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FEATURES

Making Nature Accessible

By *Brittany Jordt, Peninsula Pulse* – September 15th, 2011

Being in the “young adult” stage of life, I’m physically capable of most things. I work to maintain my physical health, and the solitude of steady foot falls with my heart pounding in the middle of the park provide moments of near perfection.

I know that I am privileged to be fit, agile – to have feet that take me where I want to go, at whatever pace I demand – but the glory of nature should be something that everyone can experience. The new interpretive trail at Newport State Park aims at just that.

Michelle Hefty, Newport State Park Manager who began the project 11 years ago, was personally invested in making it possible for everyone to enjoy a part of the park.

“I had an aunt at the time who was in a wheelchair with MS,” Hefty said. “I brought her up to the park. I was frustrated that I really couldn’t get her down by the shoreline very closely. So I wrote and submitted a grant to the DNR for the trail. If we can make it possible to get people outside, enjoying nature, that’s important.”

When I ventured up to Newport State Park to check out their new 1.2-mile handicap accessible trail, I was excited for a number of reasons. I have friends and family members who could really benefit from such a trail, and I was also intrigued at the idea of the interpretive signs, adding an educational element to the experience.

A new blacktop sidewalk provides access to the shoreline, the toilets and shelter buildings, while limestone screening on the path makes it smooth enough for a person in a wheelchair to easily maneuver



(Left to right) Tony Anheuser, representing the Sister Bay Lions Club, Newport Park Manager Michelle Hefty, former Accessibility Specialist with the DNR Dottie Krueger, current DNR Accessibility Coordinator Andy Janicki and park naturalist Julie Hein-Frank cut the ribbon for the interpretive trail at Newport State Park. The September 4 ceremony was a culmination of a project 11 years in the making.

down the trail. The seven, multi-sensory interpretive signs include graphics, text, audio description, tactile elements, guided imagery and interactive devices.



Carly Fay Wycklendt uses the Discovery Pen at one of seven interactive, signs along the new handicapped accessible interpretive trail at Newport State Park.
Photo by Brittany Jordt.

Julie Hein-Frank, a naturalist at Newport, collaborated with Hefty on the project and took the lead on designing the interpretive signs. In an effort to make audio possible on the trail without batteries or wires, Hein-Frank did extensive research that led her to design the “Discovery Pen.” The device activates audio when the ‘pen’ touches against a particular spot on the sign, triggering an audio description.

“The most fun I had was thinking about the audio enrichment spots. We had the opportunity to go beyond basic audio description,” Hein-Frank said. “That’s when I really felt like I could be the naturalist on the trail. It’s the old form of oral storytelling. How would I describe this to someone, for them to really get the *feeling* it evokes?”

Hein-Frank wrote the script and Shady Nook Creative, a Sturgeon Bay company, did all of the audio for the panels. Each sign has a number of audio listening spots which talk about a variety of things: the history of the land, the unique forest habitats the trail takes you through, and the inhabitants of the forest – from salamanders and snakes to porcupines – even identifying different birdcalls.

The signs are posted at wheelchair height and, conveniently, are also the perfect height for children. The signs are meant to enhance the connection of the visitor to the natural world by using audio and visual that trigger people’s emotions and stimulate their minds. On a couple of signs, for example, there are hands-on opportunities where people can feel the different textures of leaves or tree bark.

“It makes the experience accessible to everyone and to have that in the woods is really a neat feeling,” Hein-Frank said. The uniqueness and diversity found on each sign ensure that everyone can find enjoyment out of the experience, and the message of the park is still there.

“I kind of had the vision and Julie ran with the interpretive aspect,” Hefty said. Newport has already received a lot of positive feedback on the trail that was dedicated on Sept. 4.

“One woman said it was great to be able to get out on the trail in her wheelchair,” Hefty said. “She didn’t have to sit at the picnic area and wait for her friend to come back. She really appreciated that.”

Hefty also said that the support the park received for this project from community groups, foundations and non-profits was incredible.

“It’s very exciting because I have been working to get this accomplished for 11 years. To see it come to fruition – and better than I could have imagined – it’s incredible!”

She continued, “We’ve probably got the best, state-of-the-art technology with audio on the signs.”

On the last panel, the sign tells readers that club moss has roots that date back 400 million years. They are the warm weather plants that were once buried in the bedrock along the shore. The panel also tells the history of the plant through time. In closing, it points out how humans have dramatically increased the rate of that change.



It asks you: *What will the future of the forest be?*

As we are all the future of the forest, and we all affect change on the forest, it only seems natural that everyone – handicapped, old and young alike – should be able to get out and appreciate it. By doing so, we all learn why it needs protection and preservation.



Ethan Frank (background) and Landon Frank (foreground) listen to vocalizations of birds and learn about critical landscapes found along the peninsula.

When I'm 64 and no longer as agile as I am now, will I still want to gaze on the perfection of Newport's lakeshore, or to walk in the woods without fear of my capabilities? Do I imagine I'd take my children and grandchildren down that trail to learn about the wonders of the forest? Absolutely.

The Interpretive Trail's Carbon Footprint

Michelle Hefty, Hein-Frank and supporters worked to use environmentally friendly materials and reduce the carbon footprint of the project. The high-pressure laminate signs are fabricated by a company in the United States, using 100 percent recycled materials. Regional and local artists contributed the illustrations and tactile elements, and the Discovery Pens are rechargeable.

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