



Autism Nature Trail

A Nature Trail for all at Letchworth State Park

The ANT—Connecting the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Community to the Natural World: A Model for Post-COVID Outdoor Recreation for All

The Autism Nature Trail (**The ANT**) is a first-of-its-kind, interactive experience in nature, designed specifically for those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other developmental disabilities. Located in the #1 state park in the country, **The ANT** will become a new attraction at Letchworth State Park which hosts nearly one million visitors annually and remains a desired destination for responsible and safe outdoor recreation even amidst a worldwide pandemic.

The ANT is a one-mile looped main Trail with eight stations at various intervals, offering a range of experiences from quiet engagement to active exploration and adventure, including: the Sunshine Slope, a gentle, sloping maze in a natural clearing; the Music Circle, a circular grove of pine trees featuring nature-inspired instruments; and the Meadow Run and Climb, a dedicated space for running, jumping, climbing, balancing and testing strength, coordination and confidence. Specialized elements like cuddle swings, gliders, and “alone zones” also are a part of the Trail experience, each created to provide an inclusive environment for individuals of different needs and abilities. Signage telling visitors what to expect as they make their way around the Trail creates purposeful consistency and predictability.

Combating Social Isolation & Encouraging Inclusivity

Statistics show that young people with autism spend disproportionate amounts of time indoors, often finding comfort in digital activities which results in social isolation. This disconnectedness not only affects individuals with ASD but also can affect caregivers and entire families. Because of our current and necessary sequestering due to COVID-19, many people can relate to this isolation with everyone now having a clearer understanding of feeling cut off from the world outside. **The ANT** is designed as a series of accessible and safe outdoor spaces in nature, yet far from the distractions and often overwhelming stimuli of everyday outside life.

Activities along the Trail support and encourage sensory perception, while also providing enjoyable activities for visitors of all abilities and ages. The eight sensory stations engage each individual’s auditory, visual, tactile, vestibular and proprioceptive processing, using nature and natural materials as the tools for skill-building. **The ANT**’s natural setting allows for safe social distancing and planned interaction throughout the experience of the Trail.

Support for the ANT

The ANT is a partnership with New York State officials, New York State Parks (including Letchworth State Park), the Natural Heritage Trust, Camp Puzzle Peace in Rochester and the Perry Central School District. ASD researchers and tourism and economic development professionals will also promote **The ANT** as an inclusive place to learn, to grow and to find acceptance, and—most importantly—as an exceptionally unique opportunity for an active and safe outdoor experience for all. Dr. Susan Hyman of the Levine Autism Clinic in Rochester heralded **The ANT** as the “ANT-ithesis of inactivity”:

“While other entities are making public places accommodating, The Autism Nature Trail is making an accommodating place public and creating a space that can be widely enjoyed by every visitor.”

A Recreation Model for the Future

As we envision and plan for a *post*-COVID world, **The ANT** will allow for outdoor recreation and promote programming that can be responsibly and safely enjoyed by all who visit, employing staff members who are trained to help every visitor enjoy the natural world and the entire Parks system in a safe and meaningful way. **The ANT** is completely ADA-compliant, situated adjacent to the Humphrey Nature Center with full access to a large parking area, modern restrooms and WiFi. **There is now a responsibility—and an urgency—to offer a new model for outdoor recreation for all individuals, families, school groups and agencies.** This pandemic is teaching us that being in nature is our saving grace, and New York State Parks have remained open throughout the crisis. We also now are observing first-hand that people can feel uncomfortable, unwelcome and even unsafe in environments where certain behaviors are not understood and special needs cannot be met. The Autism Nature Trail will be a safe and inclusive space outdoors where EVERYONE can experience the physical, emotional and social benefits of being more fully engaged with nature and with each other.



PLAYFUL PATH PERSPECTIVE
LETCWORTH STATE PARK AUTISM NATURE TRAIL (ANT)

May 20th, 2020

To learn more about The Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park and to donate to the project, please visit: <https://www.autismnaturetrail.com/>.

June 1, 2020