



Able to Explore: Accessibility & Inclusion Guidelines for Nature Festivals

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INTRODUCTION

These Accessibility & Inclusion Guidelines for Outdoor Nature Events were developed following the implementation of the Able to Explore project at the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). Through this initiative, we aimed to reduce barriers and promote more inclusive outdoor experiences for people with disabilities and seniors. The project was made possible in part through funding from the Ontario government’s EnAbling Change Program.

The insights presented in this document are based on a combination of community feedback, consultations with stakeholders, relevant literature, and on-the-ground experience delivering nature-based programming and events across TRCA sites. They reflect our learnings and the opportunities we identified to create safer, more welcoming, and more accessible events in natural settings.

We recognize that meaningful accessibility and inclusion requires proactive planning, flexibility, and genuine collaboration. These guidelines are intended as a living resource to support event planners, community partners, and site managers in the environmental sector and beyond. They aim to help create and sustain environments where everyone can connect with and enjoy nature.



Staff conducting a safety discussion for visitors prior to trail activities at Bruce’s Mill event.

EARLY PLANNING

Collaborative & Inclusive Planning

Inclusive events are strongest when built on meaningful collaboration. Accessibility isn't achieved in isolation. This requires active input from the communities you aim to include.

- Define strong partnerships early in the planning process, with roles and responsibilities clearly assigned.
- If you don't yet have partnerships in place, look to your local community:
 - Reach out to organizations that work with seniors, people with disabilities, caregivers, and support networks.
 - Connect with local advocacy groups, health units, libraries, or community centres who may have insights or be willing to collaborate.



Staff supporting visitors as they roast marshmallows during nature programming at Bruce's Mill.



Staff supporting visitors during a maple tapping demonstration at Bruce's Mill Maple Syrup Festival.

- Use bottom-up decision-making
 - Consult directly with people who experience barriers to nature programming.
 - Invite community members to co-design aspects of your event, from layout to communication strategies. Plan how information about accessibility will be communicated in every co-design decision.
 - Be prepared to compensate people for their time and lived experience, especially where consultation informs program design.
 - Consider inclusive hiring or volunteering by recruiting staff or volunteers with lived experience of disability or accessibility challenges. This ensures diverse perspectives are represented in planning and delivery.

Communication & Promotion

Clear, transparent communication about accessibility ensures that all visitors can make informed decisions and feel welcome at your event. Because accessibility information is critical, it should be communicated broadly and consistently across multiple channels, even if some details appear elsewhere in the guide.

- Provide detailed accessibility information in multiple formats and locations:
 - Website, including everyday-language summaries of site conditions and available supports
 - Printed flyers or programs
 - On-site signage at entrances, trailheads, and high-traffic areas
 - Social media posts or newsletters

CASE EXAMPLE – LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

During planning for the Maple Syrup Festival, TRCA consulted the Autism Advisory Committee (AAC) at Kerry's Place Autism Services. Several participants raised an issue we had not considered: the stickiness of maple syrup can be overstimulating for some attendees. They asked whether hand-washing stations or wipes would be available. In response, we expanded hand-cleaning options throughout the site.

This experience reminded us that lived experience often surfaces needs planners might overlook, highlighting the value of direct consultation and bottom-up decision-making.

- State site conditions clearly:
 - Include surface type (paved, gravel, grass, uneven) and the presence of ramps, stairs, or seating.
- List available supports:
 - ASL interpretation, wheelchair rentals, accessible shuttle services, quiet spaces, and any other accommodations.
- Designate dedicated staff for accessibility coordination:
 - Assign a dedicated on-site staff member to handle inquiries, coordinate with community organizations, and ensure accommodations, providing personalized and site-specific support rather than a general accommodations contact.
- Encourage proactive outreach:
 - Ensure that staff reach out to community partners, disability networks, and local organizations to promote the event and its inclusive features.

Consistent communication at every stage ensures that accessibility is visible and that attendees can plan and participate confidently.

Infrastructure & Site Design

Thoughtful site design plays a key role in making outdoor events welcoming and inclusive. Consider how physical features—or their absence—can enable or restrict participation for seniors and people with disabilities.

- Washrooms:



Visitor holding a staff member's hand while engaged in discussion during nature programming at Bruce's Mill event.

- Provide clearly marked, accessible washrooms that can accommodate mobility devices. Indicate locations on maps, signage, and online.
- Ensure pathways to washrooms are flat, stable, well-lit, and free of obstructions.
- If accessible washrooms are not available, this must be clearly stated in promotional materials so attendees can make informed decisions and prepare accordingly.
- **Shade & Shelter:**
 - Include shaded areas or shelters to protect from sun, rain, and wind (e.g., tents, tree cover, canopies). Communicate their locations clearly.
 - Make these easily identifiable and evenly distributed across the event site.
- **Seating:**

- Offer ample seating options throughout the site, especially near high-traffic areas, waiting zones, and along trails. Promote the availability of these spaces in materials and signage.
- Prioritize benches with backs and armrests to support rest and stability for seniors and people with balance or mobility concerns.



Staff seated outdoors on chairs during the winter at Bruce's Mill Maple Syrup Festival.

- For very large or busy festivals where space is limited, provide reserved seating for people with disabilities and seniors to ensure accessible rest options.
- Picnic tables can be used for group activities, food areas, or social gathering points, but other seating should be provided as well. Picnic tables can be difficult to climb in an out of, and do not provide any back or arm support. Ensure tables are accessible, with clear knee space for wheelchairs, stable surfaces, and shaded where possible.

- Hydration:
 - Provide accessible water refill stations or bottled water at no or low cost.
 - Ensure water access is available at multiple points and is clearly marked with signage.

Incorporating these physical supports not only increases accessibility, but it also improves comfort and safety for all attendees.

Trail Accessibility & Navigation

If your event includes a trail walk or nature path, providing clear, detailed information helps participants assess their ability to enjoy the experience safely and comfortably. Thoughtful trail design and communication can make the difference for seniors, people with mobility challenges, and anyone new to outdoor trails.

- Go beyond standard trail signage:
 - Most trails already have directional or safety signs, but event-specific signage should emphasize accessibility and inclusive participation. Include clear markers for accessible entrances, rest areas, ramps, boardwalks, and high-traffic or narrow sections. Communicate trail information in marketing materials and online.
- Provide detailed digital or visual resources:
 - Consider creating short videos or photo tours of the trail, highlighting surfaces, slopes, rest areas, and any potential obstacles. Make sure the videos online show seasonal differences in the trail conditions.



Visitor enjoying nature programming during event at Bruce's Mill Conservation Park.

- Mark key points along the trail, such as halfway markers or rest stops, so visitors can gauge their progress and decide if they need to pause or turn back. Communicate trail length, difficulty, and seasonal conditions in advance.
- Include maps or wayfinding aids at trailheads and throughout the path with large fonts, high-contrast visuals, and AODA-compliant design.
- Account for seasonal and changing trail conditions:
 - For events outside of summer, trails can change daily due to thawing, rain, or snow. Staff should monitor these changes and ensure that accessibility features remain safe and functional in the shifting landscape.
 - Provide updates through website, emails to ticket-holders, and on-site signage.
- Integrate trail information resources into promotional materials.

Accessibility and thoughtful navigation are often overlooked in outdoor events, yet their promotion is critical. Even the best-designed inclusive measures will only make an impact if participants know they exist. Sharing detailed information through signage, maps, digital resources, and outreach ensures that people who have historically been excluded can plan, attend, and fully enjoy your event with confidence.

PRE-EVENT PREPERATION

Weather Preparedness

Global weather is increasingly unpredictable, with more frequent extreme heat, cold, storms, and poor air quality (Zhang et al., 2024). Climate change is impacting all communities. Particularly underserved populations, including seniors and people with disabilities who may have fewer resources or limited access to safe alternatives (Revanth et al., 2024).

From our experience in the Able to Explore project in 2025, several outdoor events and programs were cancelled due to unsafe weather conditions, including ice storms, extreme heat, and air quality advisories.



Families walking along the trail at Bruce's Mill Maple Syrup Festival, with snow on either side.

These disruptions highlight the importance of both flexibility and proactive planning. When planning your festival or large-scale outdoor event:

- Develop clear contingency plans: include rain dates, indoor backup locations, or virtual alternatives where possible.
- When collaborating with community agencies, check their weather-related policies. These may differ from your own, so align plans early and share your insights as an outdoor-events specialist to help everyone prepare consistently.
- Communicate weather plans early and accessibly, using multiple channels (website, social media, signage, email) so participants know what to expect and how to prepare.
- Offer weather-safe spaces on-site: shaded rest areas in summer, wind barriers or warming tents in winter.
- Monitor air quality and heat alerts and consider adapting programming or rescheduling based on health risks for general and vulnerable populations. Share updates promptly with attendees via accessible communication channels.

EVENT-DAY / ON-SITE CONSIDERATIONS

Sensory Differences

Sensory needs vary widely as some individuals are hypersensitive (avoiding sensory input), while others are hyposensitive (seeking additional input). Creating an inclusive event means acknowledging and planning for both ends of the sensory spectrum. Outdoor spaces often feel less overwhelming for autistic adults (MacLennan et al., 2023), making them an important option to include when planning inclusive events.

- Designate sensory-friendly times and spaces, especially in indoor or high-traffic areas:
 - For example, establish quiet sensory hours (e.g., 9–11 a.m. or 2–4 p.m.) where noise and lighting are minimized.



A sensory space at Bruce's Mill Maple Syrup Festival.

- Offer multi-sensory experiences at other times for those who benefit from increased stimulation, such as tactile stations, nature sounds, or interactive displays.
- Provide choice and flexibility by clearly identifying zones for varying levels of sensory input:
 - Quiet/rest areas for retreat.
 - Interactive areas for sensory exploration.
- Where event space is limited, implement scheduled access blocks—for instance, designate 9:00–10:30 a.m. as a quiet, low-stimulus period and 10:45 a.m.–12:30 p.m. for high-energy, interactive programming. Anticipate heavier demand for indoor or covered spaces during cold, windy, or rainy conditions and communicate availability and schedules clearly.
- Plan for sensory differences and disabilities:
 - Ensure your organization has a plan to support attendees with sensory disabilities, including people who are d/Deaf, blind or have low vision. This might include ASL interpreters, tactile or braille signage, assistive listening devices, or trained staff to provide guidance as needed. Share these plans in promotional materials and online so attendees can plan ahead.
- Use clear signage and promotion (on-site and online) to communicate when and where different sensory supports are available.

With intentional planning and consultation, it's possible to create welcoming environments that respect and support diverse sensory processing needs.



Signage at Tommy Thompson Park Spring Bird Festival directs visitors to a sensory space for breaks.

Sound & Audio Considerations

Festivals and outdoor events often bring a lively, high-energy atmosphere with music, DJs, food trucks, and performances. While these elements contribute to the overall experience, it's important to recognize that high volumes and constant sound can be overwhelming for some participants.

Inclusive sound planning ensures that everyone can engage comfortably, whether they enjoy the excitement or prefer a quieter experience.

- Map out sound zones intentionally:
 - Separate loud activity areas from quiet or rest zones to reduce unintentional overstimulation. Communicate these zones on maps, schedules, and signage.
- Use directional speakers to help contain sound within specific areas and minimize spillover into quieter parts of the site.
- Avoid placing speakers near essential spaces, such as washrooms, rest areas, or sensory-friendly zones.
- If your event includes a designated quiet sensory block, such as a specific time reserved for sensory-sensitive participants, audio should be minimized or paused across the site during that window. Announce this in advance across all channels.
- Communicate sound-heavy periods in advance:
 - Include schedules for performances or high-volume activities on signage and event materials so attendees can plan accordingly.



Entertainer on stilts performing at Bruce's Mill Maple Syrup Festival.

By integrating inclusive sound design and clear communication, you support both vibrant festival experiences and accessibility.

Transportation & Wayfinding

Very important but often overlooked, ensuring attendees can easily and safely arrive at, navigate through, and exit your event site is a major determinant of accessibility and inclusion. Thoughtful planning in this area can make the difference between a truly inclusive event and one that inadvertently excludes participants with mobility challenges or sensory needs.



Group of visitors gathered under a picnic shelter at Bruce's Mill outdoor event, with a support coordinator in a bright vest.

- Plan accessible transportation options:
 - Arrange for accessible shuttle services or designate drop-off and pick-up areas close to event entrances and communicate these to local paratransit system provider.
 - Clearly communicate public transit options: indicate accessible routes, stops, or stations that serve the site, and provide information about available assistance for navigating transit.
- To improve wayfinding, provide clear, consistent signage throughout the event site and:
 - Use large fonts and high contrast colours for maximum visibility.
 - Consider tactile or braille signage where possible to support visitors with visual impairments.
- Go beyond typical trail signage:
 - While trails often have standard directional or safety signs, events should provide additional wayfinding signs specifically for accessibility and inclusive participation (entrances, accessible routes, rest areas, drop-off points).
- Offer digital tools for navigation:
 - Include a QR code on-site and in promotional materials linking downloadable, up-to-date transit maps, schedules, and accessibility information for attendees' convenience.

Clear communication of transportation and wayfinding is critical, empowering attendees to plan their visit and navigate independently. Making extra effort on trails and common paths ensures that accessibility isn't an afterthought but a core part of inclusive event design.

Staffing for Inclusion

Accessible and inclusive events require intentional planning not just in infrastructure and programming, but in staffing. Assigning clear roles and responsibilities ensures that accommodation is provided consistently and that all attendees feel supported.

- Train all staff and volunteers:

- Provide guidance on interacting respectfully with all visitors including those with disabilities, understanding sensory considerations, and supporting mobility.



Maple Syrup Festival staff training at Kortright Centre for Conservation.

- Include practical training on using accessibility tools such as wheelchairs, assistive devices, or communication boards.

- Inclusive hiring and volunteer recruitment:

- Recruit staff or volunteers with lived experience of disability, sensory differences, or accessibility challenges. Their perspectives can improve planning, communication, and the overall event experience.

- Designate an Accessibility Lead:

- One staff member on your events team should oversee all accessibility efforts, including coordinating accommodations, managing inquiries, and liaising with community organizations.

- Assign on-site support roles:
 - Ensure staff or volunteers are stationed in key areas, such as entrances, rest areas, and activity zones, to guide participants, answer questions, and respond to accessibility needs.



Visitors being greeted by staff at the information tent during Bruce's Mill Maple Syrup Festival.

- Plan for proactive outreach and communication:
 - Staff should engage with local community groups before the event to share accessibility details and gather feedback.
 - Encourage staff to reinforce inclusive messaging during the event to normalize accessibility as a core part of the experience.

- Monitor and adjust:
 - During the event, have staff check that accommodations are working as intended and make real-time adjustments as needed. For example, if a wheelchair ramp becomes blocked by equipment or a high-traffic area is congested, staff can redirect pathways, clear obstacles, or deploy additional signage to maintain accessibility.
 - Collect feedback from attendees to inform future accessibility planning.



Festival area with heavy use becoming muddy during the late-winter thaw.

By intentionally staffing for inclusion, you ensure that accessibility is embedded in the event experience, not treated as an afterthought.

WRAP UP

Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Closing your event with reflection helps improve accessibility and inclusion for future programming.

- Collect feedback:
 - Gather input from attendees, caregivers, staff, and volunteers using multiple accessible channels; surveys, QR codes, paper forms, or verbal interviews. Capture both experiences and observations from staff during the event.
- Analyze feedback:
 - Look for patterns in accessibility, navigation, sensory accommodations, and communication. Consider both quantitative ratings and qualitative comments to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- Share findings:
 - Communicate results with your event team, community partners, and relevant stakeholders. Where appropriate, let attendees know how their feedback has informed

future planning. Document lessons learned to guide staff training and enhance future events.

“I cannot walk but I enjoyed very much the seated activity offered by the park staff. I brought home a flower called Milkweed as a seed on a clay ball. As instructed, I planted it right way. Hopefully it will bloom. Thank you for the beautiful experience. I wish I will live long enough to experience more trips like this or the Maple Syrup one we did in March.” - CHATS Member

By systematically collecting, analyzing, and sharing feedback, planners ensure that accessibility and inclusion are continuously strengthened and visible to the community.

CALLS TO ACTION

The realities of climate change, including rising temperatures, and extreme and unpredictable weather, are reshaping how we gather in and connect with nature. These changes affect everyone, but they disproportionately impact seniors and people with disabilities who may face greater risks and fewer resources to adapt.

Creating inclusive and accessible outdoor experiences requires leadership, creativity, collaboration, and, importantly, transparent communication about available supports. By sharing accessibility measures, updates, and planning tools, festivals ensure that nature remains a safe, welcoming space for all. Together we can design experiences that not only connect people with the natural world, but also model the proactive, compassionate response needed in the face of global climate challenges.



Visitors walking the trail together at Bruce’s Mill Conservation Park nature event.

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