

# Making Outdoor Programs Accessible



Written by *Kathy Ambrosini*  
Illustrated by *Maria Jansdotter Farr*





Mohonk Preserve  
*... saving the land for life™*

---

Copyright © 2005 Mohonk Preserve  
Illustrations © 2005 Maria Jansdotter Farr  
Mohonk Preserve  
P. O. Box 715  
New Paltz, NY 12561  
(845) 255-0919  
[www.mohonkpreserve.org](http://www.mohonkpreserve.org)

All original material in this book, except the illustrations, is copyrighted by the Mohonk Preserve (© 2005 Mohonk Preserve).  
No part may be reproduced without written permission of the Mohonk Preserve.

# Contents

---

Introduction .....	1
Inclusive Outdoor Programs Are No Accident! .....	2
<i>NatureAccess</i> is Launched .....	2
The Mohonk Preserve’s Outdoor Environmental Education Program .....	3
Why Outdoor Programs Fit the Bill .....	5
Outdoor Programs Are... ..	6
Outdoor Education’s Appropriateness for People with Disabilities .....	6
Creating a Climate of Accessibility .....	7
A Planned Approach to Inclusion .....	9
Flexibility, Flexibility, Flexibility! .....	10
Knowing Your Visitors .....	10
Differentiate to Include .....	10
Planning Ahead .....	12
Modify on the Fly! .....	15
Forming Partnerships .....	17
Getting the Support You Need .....	18
Who They Are .....	18
Where to Find Them .....	19
Challenges to Learning and Understanding .....	21
Boiling It Down .....	22
Accommodations: Why, When, and Where .....	25
Accommodations, Adaptations, Modifications: What’s the Difference? .....	26
Adaptations .....	26
Modifications .....	26
Other Considerations .....	27
Environmental Considerations .....	29
The Great “Dynamic” Outdoors! .....	30
Weather and Climate .....	30
The Biological Factor .....	31
Spatial Arrangements .....	32
Physical Arrangements .....	32
Assistive Strategies .....	35
Providing Accessible Instruction .....	36
Instructional Accommodations .....	36
Instructional Aids .....	38
Alternative Formats .....	43
Adaptive Technology .....	43

What Outdoor Leaders Need to Know About Sensory Integration Dysfunction .....	47
Rethinking the Outdoor Leader's Toolkit .....	48
What is Sensory Integration Dysfunction? .....	48
Sensory Processing: Over and Under? .....	49
The Sensory Bubble .....	49
Awareness of the Triggers .....	50
Outdoor Leader's Suggested Training Activity .....	50
 In Hindsight .....	 55
Measuring Success .....	56
Creating a Record for the Future .....	57
Thanking Your Partners .....	57
 References and Resources .....	 59
References and Selected Readings .....	60
Resources .....	61

# Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the Mohonk Preserve's Board of Directors and to its Executive Director, Glenn Hoagland, for their support in the continued development of the *NatureAccess* program for people with disabilities. Their encouragement enabled me to commit to the process of developing this multi-faceted program, and to disseminate this work regionally and nationally.

Many thanks go out to the elementary teachers and administrators of the New Paltz Central School District, who have developed the curriculum upon which the *NatureAccess* model is based. In particular, I would like to thank Susan Richmann, Special Education Teacher, whose work with New Paltz students with disabilities prompted the Mohonk Preserve to become an outdoor program which is inclusive of ALL students.

On behalf of the Mohonk Preserve, I would like to thank the agencies whose funding is allowing us to continue our work with people with disabilities. The federal Institute for Museum and Library Services provided lead financial support for *NatureAccess*. The Ulster Savings Charitable Foundation contributed a generous grant to fund both the program services and the publication and dissemination of this manual.

The teamwork of Preserve Educators Kim Tischler, Betty Boomer, Roland Ellis, and Pam Uihlein, continues to enable many people with disabilities to enjoy and experience the beauty of the Shawangunk Ridge first-hand: I thank them for their many ideas and tireless energy. The publication of this manual depended heavily on the design and layout work of Patty Murphy, who worked under a tight deadline, and always with a smile. My thanks as well to Dr. Ilka List, Vincent Clephas, and Jane Taylor for their editorial assistance with this manual.

To Maria Farr, for her wonderful illustrations found among these pages; many thanks for her insights, her creativity, and for bringing the words to life.

*Kathy Ambrosini*



INSTITUTE of MUSEUM  
and LIBRARY SERVICES

Ulster Savings  
Charitable Foundation



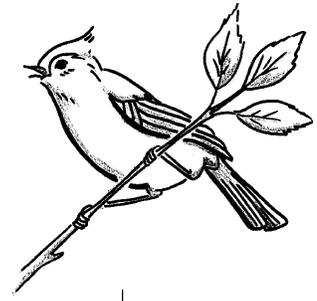
## About the Mohonk Preserve

Encompassing over 6,500 acres, the Mohonk Preserve is the largest member- and visitor-supported nature preserve in New York State. Through environmental education, ecosystem research, and land management, the Preserve aims to protect this land forever and to promote a deeper understanding of the value of nature in everyday life. The generosity of members, visitors, supporters, and volunteers ensures that this landscape will be protected, understood, and enjoyed for years to come.

## About the Author

Kathy Ambrosini is the Director of Education at the Mohonk Preserve in New Paltz, New York, a National Historic Landmark landscape, which has been designated as one of the *75 Last Great Places* by The Nature Conservancy. Kathy is the originator of the *NatureAccess* program for students with disabilities. Since 1992, she has administered an array of programs including an award-winning seven-year school field study program, a summer camp series, and year-round adult and family programs. Kathy is an adjunct instructor with the State University of New York (SUNY) – New Paltz, teaching graduate courses in outdoor and environmental education. In *Making Outdoor Programs Accessible*, Kathy reveals simple, successful accommodations strategies from her 15 years of experience spent outdoors teaching people with a variety of abilities and disabilities.

# Introduction



# Inclusive Outdoor Programs Are No Accident!

---

On a crisp, autumn day in 1994, I received a phone call from a special education teacher from our local school district. Was I aware, she asked, that children with disabilities were being left behind in school on days when their classes visited the Mohonk Preserve? Did I know that children were being separated from their classmates and teacher, left to sit in another classroom for the day, while the rest of their class boarded the bus for a field trip? Was it possible that, though we'd been administering outdoor field studies with this school district for ten years, we were missing hundreds of special education students each year? I was shocked, and together we formed a partnership and began to work on correcting the situation.

## *NatureAccess* is Launched

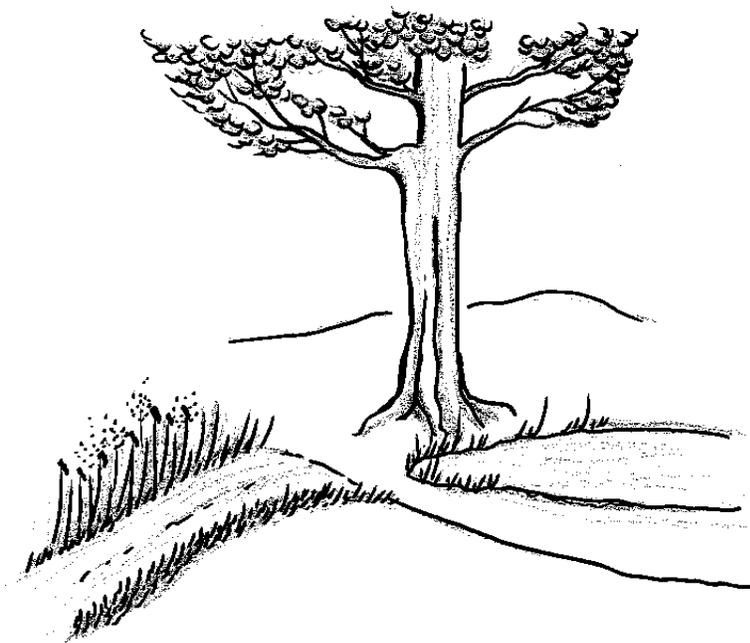
Armed with the knowledge that we were not serving the entire student body, *NatureAccess* was born. Its purpose: to be pro-active in working to assure that the inclusion and learning needs of all visitors are addressed through outdoor education.

The Mohonk Preserve's outdoor education program has built its reputation on successful collaborations. We pulled together a team to tackle the problem, drawing on the expertise of the special education teacher, classroom teachers, physical and occupational therapists, a speech therapist, a social worker, a ranger, outdoor educators, and our local resource center for accessibility. The hurdles we'd encounter seemed staggering. To name just a few ...



- How to mediate the physical challenges of a ridgeline landscape;
- How to make our interpretive services accessible to everyone;
- How to change the perception that field trips were inappropriate for children with disabilities;
- How to adapt a standardized curriculum for a wide array of needs;
- How to prepare our staff and volunteers to work with people with disabilities;
- How to finance the outdoor adaptive equipment we would later come to need.

Over the next year, we visited each program site and walked every trail. And in the years since, we continue to walk the trails, visit the forests and ponds, and review the program's curriculum in light of the dynamic nature of our changing environment and our visitors' diverse needs.



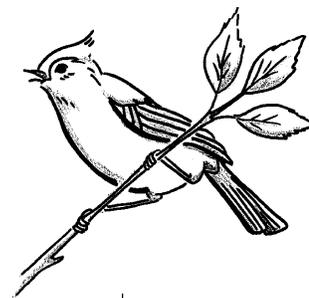
In 1996, the Mohonk Preserve received the *Accessibility Award* from the Association of Independent Living Centers in New York. Two years later, the Resource Center for Accessible Living, Inc. presented an award recognizing the Preserve for its *Outstanding Contributions to Expanding Access for People with Disabilities*. The Program has since received the *2001 Conservation Education Program Award* from the New York State Conservation Council.

## The Mohonk Preserve's Outdoor Environmental Education Program

The Outdoor Environmental Education Program at the Mohonk Preserve is a model school program, developed in collaboration with administrators, teachers, and outdoor education specialists. The focus of this sequential, seven-year program is on teaching those aspects of the curriculum which are best taught outdoors. By repeatedly bringing students back to the 6,500-acre semi-wilderness area along the Shawangunk Ridge, known as the Mohonk Preserve, our visitors form lifelong connections with the land. The success of this field study program has inspired a variety of summer camps and interpretive programs at the Preserve.



# Why Outdoor Programs Fit the Bill



# Outdoor Programs Are...

---

For the purposes of this book, Outdoor Programs include any instructional program which takes place out-of-doors. The focus of the program may be recreational or educational, but if it is indeed a program, then it is led by a guide, a ranger, a youth leader, an educator, an interpreter, or instructor. Sites for these programs are as diverse as are their leaders: zoos and botanical gardens, parks and community centers, campgrounds, farms, nature centers, and wilderness areas are among those offering programs to their visitors.



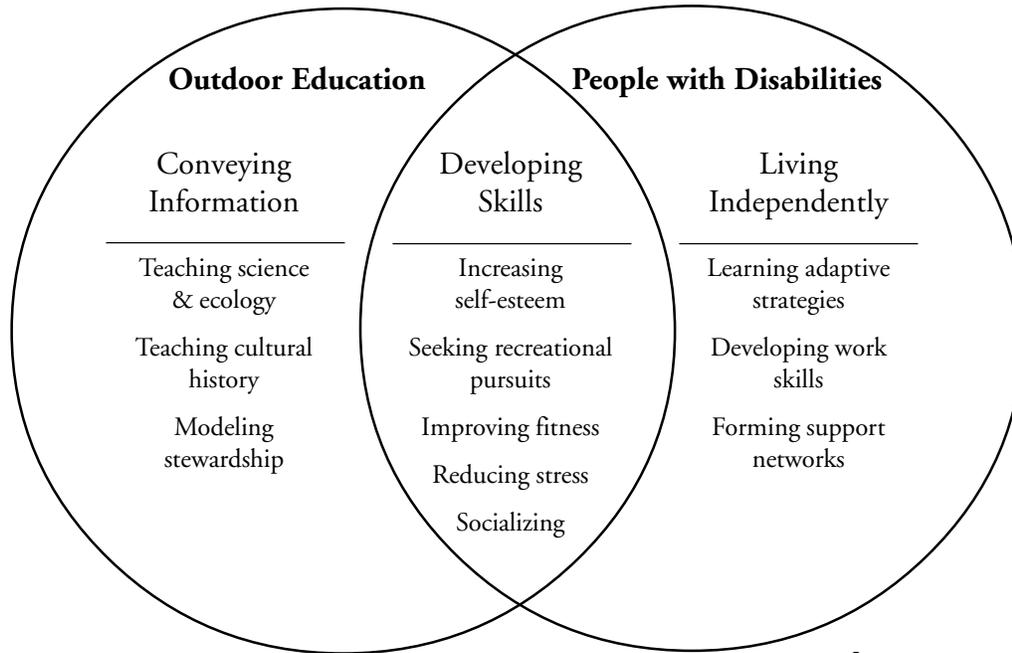
---

*This manual will focus on what you, the Outdoor Program Leader, can do to accommodate people with a variety of disabilities.*

---

## Outdoor Education's Appropriateness for People with Disabilities

For each of us, but especially for people with disabilities, the benefits of time spent in the great outdoors are many. People with disabilities often have personal goals that include the opportunity to live more independently, develop personal skills that improve health, aid in stress management, and gain socialization skills. Though outdoor education is often used as a method to convey information in science or history, its breadth is virtually unlimited. Many outdoor education programs focus on the development of personal skills, such as building self-esteem, personal fitness, and stress reduction. Others teach recreational sports and encourage group dynamics and leadership skills. It's a match with great potential, yet few outdoor centers have embraced and implemented a plan to make their programs accessible.



## Creating a Climate of Accessibility

If your programs are open to the public, and particularly if you have a building or public facility, then you are probably aware of the standards outlined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which are designed to make public spaces accessible to people with disabilities. However, when it comes to providing accessible services such as instructional programs, many outdoor centers are still missing the mark.



Under Title III of the ADA (28 C.F.R. sect. 36.303), “public accommodations shall take those steps that may be necessary to ensure that no individual with a disability is excluded, denied services, segregated, or otherwise treated differently than other individuals because of the absence of auxiliary aids and services, unless public accommodations can demonstrate that taking those steps would fundamentally alter the nature of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations being offered or would result in an undue burden, i.e., significant difficulty or expense.” In other words, we need to seek to provide equal access to our programs, including providing appropriate aids and services.

Creating a climate of accessibility demands that we dispel many myths and societal stereotypes. Just because there is a park upstate that caters to hikers with disabilities does not exempt your center. If you don't consider the disabled hiker in your programming, then you are non-existent to people with special needs in your community.

---

*We can no longer assume, and should not accept, that disabled people will go somewhere else for their programs. If your center is open to the public, then it must serve a diverse public.*

---

Simple solutions for making your programs more inclusive will be covered in these next few chapters. Many of these, such as modifying your instructional language, can be implemented today. The key to success is starting immediately, implementing what you can from the suggestions in this manual, and then determining to what extent you and your facility can progress once you've gotten your feet wet!

