Its Only Natural: Enabling Access to Nature and Outdoor Spaces for Those with a Disability is a Right—and is Essential for Wellbeing

Don't you have anything better to do than to stare out the window?! For 16% of the world's population, 1 in 4 people living in the United Sates, and 1 in 3 in Indiana, the answer is all too often "yes … but no."

Who are these people? Some are invisible to us—a co-worker or colleague—while others make us cringe and yearn to help as they struggle to get over a curb with a manual wheelchair. Disability, whether as a defining term or in its physiological and mental / emotional manifestations, is both a tangible and intangible part of society, our local community, and the world community.

> *The world edifice is made of two parts—one tangible and perceptible, and one invisible and imperceptible. The tangible part is the body; the invisible is the Stars … The two parts together constitute life.* — Paracelsus

The Tangible

What constitutes disability has been a point of much discussion, debate, and outright disagreement, entangled in political, academic, and economic harangues which all too often obfuscate the true subject: the human being facing the daily challenges of living in a world lacking in awareness—and empathy.

Thankfully, there are compassionate, motivated, and determined people who wish to create a change. A number of these can be found at the Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands in Bloomington, Indiana, working intently to bring about a pivotal shift in public and organizational perspectives on what constitutes accessibility and individual wellbeing. "Access to parks, recreation, outdoor programs, and public lands is a right and essential component of healthy and engaged citizens," states the Eppley Institute's website. Jim Ridenour, who co-founded the institute with his great uncle Dr. Garrett Eppley in 1993, echoed this statement in a recent interview in which he candidly commented on the frustrating failure of both public and private sectors to recognize the intrinsic, human need for access to outdoor spaces and natural areas—not merely in the form of a paved city park, but encompassing and interconnecting surrounding natural areas which might include rivers and streams, wooded areas, or nature preserves. "I really had to push to convince people that the Eppley Institute should be part of the School of Public Health … that [access to nature] is a public health issue" says Ridenour. "They just didn't see it that way." Currently in its thirtieth year as a catalyst in bringing about equitable access in natural settings, the Eppley Institute transitioned from its longtime home at Indiana University's School of Public Health to the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community (IIDC) in 2020. It continues its work locally, regionally, and nationally to provide "innovative approaches to advancing access for all people."

All people. Therein lies a challenge for those with the best of intentions: How to respect ecological fragility, preserve nature's beauty, and protect its inhabitants—while endeavoring to pave the way to her front door.

The Basics

Some know the harsh lessons of living with a disability, while others have seen friends or family become disabled due to injury such as limb-loss or a traumatic brain injury (TBI), severe illness (COVID and polio, for example), age-related conditions, or long-term neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis (MS) and Parkinson's disease (PD). Disability related to cognition—defined as serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions—is statistically ranked as most prevalent in Indiana, closely shadowed by the most common type of disability overall: disability related to mobility, or serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.

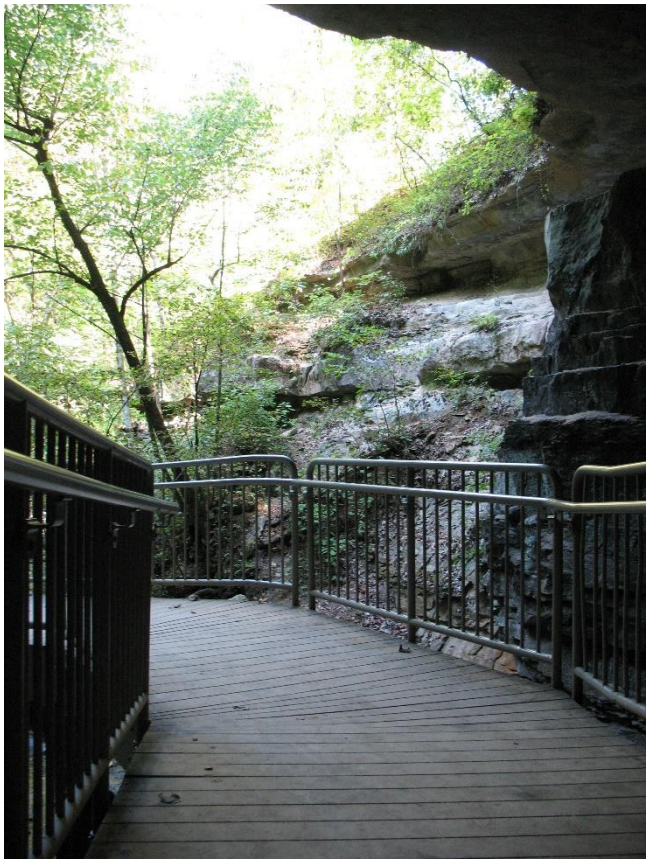
The latter definition is problematic, particularly when casting an eye to accessibility to, and in, the outdoors. When considering "difficulty walking," there is the matter of being able to stand in the first place, let alone tackling steps. If a parking lot has yawning potholes, impassable curbs, or cordoned areas for construction, mobility with a wheelchair, cane, walker, or prosthetic leg becomes an issue from the moment of arrival ... never mind accessibility to trails, green spaces, or parks.

"We need to start with the basics," says property manager of Spring Mill State Park, Mark Young. "That means improving overall signage, expanding handicap parking, and making interpretive programming more accessible." Although Spring Mill Park recently worked with the Eppley institute to create a master plan, Young reiterates what both Ric Edwards, the Indiana Department of Natural Resource's Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance director, as well as Eppley's Ridenour, emphasize when considering modifications and ADA compliance: cost vs. budget (funding!), individualizing the recommendations and modifications to each location and its topographic setting, and training of staff to increase overall awareness and inclusive delivery of programming.

Edwards wryly points out that at the outset of his work in ADA compliance, he often had to pause and backtrack during meetings with organizational heads and park managers because "they were all staring at me as though I had suddenly grown three heads." In other words, what was needed was not

necessarily what was feasible. More often than not, simple, common-sense changes—such as adding benches at short intervals on an accessible trail—may be the difference between someone sitting in the car at the trailhead while their family visits a cave, or joining them as far as the entrance. With this in mind, Spring Mill Park placed several niched benches on an accessible trail connecting to Donaldson Cave.

The remainder of the project was not without controversy: adding 200+ feet of accessible aluminum accessway leading up to the cave entrance led to some disgruntled comments and feedback. Young recalls one couple in particular who expressed outrage over the loss of an entirely natural setting and the incursion into the cave entrance. Despite his explanations, they were not mollified.



The Not-So-Basic

Logistics and mindset are usually behind providing accessibility. Stacy Duke, District Recreation and Wilderness Manager for the Hoosier National Forest, candidly comments that any number of variables (staffing, maintenance, budgets, ADA compliance and the sheer size of the areas managed by the National Forest system) can curtail what may seem basic, low-cost, and common-sense to the public—such as benches along a trail. It is many things, but most of all it is mindset, according to Edwards. “If people really want to get it done, they will find a way.”

Ric Edwards is a resolute advocate for accessible environments.

An outing in one of Indiana's state parks. (See some accessible suggestions)

A narrow wooden walkway with no rails, extending across a wetland area to an observation deck, may not seem to be a logical (or logistical) candidate for those with accessibility challenges seeking the gifts of health and wellbeing offered by Mother Nature. Volunteers, a donation, and some old-fashioned rolling up of sleeves and "getting it done" mindset changed that at Beanblossom Bottoms, a wetland area just outside of Bloomington. It is a modest change consisting of a widened, ADA compliant walkway made of a textured, plasticized material, along with metal pilings and added stability, yet when the parking area is not flooded due to heavy rains (Beanblossom Bottoms is a lowland area), the walkway now provides a stable, accessible structure leading to the "swamp deck" and extensive, panoramic views of the surrounding wetland. "Maybe not perfect, but we do what we can," says John Lawrence, Director of Sycamore Land Trust in Bloomington, Indiana.

The Intangible

> *Everybody needs beauty ... places to play in and pray in where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and soul alike. — John Muir*

Numerous studies reflect our intrinsic need to be connected to nature in order to sustain mental and emotional wellbeing and maintain or improve our overall health; in particular—quiet, natural spaces with trees, perhaps accompanied by a stream or body of water. "Listening to nothing except maybe the wind in the trees, or birds," as Ric Edwards puts it. "For me, being in nature helps me to focus on, and appreciate, what is around me … rather than a current situation or momentary problem." For a woman with multiple sclerosis who had not walked in over a decade due to disease progression, the intrinsic need to be surrounded by nature was the reason she spent most of her time in the living room, facing floor to ceiling windows which gave her the feeling of being part of the forest behind her residence; weather permitting (or not) these windows were thrown open to let in the sounds of birds chirping, leaves rustling, and the smell of warm earth and clover. She called the natural world her lifeline.

The natural setting outside her windows was her lifeline.

Ben Foley enjoys discovering natural areas during his travels (see below).

Age-old wisdom. the world over, points to humankind's interconnectedness with the natural world. And yet, we are increasingly disconnected from nature, both as individuals and as a society. According to surveys, Americans spend more than 90% of their time indoors, with average screen time and total media consumption consuming almost eleven hours per day among adults... and rising. For those with a disability. that time indoors may expand to 100%—imposed upon them, rather than by choice. Why? More often than not, mundane yet practical considerations unknown to most of us who blithely turn the door handle and step outside to race to our destination in a vehicle or on two willing and functional legs: a scooter malfunction or a caregiver having car trouble ("no wheels" is a common refrain); an elevator undergoing maintenance in an apartment complex (the stairwell is not an option); feet that are stuck to the floor and refuse to budge ("freezing" is all too familiar to those with Parkinson's disease); extreme, debilitating exhaustion experienced by those with multiple sclerosis; or the phenomenon known as phantom pain, described as pain referring to a missing part of the body [such as amputation] or to the paralyzed part of the body after a total spinal lesion.

Health And Wellbeing Benefits Of Being In Nature
(or having natural spaces in urban areas and recovery settings)

- ✓ Greater Happiness, Wellbeing, Life Satisfaction
- ✓ Improved: Mental Health / General Health, Sleep, Immune Function, Pain Control, Postoperative Recovery, Cancer Risk
- ✓ Reduced: Stress / Anxiety, Depression, Aggression, ADHD Symptoms, Obesity, Blood Pressure, Acute Respiratory Symptoms (attributable to the presence of trees and their removal of airborne particulate matter)

Beyond the physiological benefits, and even emotional and mental health, resides a factor of wellbeing which is housed in multivarious descriptors. Although described differently by each person, it generally falls under terms such as spirituality, something greater / bigger than me, Faith, and more. It is interesting to note that the derivation of "holy" is from an Old English word *hālig— hāl* meaning health, happiness, wholeness. For the Lakota Plains Indians, *Wakan* has been loosely translated to "holy" but is more accurately translated as "great medicine" or "mysterious," the latter signifying something beyond one's knowing, beyond one's ken—such as the "mysterious" and *Wakan* interconnectedness of all things, and the ability of nature and the elements of nature to heal both body and spirit. In all cultures, across the world, recognition of the life-giving, grounding, and salutatory benefits of nature has been as prevalent in medicinal applications as it has in guidance for matters relating to mental / emotional distress or spiritual turmoil. As a health practitioner specializing in long-term health challenges and therapeutic rehabilitation, the author of this article has seen first-hand what being outdoors on a sunny day can do for both positive mindset and healing of the body. It is not merely a consequence of physical movement; it is the moving of anima—the soul, spirit, inner self.

The Remedy

> *The elders were wise. They knew that man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard; they knew that lack of respect for growing, living things, soon led to lack of respect for humans, too.*
> — Chief Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Lakota

Over 1 in 4 of today's 20-year-olds will become disabled before they retire; to avoid or outright ignore the needs of others is to ignore our most fundamental rights and needs as human beings. Disability—whether defined as limited mobility, hearing loss, limited vision /blindness, cognitive difficulties, self-care and independent living challenges—is a moment away for any of us. For Ric Edwards, it was the time it took a light to turn red at 10th and the Bypass in Bloomington when he was 15 years old. Paralyzed and in a wheelchair, he is grateful to be alive. Now in his sixties, he has spent a lifetime endeavoring to educate public and private sectors, as well as local and state governments, of the need for accessibility in natural environments. "People just don't realize how close they are … the chance of becoming disabled is actually pretty high." From the physiological need for Vit. D for strong bones, proper neurological function, metabolizing the nutrients we ingest, and reducing depressive tendencies (thoughtfully provided by the sun and our skin's ability convert its rays into this essential nutrient), to the sensorial need for the quiet shushing of wind and the smell of pine trees, and deeper still, to the emotional and spiritual needs of each individual—raising public awareness as well as that of clinicians, academic and organizational sectors, and governmental entities is paramount when considering the right to be in natural settings.

Could one say that society is depriving numerous individuals of the benefits of health and wellbeing accorded to them by the natural world—Yes. Is it possible to rectify all aspects of the iniquities faced by those with a disability—No. Does this mean society should stop trying to remedy its shortfalls? The answer lies in our capacity as a society to create beneficial change for those who are labeled as "disabled"—changing overall mindset from disability to ability, in tandem with recognizing the numerous

abilities of those who live with this label. Whether one strolls through the natural world on two legs, a set of wheels, or in one's mind, we are all part of humankind.

This article is by no means exhaustive in its content or coverage of the topic of accessibility. While limited mobility is the primary hindrance to being in natural spaces, visual, tactile, and auditory limitations also contribute to a reduced sensorial experience of the outdoors. Unique stories and insights, as well as recommendations for accessible natural areas and green spaces, will be added below. If you live in Bloomington, Indiana, or the surrounding area, and would like to share your own (positive) experience or recommendation, please contact Second Nature Wellbeing for Life.

Finding a Natural Space:
Where to Begin, In and Around Bloomington

- ✓ Multi-use Trails in Bloomington, Indiana
- ✓ Griffy Lake Loop Trail and Accessible Fishing Pier
- ✓ Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve - Sycamore Land Trust
- ✓ Trail 4 to Donaldson Cave and Trail-loop 6 – Spring Mill State Park
- ✓ Morgan-Monroe ADA Accessible Paved Trail – This wide, paved trail winds its way through a quiet, scenic 5.2 miles of both flat and somewhat rolling terrain. Nice for those with a scooter and family or group outings.
- ✓ A major accessibility project, in collaboration with the Eppley Institute, will take shape over the next few years at Hardin Ridge Recreation Area in the Hoosier National Park. Currently, this location offers accessible shelters and picnic areas, ample accessible parking near the beach area with paved sections above the beach, and benches providing scenic views of the southern end of Lake Monroe.
- ✓ Tibetan-Mongolian Cultural Center (TMBCC) – A place for the body, mind, and spirit. Accessible parking, generally very quiet M – W. Check FB page to avoid crowds.

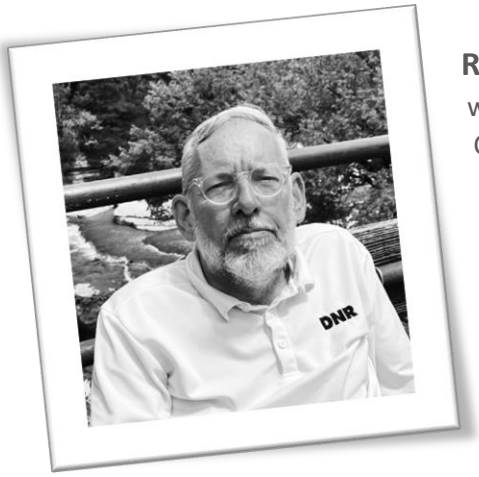
Monroe Lake and some of its feathered inhabitants.

Stacy Duke (L) and Marion Mason (R) discuss the beach area project at Hardin Ridge.

The Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center in Bloomington, Indiana offers quiet, paved areas. Some benches around the lotus pond are accessible to those with limited mobility.

Their Own Stories

Ben Foley is somewhat of an adventurous spirit. Taking his wheelchair, alone, on a 20-mile charge to a national park outside of Helsinki, Finland, was not particularly intimidating to him; in fact, he was looking forward to it as a means to get away from the noise of the city. Ben is autistic (and proud of it)—certain sounds, and particularly that of traffic, usually require headphones and white noise in order to lessen the impact and overall sense of tension / anxiety they create. Although he admits that certain sounds can be a significant issue, there are other considerations when deciding to take a "stroll" as he refers to his excursion in the outdoors, such as having TAR syndrome. Nevertheless, the comfort and solace provided by natural settings override these factors to the extent that heading out of town on a limited battery charge becomes more of a necessity than a jaunt, which was the case when heading for the park outside of Helsinki. "It was so quiet," he recalls, "I didn't even need the headphones." He goes on to describe the markedly clear, unpolluted air, wide vistas, and sense of peace which the open, rolling area gave him. On a practical level, he appreciated the extensive stretches of well-packed trail which were not only wide enough for him to comfortably use his electric wheelchair but were obviously designed with accessibility in mind: gentle curves rather than sharp bends, following the flatter areas, and no major potholes / ruts. "It makes a difference when it's not an obstacle course!"



Ric Edwards grew up in Spencer, Indiana. Despite his on-the-road work as the Indiana Department of Natural Resources ADA Compliance Director, he looks forward to time spent in the relative quiet of his hometown. "The noise in Indy drives me crazy. In Spencer, it's like listening to nothing—well, no, not nothing, except maybe wind in the trees and birds. I love that." Life changed for Edwards when he was thrown from a car during a collision at 10th and the Bypass in Bloomington. Fifteen years old, paralyzed from the neck down, he still remembers the prognosis, given in rather blunt terms: if he survived, he would be a "vegetable." Although he has had a full life—he is married with children, earned a college degree, and has spent a lifetime advocating for accessible environments for those with disabilities—his impression is that the medical community views life in a wheelchair as life being over. "My life has been better than I could have imagined." He credits his mother, wife, and people around him who saw him as a whole person, as well as the accident, for changing his perception of what was most intrinsic to his wellbeing—his Faith. He sees the deeper meaning in life, something greater and timeless, reflected in the magnificence of nature … whether at Yosemite or in the wooded hills of Brown County.

As a therapist specializing in neurological conditions and long-term health challenges, we have heard the life-stories of many clients, as well as being part of their life as years go by. In the case of "D," one of these stories was the deep impact that growing up in the outdoors had on her. That love of the natural world remained with her throughout her life: despite the multiple sclerosis, recurring cancer, fractured leg, and significant health complications, she felt that as long as she could hear the birds chattering and singing, watch the baby rabbits and deer in the grassy area between the house and the surrounding forest, and nap in front of a vibrant autumnal display or drifting snowflakes outside the living room windows, she would be "Ok." She had spent a lifetime helping others—now it was nature's turn to help her. *"D" is no longer with us, but she is remembered.*