

Which trails in open space are accessible?

This is my very first “Ask a Ranger” question that was not posted on an index card, it came to me by way of the telephone and was asked by someone experiencing mobility issues for the first time. In order to answer this question I need to ask, and answer, two others first.

First, how are you, or me, differently abled, or handicapped? Do you wear glasses (I do)? Are you left handed? Right handed (me again)? Have any allergies (and again)? Wear a hearing aid? Have arthritis? Wear inserts in your shoes (and again, but not always)? Have to be careful because of a previous injury (and again)? Have any recurring/lasting medical condition? Speak English as a second language? Are especially susceptible to poison ivy, oak or sumac (definitely me again)? Get sunburned easily (me again, my wife likes to say I can get a moon burn)? If you answered yes to any of the previous questions, or any similar ones you can come up with, guess what? You are handicapped (or differently abled).

“Handicapped” has a very broad definition, it is not confined to: people who can not see, people who can not walk, people who can not hear, people who can not talk or people who are not as smart as “me.”

The second thing we have to do is define “access.” Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines access as: permission, liberty or ability to enter, approach, communicate with, or pass to and from ... the freedom or ability to obtain or make use of.”

ADA guidelines define accessibility as: “...guaranteed “equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations” (parks are defined as a public accommodation in the guidelines).

When we combine these definitions, we discover there is not one answer. There are just over 35 miles of trails in Palo Alto Open Space. Many of these “trails” are very easily accessible; they are very wide, mostly flat, with firm, stable surfaces. Almost anyone can navigate one of them with ease. On the far other end of the spectrum we have some trails that are very steep, only a few inches wide, are covered with loose gravel and are on the edge of a ravine. Almost nobody can navigate these trails with ease. The rest of the trails cover the entire rest of the spectrum.

A particular trails’ accessibility is best defined as the usability of that trail for a particular user. Erik Weihenmayer (a blind climber) summited Mount Everest in 2001; Mark Inglis (a double amputee (both legs) climber) summited Mount Everest in 2006. Both of these men used trails and did something that I do not consider accessible to me.

Most of the difficulties that arise in trying to determine if a trail is accessible come from our methods of describing them. We almost always use subjective measurements to describe a trail. It can be muddy (is that California muddy or Maine in the springtime

muddy?), or dry (Florida or sub Saharan Africa dry?), steep (Mount Everest steep or more than a standard ramp steep?) And so on.

We have a few trails in Open Space that have been measured using a system called UTAP (Universal Trail Assessment Process). Instead of subjective measurements, the trail is described using only quantifiable measurements. The trail has a 10 percent slope with a maximum 3 percent cross slope, it is 48 inches at the widest 30 inches at the narrowest and an average of 36 inches throughout (this is a somewhat simplified version, there are many measurements that are taken in order to describe a particular trail).

My best answer to the original question posed to me is: call me (my name and phone number are below) and ask about particular trails. I will be happy to discuss your needs and make suggestions with those needs in mind. I am interested in trying to find out what variously abled park users are looking for when they decide to come into Open Space and how we can better provide the information you may be looking for.