Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Canoe/Kayak Launch Sites and Accessibility

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Each potential access site on a river, lake or ocean can present challenges for launching a canoe or kayak, especially for those who use wheelchairs to move around on land. The following slides provide some examples and ways in which planners and trail managers have, or have not, provided universal access at launch sites. As you will see, there is no one optimal solution for every situation.

Unimproved Soft Launch

Here is an unimproved soft launch, meaning that no concrete was used. The surface is stable enough for most wheelchairs, and large rocks can be useful for transfers, allowing for better stability and leverage as the user enters or exits the canoe or kayak.

Soft Launch with Outdoor Carpet

Here is another example of a soft launch using outdoor carpet that is staked down. Different types of matting can also be used

Improved Boat Ramp

Uneven surfaces such as this one at the end of a ramp can be difficult for wheelchairs to navigate. Concrete ramps are also known to be slippery.

Unimproved Beach Access

Soft sand is certainly problematic for wheelchair users.

Unimproved Bridge Launch

Unimproved launches such as this unofficial access point beneath a bridge can be problematic for anyone, and can promote erosion. Steps and crushed stone would be two ways to improve this situation, or a different site nearby could be developed.

Launch in Tidal Zone

The design and location of launches should take into account tidal fluctuations. This launch is inaccessible at low tide.

High Water Launch

This launch is only useful during high water levels. Swimmers think this launch is a jumping platform, but the water depth is usually too shallow, making it a hazard.

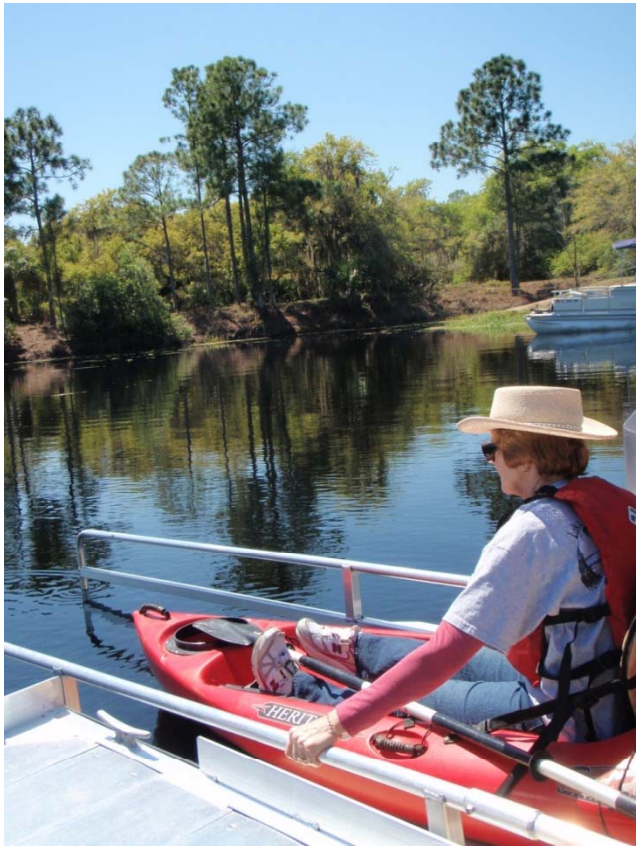
Stationary Dock

Stationary docks without steps to the water can be challenging for launching, especially during low water conditions or at low tide.

Floating Dock

This is a custom-made floating dock. A wheelchair user would likely need to be transferred to a kayak or canoe and then pushed off the dock.

Floating Dock with Rail and Launch Chute



This type of floating dock with rails and a launch chute has received high praise from those with physical challenges. The rollers can sometimes become gummed up, so occasional maintenance may be required. Installation is similar for that of any floating dock.

Ramp with Rails

This ramp to a launch area is ADA accessible.

Narrow Concrete Launch

Paddlers complained that this launch was too narrow for easy launching and some modifications were later made. Paddlers often prefer to launch parallel to shore in shallow water.

Large Steps for Launching

Steps can be problematic for wheelchair access, but can aid in launching at water's edge at different water levels.

Large Steps and Rail

Here is a similar attempt to adjust to fluctuating water levels, with the addition of a rail for safer access.

Step Launch with Outdoor Carpet

This step system with outdoor carpet, with the bottom step partially submerged, makes for easy launching. What is not visible is a ramp leading to the launch.

Steps and Ramps along Fluctuating River

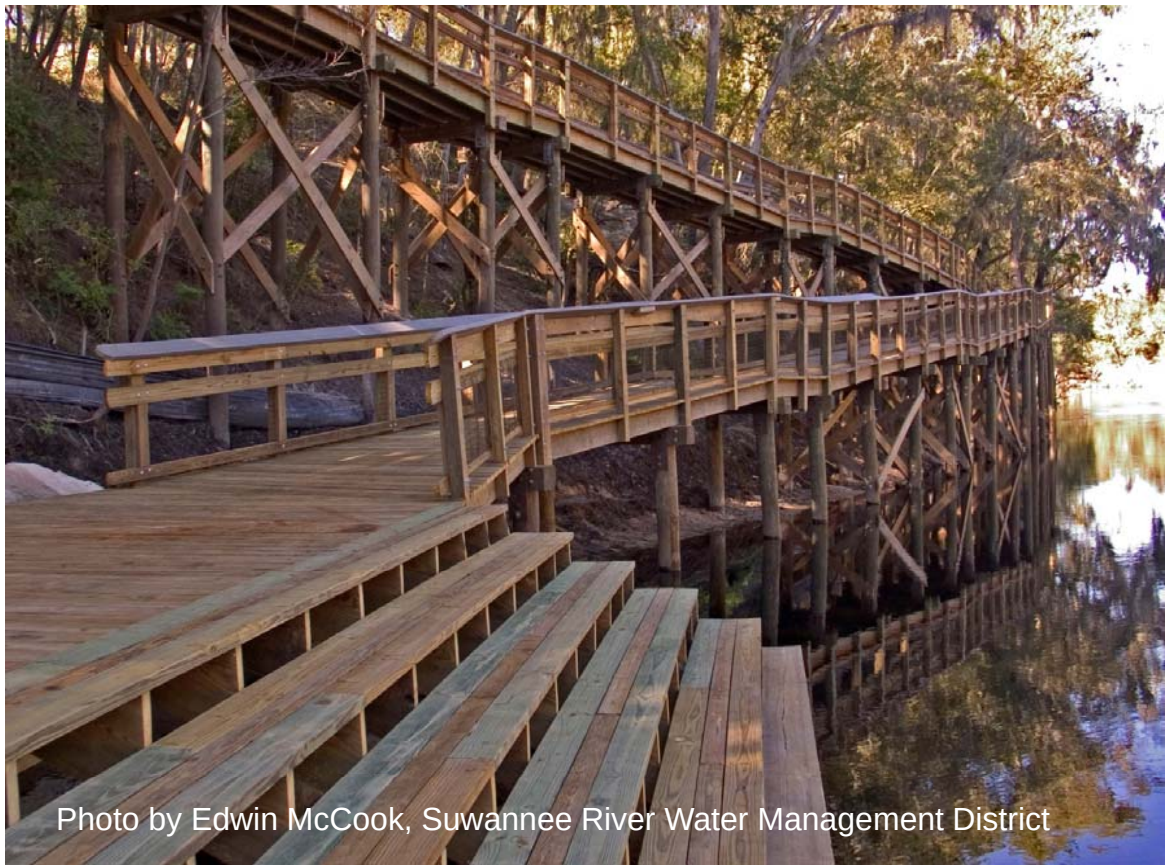


Photo by Edwin McCook, Suwannee River Water Management District

Here, steps and ramps provide access to a river camp at the top of a high bank. The main drawback to this kind of access is the expense and potential for flood damage.

Campsites, Camps and Cabins

Ramps and boardwalks to campsites, camps and rental cabins along water trails are welcome additions.

Describe Access

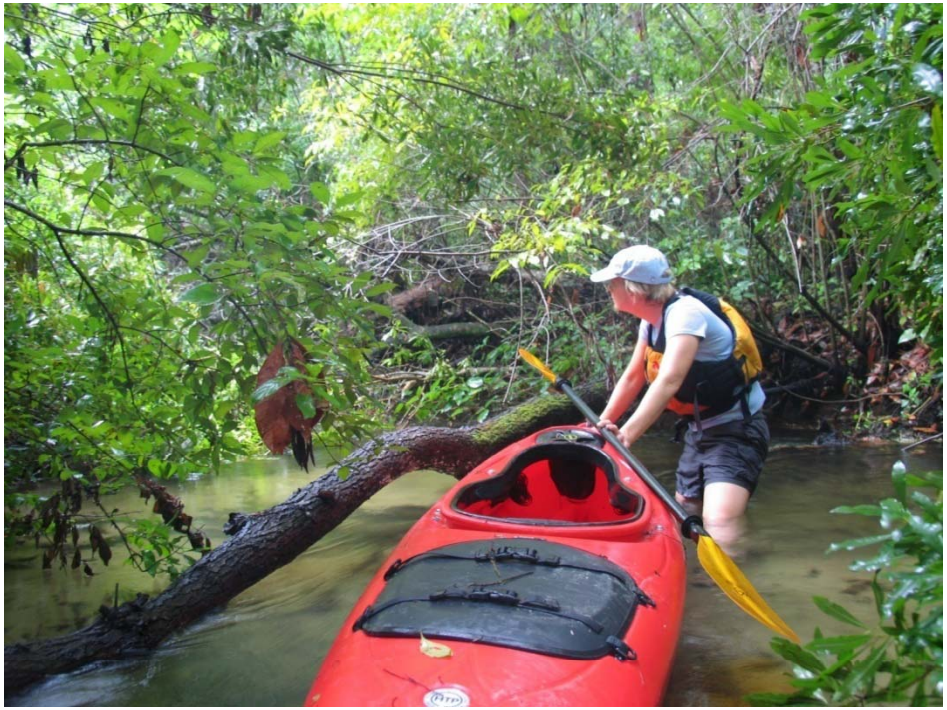
In trail guides, seek to describe launches, established campsites and points of interest in terms of accessibility. Access to this official campsite is steep and the water often waist deep.

Vehicular Access

Ideally, adjacent parking for those with physical challenges makes for easy access to a launch area. This parking area has a paved sidewalk and ramp leading to a launch area.

A word about Trail Conditions

A universally accessible access point doesn't always ensure an ideal trip. Before embarking, be sure to check with a local outfitter or trail manager about water levels, snags, tidal fluctuations, and other current trail conditions. Contact information should be included in trail guides and on signs.



In Summary…

Consulting with paddlers and professionals when first designing or modifying a launch site can often prevent problems in the future.