

Accessible Parks and Trails Assessment Report



**2010 Legacies Now
and
S Golden + Associates
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1.0 Summary

British Columbia has over 95 million hectares of land and freshwater within its limits and about 13 million hectares of this is parkland covered with thousands of kilometers of trails. These parks are used by just about every British Columbian as well as by the millions that visit this province each year. The parks serve a variety of purposes that provide significant social, economic and health benefits. Federal Parks have global reputations that draw visitors from all parts of the world. Provincial parks meet the growing demands of both overnight users (BC Parks reports increases in camping visits up to 2.3 million in 2006) and day users (16.5 million in 2006). Some regional parks also have long term camping facilities with plans to expand. Regional and municipal parks are integral to providing outdoor recreational and interpretive experiences daily to thousands of visitors. Municipal trails constitute approximately 61.8% of all trails in BC according to the BC Recreation Trails Strategy. Parks of all sizes and types are a defining aspect of British Columbia.

In fact, demand for the benefits derived from parks and trails are universal. This extends to the approximately 15% of the population with a disability, families with small children and the largest growing sector - active seniors - that are seeking ***accessible and inclusive recreation and leisure experiences***. These demographic groups present a unique opportunity and challenge for organizations managing and maintaining park assets. While it is already impressive that many of the parks in BC already have some degree of accessible features, how do we ensure that this is not only maintained but expands? This report and the attached toolkit attempts to:

Accessibility

Physical access for those with mobility, visual, hearing and cognitive disabilities as well as seniors, families with strollers, people who speak their languages and others

Inclusion

Universal participation in all the programs and services (including information and communications) that an experience has to offer

- Uncover accessibility initiatives already under way in B.C., Canada and beyond (highlighting best practices)
- Establish universal principles and objectives to guide a shared vision for accessibility in parks and trails throughout BC.
- Offer a simple and consistent approach to assessing accessibility of parks and trails in BC.
- Provide guidelines for parks organizations to make strategic decisions concerning accessibility in their parks
- Provide guidance to ensure that accessibility and inclusiveness are embedded into sustainable business practices

Contents

Attached to this Report is the Accessible Parks and Trails Assessment Toolkit which includes:

- A step-by-step guide for conducting Accessible Parks and Trails Assessments
- The Accessible Parks and Trails Inventory spreadsheet for taking stock of existing physical assets in a park
- Accessibility Standards providing universal measures for assessing the accessibility levels of assets, information and services, and business practices
- Glossary of Terms

Collectively, the Toolkit assists park management and senior executives in developing an understanding of the current accessibility levels in their parks. Ultimately, this will help to make better strategic decisions as related to Planning, Design, Budgeting and Management/Operations and provide the foundation for better information dissemination.

2.0 Project Background

This project is a by-product of the Accessible Tourism Strategy funded by the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance (MEIA). On May 18, 2007, MEIA (now the Ministry of Housing and Social Development) approved \$1.14 million towards the development and implementation of an accessible tourism strategy. Parks play an integral role in drawing in visitors from around the world and the benefit they offer to British Columbians, Canadians and our neighbours to the south. Because of this, it was quickly identified that support was needed to include parks in the tourism strategy. An additional \$300,000 was approved on May 18, 2008 of which some of this was to be directed towards achieving these ends.

The first phase of the project was to conduct research determining what was already being done in other jurisdictions and learn from these efforts. This was followed by a workshop held April 4, 2008 to help frame the accessible parks and trails challenge. Feedback from the workshop and subsequent discussions have been incorporated in this document and helped to guide the principles and approach moving forward. The following groups were consulted in this process:

- Federal parks (Parks Canada)- Alison Manley
- Provincial parks (BC Parks)- Lynn Bremner
- Regional parks (Metro Vancouver, Capital Region District)- Barry Potvin, Brad Drew
- Campgrounds (BC Lodging and Campgrounds Association, Tourism BC)- Joss Penny, Pierre Drouin, Brent Hegadoren
- Disability Organizations (CNIB, BCPA, Power to Be Therapeutic Recreation, SPARC, and the Powell River Model Community/Measuring Up Committee)- Emese Szucs, Tim Cormode, David Morris

The next phase resulted in this Final Report and Toolkit, further consultation with stakeholders and targeted pilots across a variety of parks in B.C. Ultimately, this resource will be made publically available with the goal of promoting a consistent approach across jurisdictions.

3.0 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this Report and Toolkit is to develop a consistent approach for assessing accessibility and inclusion in parks and on trails in British Columbia. To accomplish this, a working group of parks representatives, disability organizations and park users was assembled to assess the park accessibility landscape and establish a consistent approach based on universal principles and standards that allow organizations the flexibility to customize tools to meet their unique strategic objectives. The value of parks to all citizens is not disputed and ensuring that they are available to everyone is the guiding vision of this project.

Importance of features for users from surveys in California State Parks

1. Accessible washrooms
2. Access to trails/beaches
3. Accessible picnic areas
4. Accessible camping
5. Parking
6. Public information and signage about access opportunities
7. Resting points along trails



4.0 Principles

The Report and attached tools are based on the following underlying planning and design principles:

- All park users should have **equal** opportunities and choice to independently experience and enjoy the representative park environments, facilities, programs and services
- Protection of the natural environment should not be unnecessarily compromised by park development
- Commitment to **ongoing** monitoring and evaluation of access implementation in parks
- Universal design principles should be applied to site planning, design, implementation, and maintenance. Universal design means taking into consideration the needs of as many people as possible without the need of adaptation or specialized design for specific groups. The benefits of universal design are safer and more welcoming parks and trails for all. Universal design guidelines permit flexibility, if equal or greater accessibility can be provided by a different or more creative design solution.

Accessibility is important to a variety of park users:

- Seniors
- People with limited mobility including those who use manual and power wheelchairs, strollers or canes
- People with visual and hearing impairments
- Families with strollers and small children
- People with developmental, cognitive and mental disabilities
- People with ESL needs

Principles of Universal Design

1. **Equitable use:** parks are accessible to all users, provide the same means for all users, identical where possible, equivalent when not
2. **Flexibility in use:** parks accommodate a wide range of individual preferences and abilities, provide choice for all
3. **Simple and intuitive:** understanding the park and context should be easy, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language or skill
4. **Perceptible Information:** information is communicated effectively to the user regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.
5. **Tolerance for Error:** hazards and the adverse consequences of accidents are minimized (most used elements are the most accessible, hazardous elements are isolated or eliminated, provide warnings)
6. **Low physical effort:** the design can be used efficiently and comfortably with a minimum of fatigue.
7. **Size and Space for approach and use:** appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, regardless of user's body size, posture or mobility

[NC State University, The Center for Universal Design](#)

5.0 Process

In order to assist organizations to ensure a successful and sustainable accessibility and inclusion program, the following process guide highlights the key components of an accessibility strategy for parks.

Establish Team

1. Create an Accessibility Team to coordinate accessibility and assessment projects within various parks agencies.
2. Establish an Advisory Team - include members from relevant disability organizations to:
 - Serve as a readily available source of input and perspective.
 - Help to identify recreational needs of people with disabilities.
3. Develop a training session for all personnel participating in accessibility projects to ensure consistency.

Define Objectives for Accessibility Upgrades

4. Establish objectives for level of accessibility to be achieved on a site or system wide basis (see section 6)
 - Identify existing accessible experiences throughout the parks system and establish objectives for upgrades.
 - Identify park experiences that are missing within a park system, so the effort can be placed on expanding options, not just duplicating what is already in place
 - Seek comments from interested groups and individuals regarding objectives/priorities to determine priority parks for upgrades
 - Establish objectives for accessible service delivery throughout the geographical area served

Prioritization criteria for deciding what parks/trails to upgrade for accessibility:

1. High use or demand
2. Serve the widest possible range of park visitors, and have some existing level of accessibility
3. Offer representative recreational experiences (from urban to wilderness experience)
4. Considered representational regional landscape (forest, marsh, meadow, etc.)
5. Terrain (easy terrain has greater priority)
6. Landscape impact (low impact has higher priority)
7. Geographic distribution (variety of regions)

Example of Objectives for Specific Projects - (3 categories of project types - Washington State Parks).

1. Provide one accessible washroom in each park
2. Provide accessible day use facilities in appropriate parks
3. Provide accessible camping facilities in appropriate state parks

Conduct Assessment/Field Inventory

5. Conduct field review on a site specific basis to provide data on the current state and deficiencies at an identified priority site. Trends/needs and gaps can then be analyzed at a municipal, regional or provincial wide basis.
 - Prioritize assessment locations and determine scope of project (features and elements to be assessed for each site). Site assessments can identify potential for reducing barriers, as well as those areas that are inappropriate for further development
 - Identify nearly accessible facilities- trails and facilities that are essentially barrier free or could easily be improved. (This information on existing accessible features should be incorporated into any communications material for the public).
 - Identify areas for improvement to be included in the analysis.

Analysis and Decision Making

6. Prioritize projects (based on objectives), determine costs of potential projects, develop upgrade plan
 - Prioritize projects within each organization (ie. regional, municipal, provincial scale)
 - Review prioritized sites with advisory committee
 - Plan/budget for future improvements (see examples of prioritizing)

Example of Prioritizing for Improvement Cost/Scope

Immediate Action - High priority due to health and safety issues

Short Term - Dealt with in an ongoing process through routine maintenance, minimal additional resources required. Can be easily scheduled and completed.

Medium Term- Addressed through structural upgrades with minimal additional resources. Through capital or operating budgets. Fairly easy to schedule and complete.

Longer Term requirements - Generally includes capital funding and incorporates larger and more complex construction projects.

Implementation and Monitoring

- Undertake priority improvements
- Improve non-prioritized features when opportunities arise
- A scheduled program should be undertaken to monitor the improvements and re-evaluate each park with respect to accessibility
- Distribute information on upgrades to staff and the public (website, materials)
- Create an opportunity for ongoing public feedback

6.0 Levels of Access

Below are the proposed levels of access that will help to define consistent standards in park development. The standards will help to provide clearly defined levels of access that will be communicated and easily understood by the general public.

Basic Access

Basic access ensures that someone with limited mobility or using a wheelchair can get to and/or inside a facility or feature (including main entrances and public washrooms, if available). Some people may require assistance to access all features (trails, beaches etc.)

Intermediate Access

Intermediate access builds on basic access by providing safe access throughout facilities and use of amenities for both people with mobility and visual impairments. Trails are negotiable by most wheelchair users.

Universal Access

Universal access ensures full access to all aspects of a facility or feature, regardless of ability. This includes physical access for those with mobility, visual, hearing and cognitive disabilities as well as seniors, families with strollers, people who speak their languages etc.

7.0 Standards

Standards have been identified from existing sources including Canadian Standards Association, BC Building Code, Camping Select, Americans with Disabilities Act Guidelines, etc. They help to define the level of access, described earlier, and are based on universal measures outlined in the Accessible Parks and Trails Assessment Toolkit. The Standards have been classified into sub-categories for ease of use and are outlined in the assessment toolkit to be used in conjunction with the assessment spreadsheet.

7.1 Assets (includes all features/amenities within a park)

- **Common Measures**
Standards for general space requirements and other measures found in conjunction with most assets/features.

Clear space, cross slope, building entrances, hand controls, barriers, hazards, knee clearance, stairs, ramps, surfaces, signage

- **Camping and Lodging**

Any type of accommodation within the park limits (tent sites, drive-in sites, lodges/cabins, kayak campsites, hook ups, pedestal grills, fire pits/fireplace, firewood areas, showers)

- **Amenities**

Items which support the park experience (parking areas, washrooms, showers, picnic areas, kitchen facilities, telephones, pay stations, garbage/recycling, water fountains and faucets, dock, fishing pier, boardwalks, laundry, restaurant, benches, rest stops, playground, signage, information desk, concession)

- **Features**

Built and natural elements of a park that are core to the park experience (beach access, outdoor theatre, viewing area)

7.2 Links (Includes paths and trails)

Paths are short links between assets that exist mainly for circulation purposes whereas trails are usually recreational or scenic routes that may go to viewpoints, other trails, or are simply circle routes.

- **Paths**

Accessible paths ensure *universal access* connecting main park elements, and must be continuous and free from obstructions. They should be the main path of travel for the general public to the maximum extent feasible. Appendix D outlines accessibility standards for providing universally accessible paths.

- **Trails**

Universally accessible trails should provide a recreational experience for all trail users that integrates with the natural setting without detracting from the visitor's experience. The design should accommodate the maximum amount of accessibility for a specific landscape type without compromising ecological or cultural resources. A system wide distribution of trails specific to the park agency should provide accessible trail experiences in a variety of landscape types within each regional area or park system subset. An accessible trail should provide visitors with the experience of the representative landscape found within the park.

Trail Access Levels:

The three trail levels (basic, intermediate, universal) expand the range and scope of accessible trails beyond specifications found within existing building codes and provides an opportunity for users to experience a broader range of trail experiences. Such a system does not compromise the recreational experience for anyone, nor segregate users. A good system of signage and simple communication of what each accessibility level entails is necessary for user selection of trail type.

Appendix D Trails Table- outlines specific standards for providing accessible trails. Standards for trail design and classification include measurements for:

- Length of Trail
- Width
- Surface
- Max grade (slope)
- Max grade X length before resting area required
- Shoulder
- Cross slope
- Use frequency
- Trail access
- Rest stop/benches
- Edge conditions
- Barriers/hazards
- Features

Park agencies are encouraged to provide as much information as possible about trails to users on trailhead or orientation signage, information brochures and website. Information about trail length, grade, surface, rest stops etc. can help users determine for themselves their ability and willingness to undertake the experience. Some park agencies may prefer to provide a rating based on the standards provided in Appendix D (basic, intermediate or universal access) and sign the trail accordingly.

To maintain universally accessible paths and consistent trail classifications over time, a maintenance assessment should be conducted on a schedule determined by the appropriate park agency. The assessment should include a review of:

- Trail walking surfaces
- Obstacles- locations and magnitude
- Presence of vegetation growing within trail corridor
- Condition of drainage structures and standing water
- Presence of downed trees
- Condition of signage
- Condition of site furnishings

Universal Trail Assessment Process is an established proprietary assessment process that evaluates existing trails and provides standardized information to the public on specific features of a trail. Park agencies may consider this process when conducting trail assessments.

[\(Beneficial Designs, California\)](#)

7.3 Services

Services are the activities and experiences offered within the park, either through the park or alternate sources that add value to the overall park experience. The main service categories include:

- Programming
Park delivered, planned and actively managed recreation and leisure services that augment the park experience (i.e. swimming, fishing, boating)

- Interpretive and Outreach Programs
Non-recreational services (i.e. interpretive services, translators, outreach programs, etc.)

7.4 Information

Accurate and reliable information is a critical (and often inexpensive) element in a successful park experience. The information that needs to be assessed includes what is offered for the pre-trip planning as well as what is available onsite. Information includes both the content offered and the method in which it is communicated. Useful information will clearly communicate what a park has to offer to all users.

- Online materials
Information available at the park website
- Telecom services
Information provided over the telephone (i.e. telephone reservations)
- On-site materials
Information provided at the park (i.e. maps, guides, wayfinding signs, face-to-face communications,
- Off-site materials
Information provided at local tourist bureaus (airport, BC ferries, recreation centres)

7.5 Business Practices

Business practices are the policies, practices and procedures that ensure a safe, secure and high quality park experience.

- Training and Orientation (including education and awareness)
- Recruitment and Hiring
- Emergency and Security Policies and Practices

8.0 Tools

Assessment Toolkit (Appendix A)

The Assessment Toolkit contains the step-by-step guide for conducting assessments.

Inventory Spreadsheet (Appendix B)

The Inventory Spreadsheet is a simple Excel spreadsheet with a list of yes and no questions to be used by Assessors. Based on the value (yes or no) for each question will determine the level of access attributed to that element.

Glossary of Terms (Appendix C)

Standards (Appendix D)

References (Appendix E)

