

Enabling benefits for all

For many New Zealanders the experience of recreation outdoors, in whatever form it takes and wherever it happens, is woven into their sense of identity.

New Zealand's physical environment is an intrinsic part of many leisure experiences.

Well-documented evidence supports the positive impacts of [nature-based recreation](#) on peoples' lives. There are benefits of physical activity and nature contact¹ for people with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairment.

Despite this, not everyone benefits equally and disabled people² often miss out on these benefits.³ In part this is because of outdated social constructs on 'disability' and what it means, as well as informational, physical and other barriers.

Access to the outdoors should be democratic and promote inclusion – particularly in public land spaces.

Removing misconceptions of disabled nature-based recreation can help create fairer benefit distribution. Managers should enable a range of experiences beyond ableist perspectives. They may find that accessibility looks different from what they expected!

Outdoors Accessibility Design Guidelines

Recently released by Recreation Aotearoa and Sport New Zealand, the [Outdoors Accessibility Design Guidelines](#) provide excellent practical recommendations, tools, and strategies for park managers, staff and community members to design for increased participation of disabled people.

This Insights has been authored by [Crystal Brindle](#), Lincoln University master's student and Senior Ranger at the Department of Conservation. (*note that views represented are not necessarily that of DOC)*



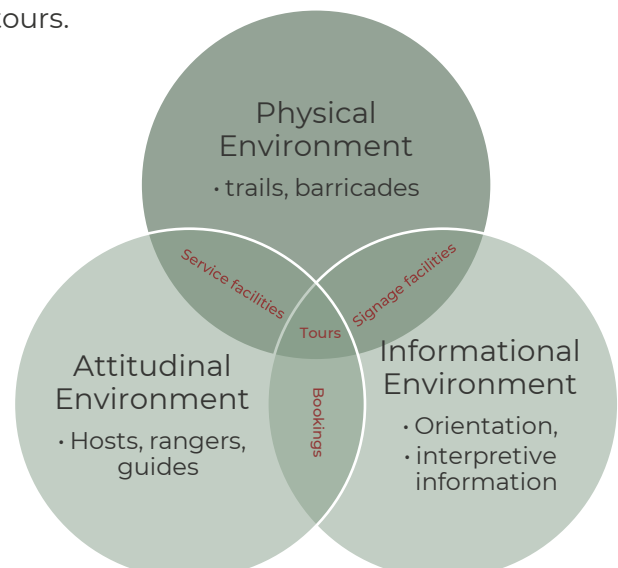
Figure 1 A young autistic man reads the interpretation panel at Mueller Hut track, Aoraki/Mt Cook. Photo: L Atkinson 2024

Participation vs barriers to access

For many disabled people the desire to get more involved in outdoor activities is strong. The recent [Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Survey](#)⁴ identified barriers for disabled New Zealanders consistent with a three-party typology that is evident in international literature:

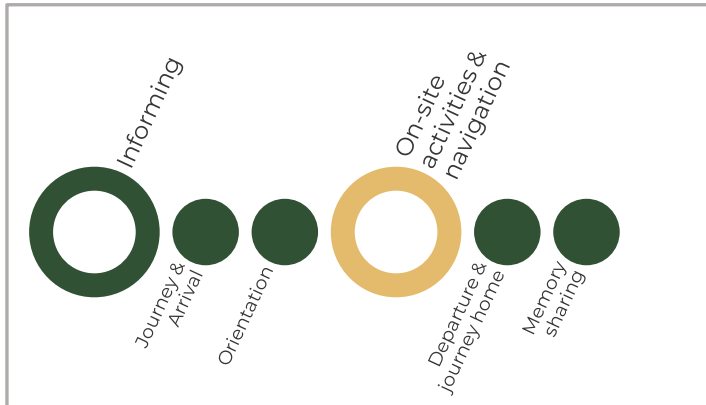
- **Informational Environment** – barriers in the orientation and interpretive environment
- **Physical Environment** – trails, barricades, toilets, and car parks that are not physically accessible
- **Attitudinal Environment** – including fear of judgement from others and lack of social support for risk-taking. The attitudes of others can be the most important and often the most difficult to change.⁵

Overlap among these three areas includes: service facilities; signage facilities; bookings and tours.



Chain of Reaction Experience⁶

The following diagram represents a chain of outdoor recreation experience, highlighting the points at which barriers can impact a person's overall experience and desire to go again.



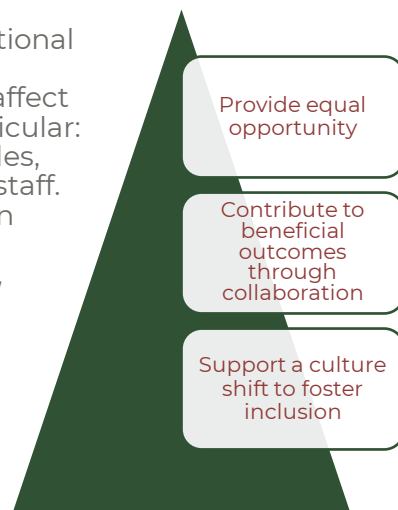
Research has found that the human factor or 'software' of an experience can be of greater importance to a disabled person than the 'hardware' of facilities.⁵

Three-part role for Parks Management

If the goal of management is to optimise benefits and managers are responsive to the public they serve, then it is clear that an important role exists.

Staff at all organisational levels including management can affect change, but in particular: hosts, rangers, guides, and front of house staff. Change can happen through fostering a culture of inclusion, collaborating to achieve beneficial outcomes and providing equal opportunity.

Figure 3 The three-part role of public land managers



Case Study

Destination Queenstown has developed a guide to six accessible Queenstown trails for visitors with wheelchairs or other mobility challenges. It includes alpine vistas from the shores of Lake Whakatipu, historic bridges of the Arrow River, and the chance to taste local Pinot Noir along the way in the Gibbston wine region.

Insights to Action

Principle	Action
Reducing informational barriers can enhance accessibility.	<p>Provide an accessibility tab or section on each park or place landing page with details of what to expect</p> <p>Collaborate with advocacy groups and experts to ensure pre-trip information is relevant for disabled people</p> <p>Provide detailed orienting and interpretive information in many forms to increase accessibility⁷</p>
Overcoming physical barriers can take many forms.	<p>Connect would-be recreationalists to where they can hire adaptive mobility gear⁸</p> <p>Think beyond the park and across the recreation experience chain</p> <p>Collaborate with the transport sector to improve coordination and access.</p>
The 'software' of an experience can be of greater importance to a disabled person than the 'hardware' of facilities.	<p>Foster an organisational culture and structure that champions and invites inclusion through staff training and hiring practices.</p> <p>Co-create accessible opportunities and facilities with the disabled community – 'nothing without us'</p>

References

- 1 Bell, S. L. (2019). [Experiencing nature with sight impairment: Seeking freedom from ableism](#). *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2(2), 304–322. Hennig, S., Sattler, T., Wasserburger, M., & Wasserburger, W. W. (2015, May 5-7). [How to improve accessibility of natural areas: about the relevance of providing information on accessible services and facilities in natural areas](#) [Paper presentation]. Plan Together—Right Now—Overall. From Vision to Reality for Vibrant Cities and Regions. Martin, J. J. (2013). Benefits and barriers to physical activity for individuals with disabilities: A social-relational model of disability perspective. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 35(24), 2030–2037.
- 2 'disabled person' or 'disabled people' acknowledges the social model of disability. See Whaikaha, Ministry of Disabled People.
- 3 Martin, J. J. (2013). Ibid
- 4 Department of Conservation, 2024. [Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Survey 2024](#)
- 5 Chikuta, O., Du Plessis, E., & Saayman, M. (2019). [Accessibility expectations of tourists with disabilities in national parks](#). *Tourism Planning & Development*, 16(1), 75–92.
- 6 adapted from Hennig et al., (2015) tourism service chain. (2015, May 5-7). [How to improve accessibility of natural areas: about the relevance of providing information on accessible services and facilities in natural areas](#) [Paper presentation at Conference]
- 8 See the Outdoor Accessibility Design Guidelines pages 47 – 61 for in-depth recommendations.
- 9 National Park Service, 2024.