

# Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

---

Volume 14 *Bear Lake Basin*

Article 7

---

2007

## Recreation in the Bear Lake basin

Patsy Palacios

*SJ & Jessie E Quinney Natural Resources Research Library, Utah State University, Logan*

Chris Luecke

*Watershed Sciences, Utah State University, Logan*

Justin Robinson

*Watershed Sciences, Utah State University, Logan*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei>

---

### Recommended Citation

Palacios, Patsy; Luecke, Chris; and Robinson, Justin (2007) "Recreation in the Bear Lake basin," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 14 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol14/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources and Environmental Issues by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usu.edu).



## **RECREATION**

Bear Lake has a long history of recreation and tourism. Activities such as water-skiing, swimming, and sailing are popular during the summer seasons. In the winter snowmobilers and ice anglers are drawn to the area. In January, fishing for the rare Bonneville cisco is a major event for local fishermen and tourists. No other lake in the continental United States offers such an opportunity.

Recreational water use continues to grow in the area. From 1959 to 1998, the number of registered boats in the state multiplied just over nine times to a total of 76,346. Numbers have decreased 20% to 61,345 in the year 2006. The number of fishing licenses sold for the same period increased nearly three times. Expectations

are that both will continue to grow at these same rates. According to surveys done by the Division of Parks and Recreation, 95% of those boating at Bear Lake were from Utah. The surveys also reveal that, although the number of boats grew steadily, the majority of boaters do not yet consider the lake overly crowded (Utah Division of Parks and Recreation, 2005).

Three state-owned facilities provide boating, camping, and picnicking. Bear Lake has approximately 50 miles of shoreline with 14½ miles open to public access. These access points include three state parks, state lands (east shore), and state highway right-of-ways. There are seven major boat-launching facilities, six of which are open to the public. (See figure 4). Bear Lake State Park Marina has 305 boat slips and a 5-lane boat ramp, while Idaho's North Beach has 2 boat unloading ramps and sandy beaches.

The main mode of transportation in the Bear Lake Basin is by private automobile. No bus or passenger train services operate in the basin. The nearest airport is at the Bear Lake County Airport located approximately 3 miles east of Paris. U.S. Highway 89 enters the basin from Logan Canyon on the west of the lake and from Montpelier and Paris from the north. This highway is one of the most scenic routes to the Yellowstone and Teton National Parks in Wyoming. As a result, much of the summer traffic is passing through to other points of destination. The traffic increases 230% to 360% during the peak month of July as compared to the low month of January. Highway 16 and 51 join at Sage Creek Junction and enter the basin at Laketown on the southern end of the lake (Lamarra, 1986). The following figure enumerates the traffic statistics collected

*Cisco Beach is known for excellent inland water scuba diving opportunities. The rocky bottom and the steep drop off close to shore make this location a favorite of divers from the Tri-State area. Two diving areas have been marked and designated for this activity. The temperature in Bear Lake on the surface is in the low to high 60's in the summer. Below the thermocline, at around 35 feet, temperatures drop to 40°F. Bear Lake sculpin, and other endemic fish, can frequently be observed by diving at this level*

by the Transportation Monitoring Unit and developed and analyzed by the Traffic Analysis Section of the Utah Department of Transportation. Each counting station records the annual average daily traffic on road sections. These permanent stations have provided traffic statistics since the early 1980's. Figure 5 presents data for the years between 2000 and 2004.

The annual average daily traffic on state and local highways has continued to rise despite the construction on highway 89 from Logan to Bear Lake. Construction began in the summer of 1999 and will continue until winter of 2006. Traffic is often reduced to one lane with several sections closed during non-peak hours. Table 4 shows the number of visitors that have been counted at the Bear Lake State Park per month for several years.

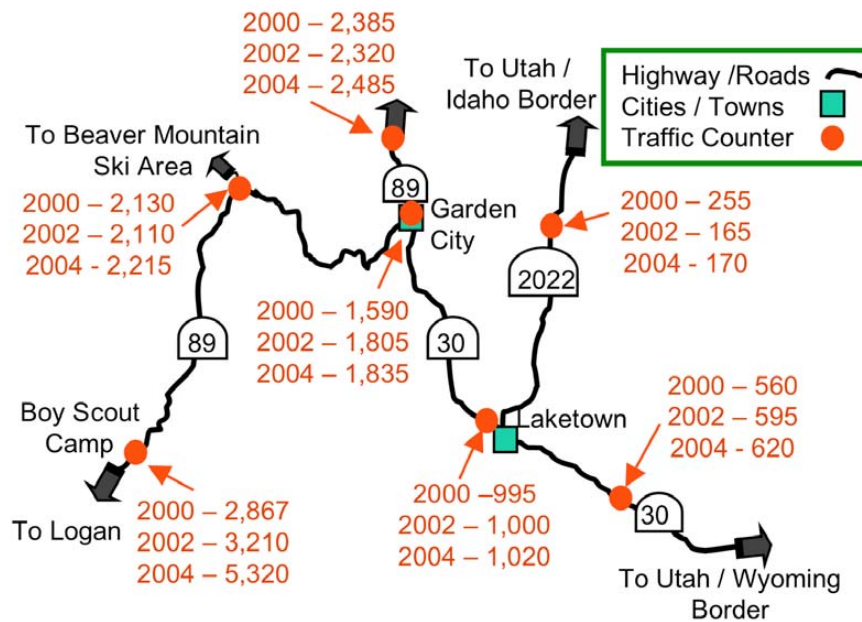


Figure 5. Average Daily Traffic Counts on the Highways Around Bear Lake Between 2000 and 2004 (UDOT, 2006).

<b>Visitors at the Bear Lake State Recreation Area</b>			
	1980	1990	2002
January	17,131	1,614	3,282
February	2,198	764	2,718
March	1,792	1,205	2,534
April	9,961	2,783	3,025
May	18,514	4,042	15,347
June	30,799	24,151	19,117
July	57,985	50,417	115,714
August	42,522	40,975	90,566
September	21,196	29,507	48,231
October	5,064	3,612	5,878
November	1,564	494	1,630
December	1,879	641	2,133
<b>Total</b>	<b>210,605</b>	<b>160,205</b>	<b>310,175</b>

*Table 4. Visitors Per Month at the Bear Lake State Recreation Area as Reported by the Utah Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks and Recreation, 2005.*

### **RECREATION HISTORY**

Lakota Bear, purchased around 1913, became the first successful resort with log cabins and a heated pool. About the same time the Ideal Beach Amusement Company began operation with cabins, concessions, dance pavilion, first class restaurant, and rowboat or canoe rentals. In the 1970's the area around Bear Lake experienced a recreational boom. Five new enterprises appeared along the lake including the Sweetwater Resort. This resort was the first to develop winter recreation by offering snowmobile rentals, cross-county trails, and sleigh and toboggan runs. Through the 1950's and 1960's the Rich County area felt an increased demand for recreational pursuits. The west shore of Bear Lake became interspersed with private cabins, motels, and the new Blue Water Beach. As recreational activity steadily increased, state and federal agencies began taking an interest in the region. Rendezvous Beach was designated a state park in the

summer of 1978 and had entertained over 80,000 people in its first season (Parson, 1996). Rendezvous State Park complemented the already existing Bear Lake Marina located north of Garden City. The state constructed the marina in 1965-66 to accommodate all sizes of boats and, with a recent expansion, to remain usable to lake elevations at a low of 5,903 feet. The parks on the eastside of the lake, First Point, South Eden, Cisco Beach, Rainbow Cove, and North Eden, were obtained through a number of transactions from 1962 through 1987 (Utah Division Parks and Recreation, 2005).

The Utah Power and Light Company's capability to raise and lower the reservoir lead to erratic lake levels that caused resort visitation numbers to vary. High levels brought high-demands while low levels yielded a drastic reduction. In 1955 the joint compact among Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming was signed into law by President Eisenhower to address this problem. The Bear River Compact would be used to provide for efficient use of the water while promoting multiple purposes. Early in 1973 the Bear Lake Regional Commission was created. It was formed to assist in addressing problems related to impacts of growth in and specifically around Bear Lake.

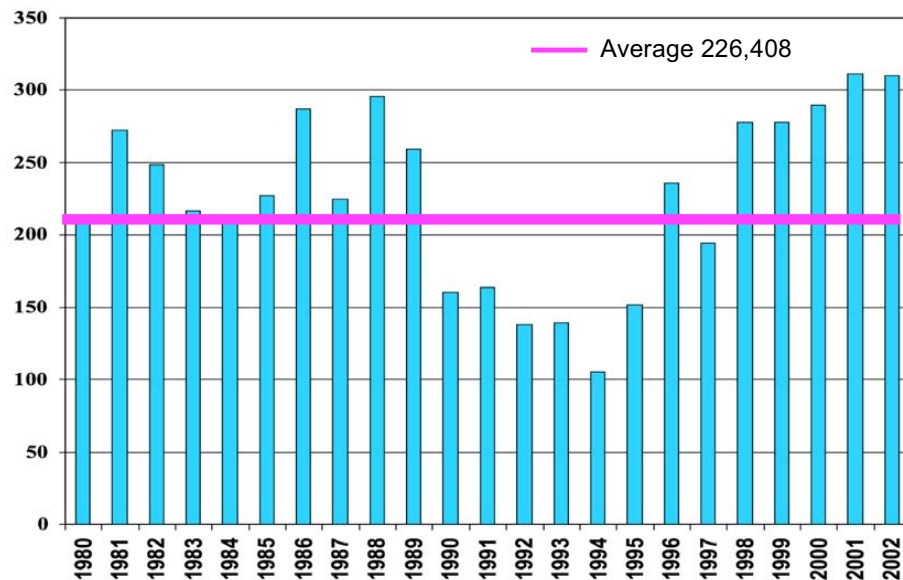


**Bear Lake Looking East**

*Photo from: <http://www.orneveien.org/adventure/bearlake/02.htm>*

### ***ESTIMATES OF RECREATION USE ON BEAR LAKE***

Bear Lake State Park's annual visitation has been trending upwards since 1990, despite dips in visitation in 1994 and 1997. Visitation increased 94% from 1990 to 2002. Most visits to Bear Lake occur between July and September, with 34% of the yearly total in July (Utah Division Parks and Recreation, 2005).



Graph 2. Number of Visitors at the Bear Lake State Park Between 1980-2003 (Utah Division of Parks and Recreation, 2002).

A visitor survey conducted at the Bear Lake State Park administered between May 21 and September 2, 2002 summarized the following conclusions:

- ▶ The majority of respondents, 69.3%, report that Bear Lake was their only destination.
- ▶ According to the survey the Bear Lake Marina is the most visited site (72.1%), followed by Rendezvous Beach (35.1%) and Cisco Beach (15.2%).
- ▶ Over half of respondents stayed two or more days (67.5%) while 27.6% stayed one day or less.

- ▶ More than 70% visited Bear Lake more than 2 times in the last year.
- ▶ 16.8% of respondents visit the lake alone or with one other person. Groups with 3 to 10 members comprise 54.9% of respondents, and groups with more than 10 accounts for 26.1%.
- ▶ Over 75% of groups contained children under the age of 18 and in 54.4% of the cases the group was family.
- ▶ Respondents chose swimming (58.8%), boating (57%), and sunbathing (55%) as the top 3 activities with camping (37.4%) and picnicking (35.4%) close behind.
- ▶ Most respondents (80.4%) were residents of Utah.



**Bear Lake Marina**

Photo from: [http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/blueribbon/waters/bear\\_lake.html](http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/blueribbon/waters/bear_lake.html)

The Bear Lake valley is noted for its hunting opportunities. Hunters return year after year because of the abundance of sage grouse, ruffed grouse, blue grouse, and big game animals such as mule deer, elk, and moose.

Riley (1966) found that during the hunting season 97.5% of the visitors to Bear Lake reside in Utah, Idaho, or Wyoming with 78.1% of those living in Utah. Additional findings conclude that the majority of hunters are between 18 and 50 years of age with most (33%) falling in the 36-50 year age range. Of the hunters surveyed 80% are male, 98% married, and in a group consisting of 2-4 individuals



---

(70% of the time). A full 95% of those surveyed had at least one prior visit to the area and all of them said they definitely planned to visit the area again.

Fishing activity is also rising in popularity at Bear Lake. Creel surveys have been conducted on Bear Lake since 1973 to estimate angler pressure as well as catch and harvest by species information. Total angler pressure in the Bear Lake for the 12 month creel period in 2002 was estimated at 66,645 hours. This is a 25% increase from the 1999 creel count of 53,046 and a 42% increase from the 1996-1997 creel count of 27,711 (Tolentino, 2002). Harvest estimates indicated that 37,000 fish were caught and 23,400 of those were harvested (see table 5). Most angling hours were directed at the 2 trout species (S. Tolentino personal communication). Some anglers target the whitefish species, especially during winters when the lake is ice capped, and during January when cisco fishing is active. Yellow perch are a common game fish in the U.S., yet in Bear Lake they are sparsely distributed and rarely reach catchable lengths. The customary Cisco harvest takes place on the lake's east shore every January and has drawn over 8000 participating anglers consistently since before 1990. Most of the fishing takes place on the Utah end of the lake.

Consistent patterns throughout years illustrate weekend angler pressure as higher than weekday angler pressure at an average rate of 4 weekend anglers to 3 weekday. Throughout the year the estimated angling pressure during winter months, December through March of 2002, was nearly equal to the pressure observed during the summer months of May through August. Winter fishing was noted to increase substantially in years when the lake freezes over allowing for ice fishing. The highest month of weekend fishing was February while the highest month of weekday fishing pressure was May.

During the 2002 creel census, anglers reported releasing 23,461 fish and keeping 37,146 fish. This means 63% of the fish caught are harvested. Whitefish is the species caught most often (14,411) followed by cutthroat (10,053) and Cisco (8,825). These numbers were positively influenced by the Bonneville cisco that

have a daily limit of 30 fish, all of which are typically harvested for bait fishing at other times of the year. Table 5 illustrates the number of fish caught and the number of fish harvested during the year 2002.

<b>Catch and Harvest Estimates for 2002</b>				
	Catch	Harvest	Percent Of Catch Harvested	Percent Change 1996-1997 (Catch)
Cutthroat	10,053	4,112	41	13% Higher
Lake Trout	3,818	2,153	56	6% Lower
Whitefish	14,411	8,332	58	375% Higher
Cisco	8,825	8,825	100	11% Lower
Yellow Perch	13	13	100	86% Higher
Other	26	26	100	79% Lower
<b>Total</b>	<b>37,146</b>	<b>23,461</b>		

*Table 5. Catch and Harvest Estimates per Species For Year 2002 ( Utah Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife Resources, 2002).*

Boat and ice anglers made up the majority of angler hours spent on Bear Lake in 2002. Anglers fishing from boats made up over 54% of the total estimated fishing pressure while ice fishing accounted for 30% followed by shore fishing at 16%. Further analysis revealed that 90% of the anglers fished on the Utah side of the lake. These percentages are very comparable to past creel surveys (Tolentino, 2002).

Bear Lake has been designated a Blue Ribbon Fishery by Blue Ribbon Fishery Advisory Council (BRFAC, 2006). Selection as a Blue Ribbon Fishery requires demonstration of a water bodies ability to support a self sustaining, fishable population, that is accessible to the public, has good water quality and unique or desirable fish species. Bear Lake meets all of these conditions. Designation of being a Blue Ribbon Fishery allows access to funds and other layers of support in maintaining the health and well being of a water body. In October 2005 funding released to Bryce Nielson by BRFAC built four artificial reefs north of the Bear Lake

State Parks Marina. These reefs were made of local rock barged to waters 33 feet deep and dropped in piles. The reefs were designed to augment the productivity and spawning opportunities for endemic fishes seen on the natural rock outcropping north of Gus Rich Point in the southwest portion of the lake. Within a week fish were observed using these reefs.

The popularity of snowmobiling as a winter recreation activity in the basin has increased dramatically. A survey conducted by Utah State University in 2001 found that over 35% of Utah snowmobilers prefer to use the Hardware Ranch, Monte Cristo, and Logan Canyon Area, which include the areas around Bear Lake, to any other one place in the state. This trend is expected to continue (McCoy, 2001).

*Mission statement of the Blue Ribbon Fishery Advisory Council: "To identify, enhance and protect those Utah waters and their watersheds that provide, or have the potential to provide, Blue Ribbon quality, public angling experiences for the purpose of preserving and enhancing these valuable economic and natural resources"*

*(<http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/blueribbon/mission.html>).*



Photo by Ed Stephens

### **Snowmobiling the Bear Lake Valley**

Photo from: <http://www.bearlake.org/snowmobil.html>

## Recreation Sites on Bear Lake

The 70,000 acres Bear Lake water provides opportunities for first-rate boating, swimming, sailing, water-skiing and wakeboarding. Numerous public boat ramps are positioned around the lake for launching boats. Personal watercraft, such as jet skis and waverunners, can be rented at the marina and on the beach. Over 500 campgrounds are dotted around the lake offering a range of sites, from tent to full hook-up with electricity, culinary water, and showers. Picnick tables and restrooms are available at the state park beaches. Utah and Idaho are connected by hundreds of miles of backcountry trails for all levels of all terrain vehicles (ATVs). The Shoshone ATV Trail System and the surrounding canyons make for a challenging ride. Hiking, cycling, and mountain biking opportunities are abundant and offer acres of trails through mountain wilderness. Trails include the Bear Lake Scenic Bike Trail, a 4.2 mile paved trail from Harbor Village to Ideal Beach as well as the 45-mile paved roadway that encircles the lake.

You can golf 3 seasons of the year in the Bear Lake Valley: spring, summer and fall. The golf courses are located on western hillsides overlooking the lake.



***Jet Skis and Wave Runners are Popular Water Fun on the Lake***

*Photo from: [http://www.utah.com/stateparks/bear\\_lake.htm](http://www.utah.com/stateparks/bear_lake.htm)*

Bear Lake Marina is a well-developed boating facility with 176 slips that can be rented by day or season. It has an adjoining campground, a sheltered harbor and launching ramp, sanitary disposal station, rest rooms, and several concessionaires.

Bear Lake Rendezvous Beach is on the south shore near Laketown and provides 1.25 miles of wide, sandy beaches for camping, picnicking and watercraft activities. This beach is popular for large groups and is the site of the annual Mountain Man Rendezvous. Rendezvous' four campgrounds, Willow, Birch, Cottonwood, and Big Creek, contain a total of 178 campsites.



**Bear Lake at Sunset**

*Photo from: <http://www.thewanderingwoods.com/BL/a5bl401.jpg>*

First Point, found on the southeast shore, offers primitive campsites with a small boat ramp and toilet facilities. South Eden has drinking water, primitive campsites, 2 group pavilions and toilet facilities. Rainbow Cove has a boat ramp, group fire pits with grills, dispersed primitive campgrounds, and toilet facilities. Cisco Beach is famous for its midwinter fishing with dip nets for Bonneville Cisco. For a week to ten

---

days in January the small fish come close to the rocky shore to spawn and the fisherman wade waist-deep into the icy water to scoop them up. North Eden on the east side is the most primitive camping area. It offers 2 group pavilions, 2 toilets, and fire pits with grills.

The largest and most developed recreation complex on the lake is Sweetwater, located in the southern end of the lake. Sweetwater Corporation has a resort complex on the shore of the lake that contains 150 condominiums, a convention center, 2 restaurants, and several recreational facilities. The vast majority of Sweetwater property owners are absentee owners and visits seasonally.