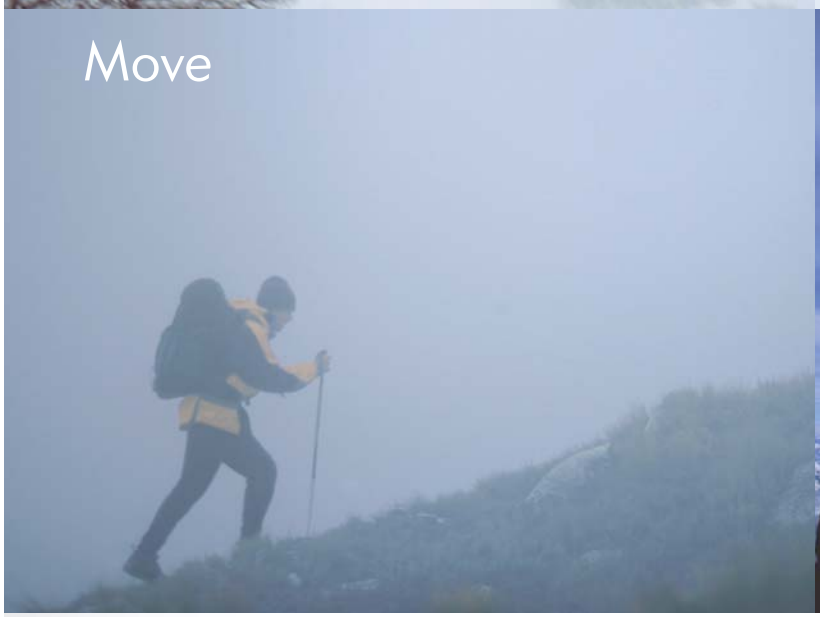

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"There are 54 million Americans in the U.S. with disabilities who have $170 billion in discretionary income."

move the body forward and backward. "With thermal formers we can manufacture all kinds of things to help make paddling more accessible," said Corson.

Candace Cable can't emphasize enough the importance that gear plays in promoting participation in outdoor activities—especially cross-country skiing. She said the current sit-skis limit maneuverability. "The equipment needs to evolve into an articulating ski that allows you to create an edge. It's a hard sport, and that would make it easier and safer, and more people would want to participate," she said. Unfortunately, major manufacturers remain reluctant to serve the relatively small community that requires adaptive gear.

Northwest Kayaks is an exception, and most other adaptive gear is hammered out in garages by gear heads. But Cable said the outdoor industry should open its eyes. "Adaptive equipment allows us to access the outdoors in ways we never have before, and that turns us into consumers," she said. "There are 54 million Americans in the U.S. with disabilities who have $170 billion in discretionary income. One in five families in the U.S. has a disabled person in their family. So this is a huge consumer base that has never been (fully) tapped."

Despite the fact that participation in adaptive skiing has grown steadily, sit-skis are still produced by a dozen or so small companies that sell so few units that they must charge $2,000 to $3,000 for a single ski rig. Andy and Lynn Tirums opened Freedom Factory in 1990 after they designed a sit-ski for a friend's daughter. They sell about 80 units a year, making their work as much a labor of love as anything. "We're the only two employees, so it pays the bills," said Andy. In a five-car garage, the two assemble parts that are welded and powder-coated by other local shops. To acquire the actual skis, they buy from retail shops because K2 is the only manufacturer that will deal with them directly, and Andy said, "We get as good a deal at retail as we'd get from K2." Be-

WENDY GEISTER PHOTOGRAPHY

cause they have little time to develop new technologies, they look to the motocross industry for designs that are proven.

FREEDOM IN THE OUTDOORS

In meeting rooms and aisles at the Outdoor Retailer trade shows, talk has turned to how the industry might grow the market by attracting a broader consumer base, including more youth and minorities. But few have uttered a word concerning people with disabilities. At least Eureka created some buzz this summer when it introduced the Freedom, a wheelchair-accessible tent.

Dianne Goodwin and her company Blue Sky Designs developed the tent utilizing grant money from the Small Business Innovation Research Program. Founded in 1997, Blue Sky Designs originally made custom devices for disabled individuals and conducted training programs for therapists to help them better utilize technology. Goodwin's desire to produce a tent grew largely from her experience leading outdoor trips for kids with disabilities in the 1970s. She understands the remarkable effect the outdoors can have on a person mentally and physically. She also understands the market realities that restrict the development of technologies that can make something like camping an inviting experience for the disabled. "I want to move more toward being a product development company," she said. "You can impact far more people by developing products that become commercially available."

Goodwin said the outdoor market hasn't seen a tent like the Freedom before because "big companies don't typically go after what they perceive to be small markets." Also, large companies are not likely to go after markets that are unfamiliar to them. "It helped Eureka to have a partner with more awareness and expertise (of the disabled community)," she said.

Goodwin said she hopes Eureka will expand the Freedom into a whole line of tents, and she has incorporated "universal design" elements so the tents will also appeal to able-bodied consumers. For example, the Freedom's fan-like door (for people with limited hand mobility) might make its way into other Eureka tents.

Like Cable, Goodwin believes that demand for adaptive gear exists, and companies could profit from a viable consumer base that has yet to be addressed properly.

FEELING WHOLE AGAIN

Anyone in a wheelchair can tell you that feeling ignored is nothing new. Cable recalled that, after her accident, she became very aware that her wheelchair made her appear different than most people, and she noticed that many wanted to turn away. But it's important that people not turn away. Cable wants people to understand that her desire to explore the outdoors runs as deep as the desire of someone who skis on both legs.

"An outdoor sport does for people with disabilities exactly what it does for able-bodied people—it gives us that connection with nature that is vital to our health and wellness," she said. "For people with disabilities, it's even more crucial, because we are told so often that our lives will be asphalt and concrete, and that we will be relegated to the smooth surface. We're told the natural environment, with its ups and downs and unpredictable places will not be a part of our lives anymore. We need that connection to nature. We need it to feel whole."

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