

# NFCT Accessible Waterway Access

## Survey Report

July 2024

### Introduction

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail organization (NFCT) promotes and stewards a 740-mile paddling trail across a network of rivers, streams and lakes stretching from Old Forge, NY to Fort Kent, ME. Our mission is to connect people to the region's waterways, heritage, and contemporary communities by stewarding shared outdoor resources and providing access to paddling experiences along the route.

In partnership with the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program of the National Parks Service, the NFCT would like to improve access to waterways of the Northern Forest for adaptive paddlers and anyone with a disability or mobility challenge who might have an interest in paddling, whether or not they have participated in water sports before. A survey of adaptive paddlers was created and distributed to collect this information, and the survey received 85 responses from across the paddling community. The following is a summary report of the survey results.

### Survey Methodology

#### Survey Development

NFCT staff researched the challenges faced by disabled people when participating in outdoor activities in general and paddling in particular. Several agencies that work with disabled populations to support active lifestyles were interviewed to develop questions in the survey. Once the survey was in draft form, the same agencies were invited to edit and critique the questions to ensure their effectiveness.

#### Distribution

In order to connect with a wide variety of diverse people with relevant knowledge and experience, developers engaged partners in the adaptive sports community and other organizations that work directly with disabled people to help distribute the survey. Each partnering entity shared the survey along with an introductory letter with their constituents. Results were reported back to NFCT.

In addition to this outreach to the disabled community, NFCT shared the survey with its own constituents via direct email and social media in order to hear input from people who may not identify as disabled, but who have limited mobility as a result of age, injury or other reasons. For an even broader reach, press releases were developed and shared with regional press, which resulted in articles in several news outlets describing the effort and inviting participation in the survey.

## Summary Methodology

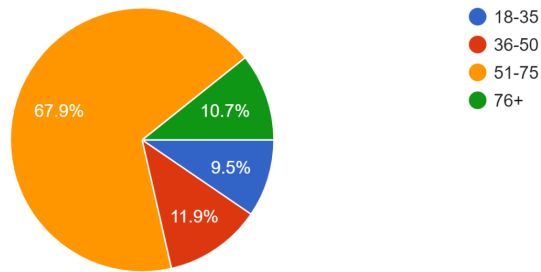
For multiple choice questions, graphs were copied directly from the survey responses. Bar graphs with a substantial number of write-ins were cropped to just the multiple-choice answers offered, and a summary of the write-ins was included with the graph.

For short answer questions, responses were visually scanned, and duplicate answers/sentiments were combined and recorded. Unique, relevant answers that had not come up in previous survey responses were also recorded. The themes from short answer questions are described either in paragraph form or as bulleted lists.

## Who answered the survey?

1. **49.4%** of respondents said they experience challenges accessing the water or participating in paddling activities, and 28 respondents identified disabilities when asked to provide more information. Disabilities identified were mobility disabilities (25), including temporary injuries, use of a wheelchair, and others, hearing loss (2), low-vision (1), TBI (1), and general reduced mobility due to aging (5).
2. Respondents were **85.7%** white, **1.2%** Asian, and **1.2%** Middle Eastern or North African, and **11.9%** preferred not to identify their race.
3. **53.6%** of respondents identified as male, **40.5%** as female, and **2.4%** as trans or non-binary.
4. Age:

What's your age?  
84 responses

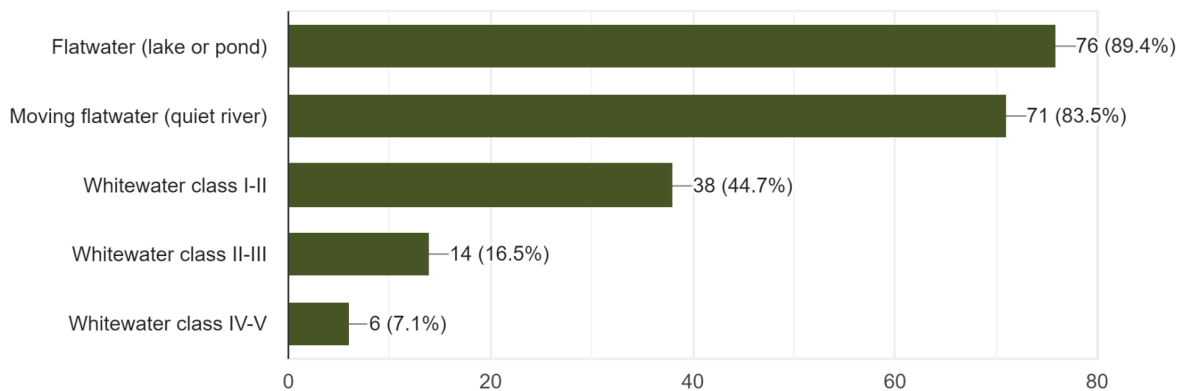


## Paddling Preferences

The majority of respondents favor flatwater paddling and tend to be experienced paddlers who paddle weekly in season and are interested in multi-day paddling trips. In addition, **74.1%** of respondents canoe, **58.8%** use single kayaks, **11.8%** use tandem kayaks, and **10.6%** paddleboard.

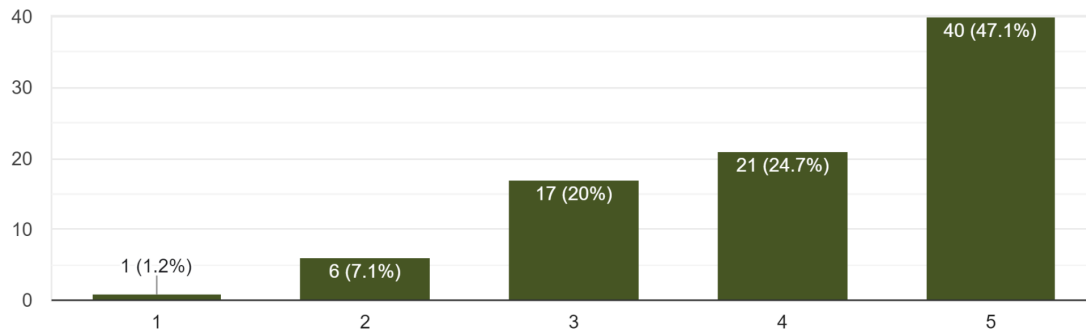
Respondents who were interested in overnight paddling trips had a range of needs and desires for their campsites, ranging from “The more remote the better” to “it would be nice to have some electricity so I can charge my phone in case since I am deaf.”

What type of paddling do you prefer or would you like to participate in? (select all that apply)  
85 responses



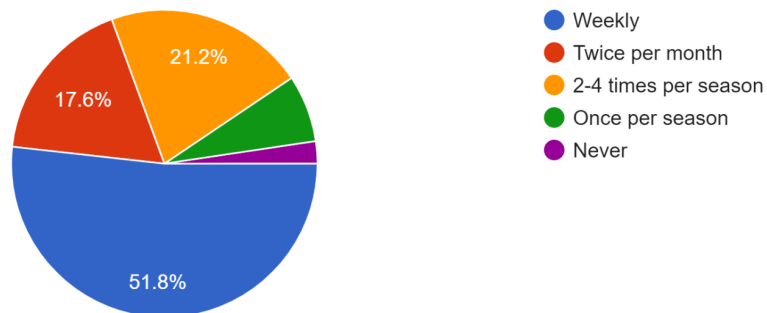
### Please rate your current experience level in paddling

85 responses



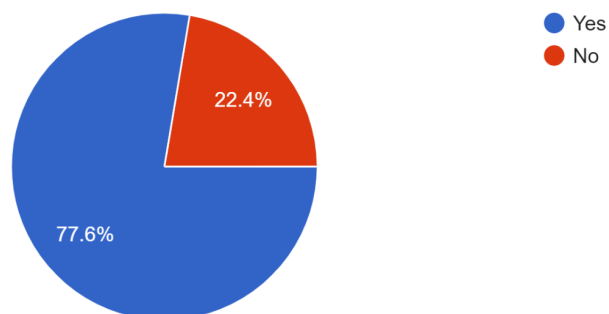
### During the paddling season, how often do you typically paddle?

85 responses



### Are you interested in multi-day paddling trips?

85 responses





## Paddling Equipment

**81.2%** of respondents already use mobility devices or modified recreational equipment to paddle. Respondents use a huge range of adaptive equipment while paddling, including:

1. Canoe/kayak carts
2. Accessible ramps to make entering the water easier
3. Vibrating vests for a guide to communicate with a deaf person who takes a swim
4. A knotted rope to use as a handhold
5. A kayak with a disconnected footplate/rudder
6. A one-arm paddle that pivots at the shoulder
7. A high-back canoe chair
8. A luggable loo
9. Custom made transfer-assist devices
10. Equipment from Angle Oar (Versapaddle and stabilizers called Outriggers)
11. Raised canoe seats

Paddlers who are new to paddling and do not currently use adaptive equipment expressed desires for stabilizers, a well-fitting and comfortable seat, accessible launch sites and general access to equipment and information. When asked what instruction they might need, respondents had split desires for workshops compared to individual guidance.

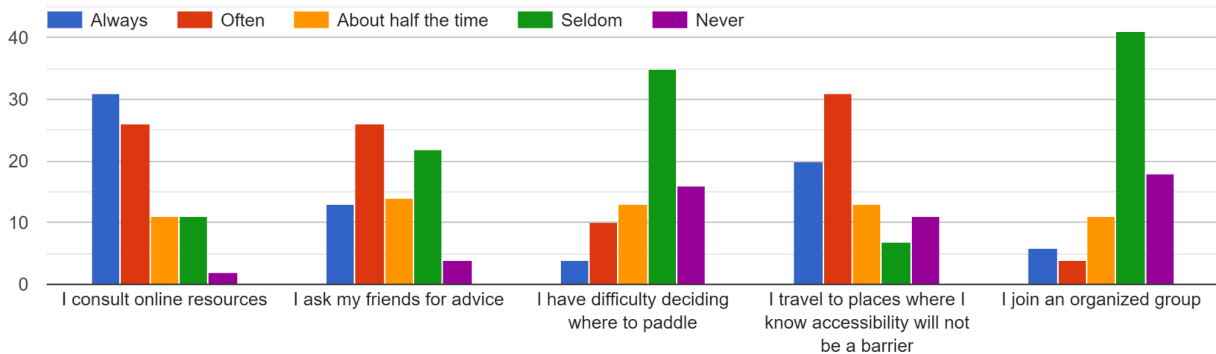
## Planning

Respondents' informational needs often corresponded to information needed by paddlers regardless of disability, including parking, put-in details, hazards, weather conditions, water conditions, etc. Other concerns included how far the parking lot and bathrooms are from the boat access, the distance that must be traveled over rough terrain, the type of launch (beach launch, dock, designated accessible launch, or others), and the steepness of the launch. Respondents also wanted details on what the rest spots and portages look like and whether there is a safe place to store a wheelchair while paddling. Some respondents have very specific constraints, such as not being able to transfer more than 10 inches from a dock to the water, so detailed information is important to know. Other respondents run group trips and need information on how to park and turn a trailer and how many cars a parking area can fit.

At the access point, one of the top requests was a comprehensive map. While desires for information on the map differed, respondents expressed a need for information on whitewater classifications, rest stops, distances, portages, local amenities and emergency contacts, current water level and weather forecast, and wildlife information. Respondents also mentioned wanting information about how the water level might affect their experience on the river or finding rest stops (where they are more likely to beach or be unable to access a rest stop). Several

respondents requested visual information, including who to text in an emergency/how to send an SOS without audio. A few respondents said that they needed no information at the access point, since they gathered all information online ahead of time.

How do you typically plan a paddling trip? (Please check one box for each response)



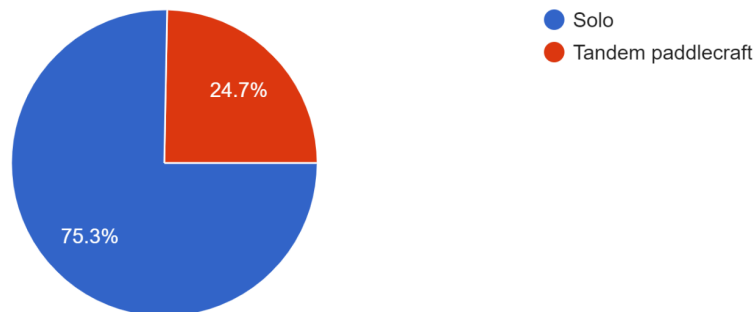
## Safety

Respondents were concerned about the current river and weather conditions and hazards, especially if they cannot hear approaching hazards. Motor boat traffic was also a frequent concern, as well as having a plan and ability to either self-rescue or get rescued if they swim.

Several respondents were most concerned for the safety of others; while they paddle all season and take appropriate precautions, they shared that they see paddlers without PFDs or dry suits in the cold or worry that people will see them paddling in cold conditions and want to try the same thing without the same preparation. Sometimes, respondents were worried about the skill levels of others in their group whom they had not paddled with before.

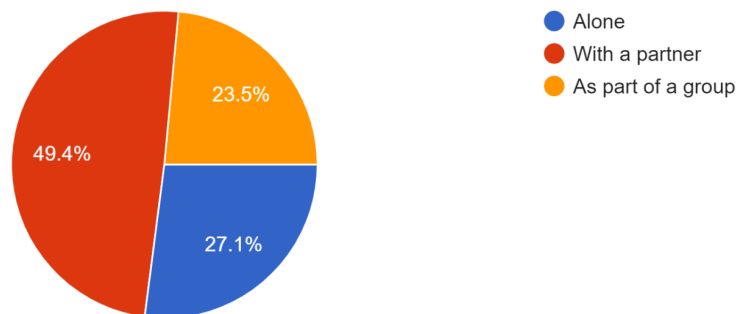
Do you prefer to paddle solo or in a tandem paddle craft?

85 responses



Do you prefer to paddle alone, with a partner, or as part of a group of other paddlers?

85 responses



## Transportation

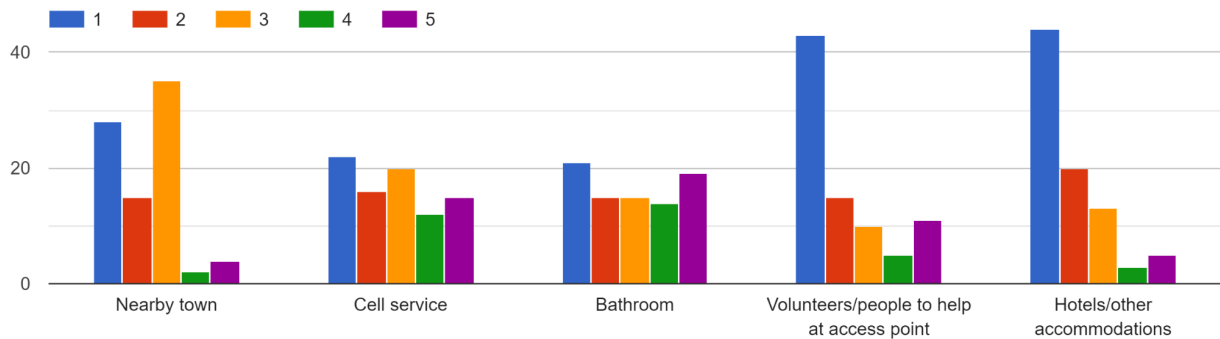
**88.2%** of respondents use a personal vehicle to access a water recreation site. Besides cars, two respondents carpool, two mentioned using public transit, two use bikes, and one uses a rideshare service.

Respondents who have personal watercraft said that they transport it to the access site with roof racks, trailers, in a truck, or in the car if it fits/deflates. The most popular response was using a roof rack.



## Amenities

Please rate the importance of the following amenities on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being least important and 5 being most important.



## Elements of a Recreation Site

Respondents identified a number of elements that made recreation sites difficult to use. Steep and slippery slopes came up most frequently as a concern, as well as uneven surfaces and the presence of loose sand, mud or grass. The most common concerns (in no particular order) were:

- Steep slope or steps
- Slippery
- Cross slope
- Trash/debris around site
- Overhanging trees and brush
- Narrow trail
- Motor boats at same put in
- Distance of parking to water access
- Loose sand, mud or grass
- Low water level
- Unmaintained roads
- Not enough information available ahead of time

Respondents also had thoughts on what made a recreation site easy to access, including:

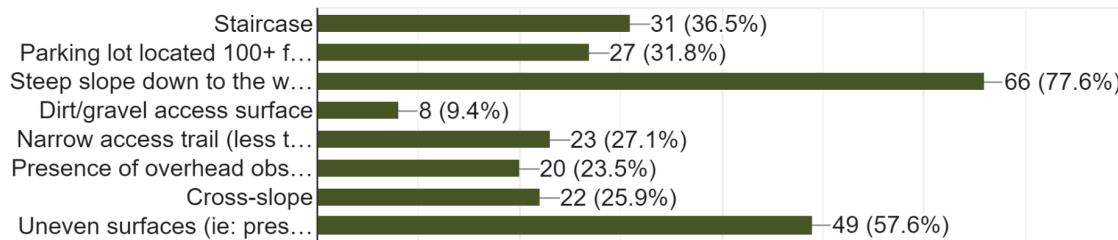
- Gentle slopes
- Wide: space to transfer boats to water and stage gear

- Accessible/adaptive launches
- Close to parking
- Shallow
- Not crowded
- Bathroom access

When asked to select the elements of a recreation site that would present the biggest accessibility challenges, top answers were steep slope down to the water (**77.6%** of respondents) and uneven surfaces, ie: presence of rocks or roots in trails (**57.6%** of respondents). The full graph can be seen below. There were a number of write-in answers as well, many of which addressed muddy or generally unstable surfaces. Several respondents wrote that none of these inhibited their access.

Please select the following elements of a recreation site that would present the biggest accessibility challenges

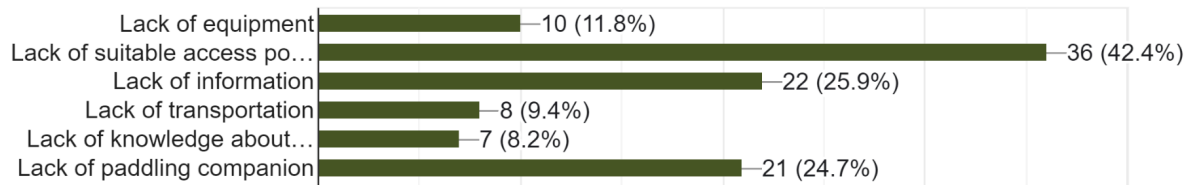
85 responses



## Barriers to Entry

What barriers limit your ability to paddle? (select all that apply)

85 responses



When asked what barriers to entry are unrecognized or overlooked in paddling, respondents answered:

- Irrational fears
- Cost
- Knowledge of how to recover from a swim (or how to swim at all)
- Knowledge of river hazards (and how they changed based on conditions)
- Private land
- Paddler ability (and willingness to adapt to differing ability)

Suggestions for other things to consider to improve accessibility:

- Creative communications, including around conditions and safety concerns
- Places to sit, transfer, and store equipment as well as tie up boats at launch sites
- Flat, smooth surfaces at access sites
- Safe and adequate parking
- More accessible launches, keeping in mind that not all accessible launches are the same and may function or age differently
- List of guides, therapists, groups, and others which can provide introductions to adaptive paddling (and support/training for those guides)
- Consulting disability community across the spectrum of disabilities
- Considering aging
- Preserving the wilderness character and feel of backcountry access sites

## Next Steps

When asked what types of infrastructure improvements would be most beneficial for the NFCT to direct resources and staffing time towards developing, many responses coalesced around accessible bathrooms/privies, smooth surfaces and low-grade slopes at access points, and parking close to the access site. A full summary of suggestions include:

- Accessible bathrooms/privies
- Smooth surfaces and low-grade slopes
- Parking lots with proximity to put-in
- Access points and portages that can accommodate a canoe cart
- Signage
- Infrastructure to assist with put-ins/transfers
- Picnic tables
- Canoe/kayak launch area next to sites with large boat launches

Respondents had many ideas for what types of information and outreach would be most beneficial for the NFCT to direct our resources and staff time towards developing. Responses generally addressed the need for partnerships and increased information, including:

- Partnerships with:
  - Adaptive paddling supporters/providers to provide education and support
  - Physical therapists, physicians, and social workers who can connect people with adaptive paddling opportunities
  - Youth groups and college outing clubs
  - Local outfitters who can provide current information and equipment
  - People with disabilities who can provide lived experience and professional expertise for accessibility improvements
- Information:
  - Planning help, including water trail information, transportation and parking, lodging, and food options near access point
  - Listing of current access points and what is available at each
  - Emphasis and information on safety
- Locations and days where trained volunteers can help people launch, unload, enter, and exit the water (run as an event or as support for solo trips)
- Support for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind (DHHDB) people, including staff training and resources

## Other Themes

One theme that showed up across multiple questions was a need for accessible launches but a dissatisfaction with many existing accessible docks. Respondents said:

1. “Including those with disabilities to be part of the design work. It matters. Most people who do not live with physical limits cannot understand. NC spent \$1,000,000 on making water accessible with ramping systems and dock that were not accessible for mobility user. Sad.”
2. “NEVER use a "handicap" access kayak dock : much too short and will damage my kayak hull due to the weight on it handicap ramp rollers.”

There was consensus around the need for smooth surface, low-grade access points which, if they have an installed, accessible launch, have one that has been chosen in partnership with the disability community and is known to be durable.