

Howard Hill Universally Accessible Trail Initiative

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*Howard Hill
Photograph: Norm Rodrigue*

Definitions

Accessibility - The extent to which independent access to particular environments or services is feasible without barriers for individuals with disabilities (Open to All)

Equity - Fairness achieved by considering each individual's particular needs and circumstances rather than treating everyone the same (Open to All)

Inclusion - Ensuring a sense of belonging for everyone (Open to All)

Universally Accessible Trails

Accessibility is becoming a priority in the management of public lands across the United States. The initiatives taken to implement features of accessibility are crucial in the quest to make the outdoors an inclusive space. One common way in which the managers of public lands have engaged in equity-conscious land management is to develop universally accessible trails, which are distinguished by several features. Accessible trails use low grades, smooth and firm surfaces, and extra width to enable as many people as possible to use them. These features help ensure that a person who wants to experience the outdoors has that opportunity regardless of their specific mix of abilities.



Enock Glidden giving an interview

In this context, it is important to recognize that disabilities come in many guises. Universally accessible trails must accommodate a variety of disabilities, including but not limited to mobility challenges, vision impairments, and cognitive difficulties. Accessibility also involves addressing both social and physical barriers. For example, land that is close to or easy to get to from population centers is more accessible.

Kennebec Land Trust Accessible Trail Initiative

Our summer intern research project for the Kennebec Land Trust (KLT) is a trail accessibility feasibility study for the City of Augusta's Howard Hill Historical Park in Augusta (164 acres) and the City of Hallowell's Effie L. Berry Conservation Area (8 acres). KLT holds conservation easements on these contiguous properties and works in partnership with the two cities to help maintain the properties and trail networks.

Howard Hill & Effie L. Berry Conservation Area as a Location:
Percent population living with disabilities as of 2020:

	Hearing	Vision	Cognitive	Ambulatory	Total
Augusta - (Total Population:18,923)	6.3%	2.7%	11.5%	9.9%	20.5%
Hallowell - (Total Population:2,567)	9.3%	4%	8%	9.3%	20.5%

(U.S. Census Bureau)

Considering the population demographics of Augusta and Hallowell, a universally accessible trail would be extremely beneficial to the community. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the national average for the percentage of population living with disabilities is 12.7% as of 2021. Augusta and Hallowell are both well above the national average, with 20.5% each. A significant portion of the population of this area has been unable to enjoy the outdoors to the fullest extent, and the Howard Hill/Berry location would be the perfect place to remedy this situation. Howard Hill is especially appropriate because it is a particularly beautiful property, with mixed conifer and hardwood forests and unobstructed views of the Maine State Capitol Building and the Kennebec Valley.

Research Process

A central objective of the accessible trail initiative was to create an informational video as part of the outreach for this project. The video was produced by Tim Long, a professional videographer. We are very grateful for his contributions—we could not have completed this project without him. Our video aims to provide information regarding universally accessible trails and encourages viewers to support the possibility of an accessible trail on Howard Hill. The video includes interviews with community members, among them people with firsthand experience of accessible trails, as well as clips of how we, along with KLT staff, evaluate a trail’s potential for accessibility.



Tucker Schulze works with Tim Long to conduct interview.



Ethan Ross demonstrates trail assessment process.

Another research objective focused on the process of assessing several KLT properties being considered for accessibility improvements. Working through a preliminary list of potential properties, we went out into the field to measure accessibility. The first step was to create a high-accuracy GPS map of the trail, including its length. Next, the grade (slope), width, cross slope, and impeding features (e.g., roots, rocks, etc.) were measured between waypoints. This data will be analyzed by KLT staff to assess their ability to be more accessible to the public.



The two images were generated using the Gaia GPS app. Each location marker is a waypoint where grade, width, and cross slope were measured and tread descriptions were recorded. These are only two of several potential locations being considered.

Our research highlighted some of the inherent biases in the way society views nature and accessibility. For example, many features that are generally viewed as making an area more accessible, like bog bridging, do not meet established accessibility standards. Given the many misconceptions, accessibility requires not only that we solve a set of practical problems, but also that we work to change the mindset of the general population.

In turn, changing mindsets depends on an expanded perspective that goes beyond individual experiences and makes room for every individual to have a sense of belonging. Studying the feasibility of a universally accessible trail at Howard Hill is just a first step in KLT's prioritization

of inclusion and accessibility. We hope that KLT will become a significant force in making outdoor spaces in central Maine truly inclusive, and that the values of inclusion will become ingrained into the very definition of the organization.

Howard Hill Trail Accessibility Video

<https://www.tkl.org/howard-hill-trail-accessibility>

Sources

Land Trust Alliance Advisory Council on Inclusive Health and Disabilities, Open to All: A Disability Guide for Land Trusts (2021).

"Augusta, Maine: Disability Characteristics." American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, (2020).

"Hallowell, Maine: Disability Characteristics." American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, (2020).

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