

Accessibility Benchmarks: Interpretive Programs and Services in North Central California¹

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Abstract: The Heritage Corridors Project was a unique partnership between the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the California State University, and the Across California Conservancy. The purpose of the project was to develop a map of selected northern California outdoor recreation and heritage sites. Data about facility accessibility improvements (restrooms, clear access from the designated parking space to the site or facility, Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD), Braille materials, large print materials, and sound amplification devices), and interpretive and recreation amenities were collected. The current accessibility status of interpretation in north central California is reported and serves as a benchmark for access enhancements to sites and programs.

Several tourism researchers have discussed the swift rise of heritage tourism (Crompton 1990, Makens 1992; Steel-Prohaska 1990; Tighe 1990a, 1990b), the importance of effective interpretive programs to enhance visitor enjoyment (Gunn 1990, Hayward 1989), and the need to create a critical mass of attractions to promote tourism at the regional level (Lue and others 1993, Schneider and Kaldenberg 1991). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has stimulated interest in site and programmatic accessibility for visitors with limitations (Elsner 1992), estimated to be as many as 100 million citizens (Kermeen 1992).

Project Overview and Purpose

The Heritage Corridors Project was a partnership between the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the California State University, and the Across California Conservancy (a non-profit disability access and advocacy organization). The purpose of the Project was to develop a map of outdoor recreation and heritage sites in Northern California. Because ADA compliance plans were first required in 1992, the interpretive programs and services (hereafter called amenities) data collected in 1992 for the Heritage Corridors Project provide a unique and timely dataset.

This work was authorized through California Assembly Bill 4044 and served as part of a comprehensive plan for a statewide system of trails. The “heritage” portions of this

system will be a part of an eventual nationwide network of heritage-related outdoor recreation resources. Although the project was initiated at the State level, local and Federal outdoor recreation and heritage sites were also featured.

Access for Persons with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has played an important role with access to outdoor recreation and cultural heritage resource areas (Elsner 1992). “With an estimated 43 million people in the United States with disabilities severe enough to be recognized by the ADA,” with another 10 percent of the population temporarily disabled at any given moment, and with yet another 10 percent with mobility impairments due to old age, as many as 100 million United States citizens can benefit from improved site accessibility (Kermeen 1992).

The ADA was designed to eliminate discrimination against people with disabilities in the areas of employment, transportation, public accommodations, public services and telecommunications (Schleien 1993). The Act supports architectural and attitudinal modifications to maximize opportunities for people with disabilities. “Handicapped travelers make up a segment of the travel market that is growing and is deservedly receiving greater consideration in the physical design of tourism facilities” (Mill and Morrison 1985, Mueller 1990). In addition, families are another one of the fastest growing tourism markets (Makens 1992), which means that destination areas can anticipate increasing numbers of families who have children with disabilities. Fortunately, with the passage of the ADA, the necessary incentive for the design and construction of accessible sites and amenities is in place.

Although people with disabilities desire recreation experiences similar to those of the able-bodied population, many of them face numerous constraints to travel. Studies have found that for persons with disabilities, social contacts are reduced and financial responsibilities are increased (Murphy 1982). In addition, parents of children with disabilities have restricted free time because of their increased child care responsibilities (Lucca and Settles, 1981). These are examples of some of the constraints experienced by individuals with disabilities and families who have a member with a disability.

Furthermore, most people with disabilities require extensive planning and preparation prior to a trip. This may be because of the need for assistive devices such as a wheelchair or a walker, large print materials, or a telecommunication device (TDD).

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While there are many things to think about when planning a camping trip, probably the most important thing for a wheeler is obtaining accurate information. Most parks have made some modifications to make them more accessible to disabled people, especially wheelchair users. However, the extent of modification varies widely from park to park and from camping area to camping area (Ellis 1992).

Destination points must be contacted to verify access and availability to special services. In outdoor recreation and interpretation, this may include such features as a ramped and paved campground site, a visitor center with sound amplification devices, or a nature trail with large print self-guided materials.

Interpretation

“Interpretation” is a broad and encompassing concept that is used in a variety of public and private areas. Tilden (1967) describes interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information”. Aquariums, zoos, parks, forests, museums, and other attractions all use interpretation techniques. Hayward (1989) espouses a comprehensive approach to interpretation that combines “a leisure setting with an educational or cultural experience”. Sharpe (1992) describes interpretation as serving three purposes: 1) helping the public to understand and appreciate the resource; 2) assisting the public in pursuing its own interests about the resource; and 3) providing resource stewards with a management tool. Sharpe’s first two purposes of interpretation apply to the Heritage Corridors sites. Because the majority of sites are public sector entities, the third purpose also applies, although in ways not directly apparent to visitors.

Tourism promoters have started to recognize the value of “heritage” in travel decision-making. “Visiting historic sites and museums ranks as the first, second, or third most popular activity for tourists in every state in the United States” (Steel-Prohaska 1990). This trend is increasing for at least three reasons: 1) the “baby boomers” are approaching middle-age, a time when people generally become more interested in culture and heritage; 2) the senior adult population, strong supporters of cultural and heritage activities, is also increasing; and 3) cultural resources are often suitable for mini-vacations, another trend within the travel and tourism industry (Tighe 1990a). Furthermore, family vacations are on the rise and historic and/or outdoor recreation sites are popular family vacation activities (Makens 1992). These trends provide evidence that cultural and heritage travel will flourish in the future.

Methods

In the present study, we compiled a list of outdoor recreation and heritage sites by using primary and secondary information sources. A panel of tourism, therapeutic recreation,

and geography specialists selected 300 sites for further investigation. A survey was designed to collect interpretive amenity information from sites in north central California.

Development of Survey Instruments

Site Selection

A secondary source search of the state parks map, American Automobile Association publications, commercial tourism guidebooks, Federal resource agency listings, recreation access guides, and the California Office of Tourism files generated an extensive list of possible sites. Each site was then evaluated against the three criteria for map inclusion. First, potential sites were required to be of cultural, outdoor recreation, or conservation education significance to California. Second, sites had to have interpretive materials for “self-guided tourism.” Third, sites had to possess significant site improvements for persons with vision, hearing, or mobility impairments. Sites meeting two of the three project criteria comprised the master list from which the map sites were selected. These sites included parks, forests, museums, attractions, parkways, and vista points administered by local, county, state, or Federal agencies or organizations. After discussions with agency officials, various disability access groups, and other key informants, the list was reduced to the 300 most promising sites.

Self-Administered Mailed Survey

A 4-page survey instrument was designed to collect amenity and accessibility data about each site. The project co-directors developed the initial version of the survey that was then sent to a panel of State and National Park interpreters. After this pilot study, minor revisions were made in the survey instrument. Agency directors at each site received a survey packet just after Labor Day in 1992.

Telephone Survey

A more concise version of the mailed survey was prepared for use in a telephone interview with managers or access coordinators at sites that had not responded to the written survey. Four trained interviewers conducted the telephone calls between November 1992 and February 1993.

Data Collection

By using these two data collection strategies (mailed questionnaire and telephone interview), all sites were contacted. Of the 300 sites, 172 were selected for detailed analysis based on their recreational and interpretive amenities and their accessibility status for persons with mobility impairments.

Data about facility accessibility improvements (restrooms, clear access from the designated parking space to the site or facility, TDD, Braille materials, large print materials, and sound amplification devices) were collected. Nine interpretive amenity categories were evaluated (exhibits, guided tours, nature trails, museums, visitor centers, printed interpretive materials, site signage, interpretive audiotapes, and videotapes). If an amenity was present, respondents were

asked to answer an additional question about site accessibility for visitors with mobility impairments. Three levels of access were identified: not accessible, “easy” or assisted accessibility, and independent accessibility. For an amenity to receive the “independent” access designation, a mobility impaired visitor traveling alone should be able to exit his/her vehicle, enter the site or facility from the designated (handicap) parking space and utilize the site or facility.

Results

Sites were classified according to management agency and site type. Forty-nine (28 percent) of the sites were managed by Federal agencies, 74 (43 percent) were under the administration of State agencies, and 49 (28 percent) were governed by local agencies. Each of the sites were also categorized as natural heritage or cultural heritage sites. In addition, if a cultural heritage site had been identified as a California Historic Landmark that designation was noted. One hundred and twenty-nine (75 percent) of the sites were natural (e.g., outdoor) heritage sites, 55 (32 percent) of the sites were categorized as cultural heritage sites, and 45 (26 percent) of the sites were historical landmarks. (Categories were not mutually exclusive; 7 percent of the sites were classified as both a natural and a cultural resource area.)

Data were collected for nine types of interpretive amenities and six types of access improvements. Interpretation amenities included programs, materials, and services provided to the public for educational purposes. Of the interpretation amenities measured by the survey, the average site had 8.5 amenities. Only 31 percent of the amenities were accessible to visitors with mobility impairments. The most frequently occurring amenities were: printed materials (79 percent of the sites), exhibits (70 percent), interpretive signage (67 percent), guided tours (59 percent), visitor centers (43 percent),

video tapes (40 percent), museums (39 percent), nature trails (38 percent), and audio tapes (8 percent).

“Access improvement” was defined as an amenity that improved site accessibility to persons with mobility, visual, or hearing impairments. These amenities included restrooms, clear access from the designated parking space to the site or facility, large print materials, sound amplification devices, telecommunication device (TDD) for the deaf, and Braille materials. One hundred forty-nine (87 percent) of the sites had accessible restrooms. More than half of the sites (58 percent) had clear access from the parking lot to the facility. Improvements for people with visual impairments included large print information at 15 (9 percent) of the sites and Braille materials at 5 (3 percent) of the sites. Amenity improvements designed for individuals with hearing impairments included sound amplification devices at 12 (7 percent) of the sites and a TDD at ten (6 percent) of the sites. Five interpretation amenities (exhibits, guided tours, visitor center, museums, and nature trails) were evaluated for accessibility to visitors with impairments (*table 1*). In addition, restrooms were included as an important amenity in terms of dictating destination stops.

Discussion

Printed materials, exhibits, and guided tours are examples of interpretation found at many destination locations. Printed materials can be mailed in advance, allowing people with disabilities to plan ahead. In addition, printed materials improve the interpretive experience for many visitors and offer a helpful mechanism for visitors with hearing impairments. Audio-tape tours, available in fewer than 10 percent of the sites, can be enjoyed by visitors with visual impairments. Increasing the number of these materials could enhance the interpretive experience for all visitors.

Table 1—Levels of accessibility for selected interpretation and access improvements¹

Amenity	Sites with amenity ²	Not accessible		Accessible with assistance ³		Independently accessible	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Interpretation Amenities							
Guided Tours	102	46	45	56	55	31	30
Visitor Center	74	12	17	62	83	37	50
Museums	67	14	21	55	79	32	48
Nature Trails	65	35	54	30	46	12	18
Exhibits	121	0	0	121	100	95	79
Other Amenity							
Restroom	149	19	13	130	87	90	60

¹Accessibility figures were calculated as the percentage of the particular amenity that were reported as accessible with assistance or independently accessible.

² Number of sites out of 172 that had the amenity.

³The accessible with assistance frequencies and percentages include sites that are independently accessible.

Exhibits are the most capital-intensive interpretive amenity. These are particularly valuable interpretation tools as facility staff continue to decline or take on additional duties. However, exhibits are also the most accessible interpretation amenity, with more than half classified as independently accessible to persons with mobility impairments. Access improvements for other types of disability groups are practically nonexistent. This is partially alleviated by the frequent occurrence of guided tours. Tour guides are typically able to make minor adjustments in their interpretive talks to accommodate the differing needs and interests of groups. Many provide alternative experiences for visitors with visual or hearing impairments.

Nature trails are included as an interpretive amenity. They differ from hiking trails because they have fixed interpretive signage, guidebooks, or other printed materials. As the "trails movement" continues to rise, nature trails are expected to increase. Characteristics of nature trails include a shorter trail than that of a hiking trail, intersecting loops, and rest benches. These qualities make them particularly popular with travel parties, such as groups comprised of people with varying ages and ability levels. These same characteristics make nature trails good candidates for accessibility improvements.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Heritage Corridors Project is one of the first steps toward a nationwide system of heritage trails. Continued research on the types of assistive devices that are consistent with the needs of current site users will be useful to site planners and managers. On-site access inventories are also needed. To be effective such inventories will require collaboration between trained researchers and persons with mobility, hearing, and vision impairments. Although an ambitious task, local disability access and advocacy groups could facilitate such an effort. Finally, access and interpretation information needs to be disseminated to benefit persons with disabilities.

A wealth of opportunities for outdoor recreation and heritage exploration is available in northern California. The map and database provide visitors with valuable information to assist in trip planning and site visitation. This research reports the most comprehensive and current accessibility

status of heritage recreation in north central California and serves as a benchmark by which future efforts and improvements can be measured.

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