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UPEP Policy Brief #1: Utahns Support State Spending for Outdoor Recreation

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Utahns Support State Spending for Outdoor Recreation

Casey Trout

Utah is known as an outdoor recreation destination, with stunning landscapes ranging from high alpine mountains to red-rock deserts. In recent years, Utah’s Legislature has shown a commitment to investing in outdoor recreation. In 2017, the Legislature approved a 0.32% statewide lodging tax to fund Utah’s Outdoor Recreation Grant Program¹ and in 2022 approved a diversion of 1% of all sales taxes in the state to go to funding outdoor recreation infrastructure projects².

But do Utahns actually support state investments in outdoor recreation? And is outdoor recreation an important component of Utahns’ lifestyle? The 2023 Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP) gathered data to answer these questions and provide insight into which outdoor recreation investments would be most supported by Utahns.

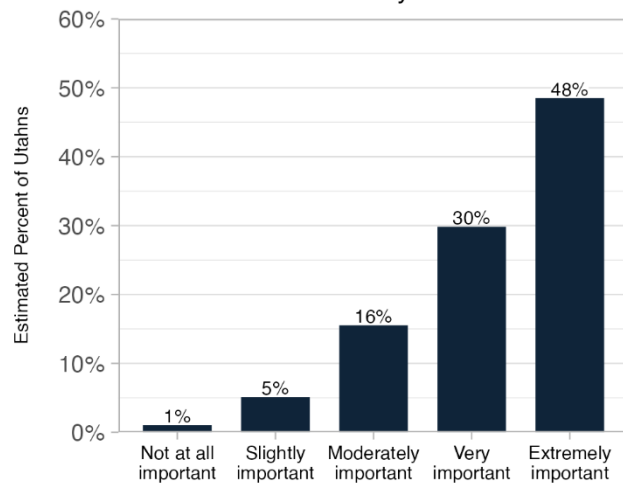
Outdoor Recreation Is Important to Utahns’ Lifestyles

Survey respondents were asked, “how important are outdoor recreation options and/or access to wilderness and public lands to your lifestyle?”³ We found that nearly half of Utahns feel that outdoor recreation options are extremely important to their lifestyle, while nearly 95% feel that outdoor recreation options are at least moderately important to their lifestyle (see Figure 1).

KEY FINDINGS

- In a representative statewide survey, over three-quarters of respondents indicated that outdoor recreation options are “extremely” or “very” important to their lifestyle.
- Survey respondents indicated high levels of support for state funding of outdoor recreation initiatives, ranging from 50% to 94% depending on the initiative.
- The initiatives with the greatest support were maintaining existing recreation resources, providing education on responsible recreation, and building more greenways and trails within communities.

Figure 1 Importance of Outdoor Recreation to Utahns' Lifestyles



Source: 2023 Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP)



Utahns Support Using State Funding for a Variety of Outdoor Recreation Initiatives

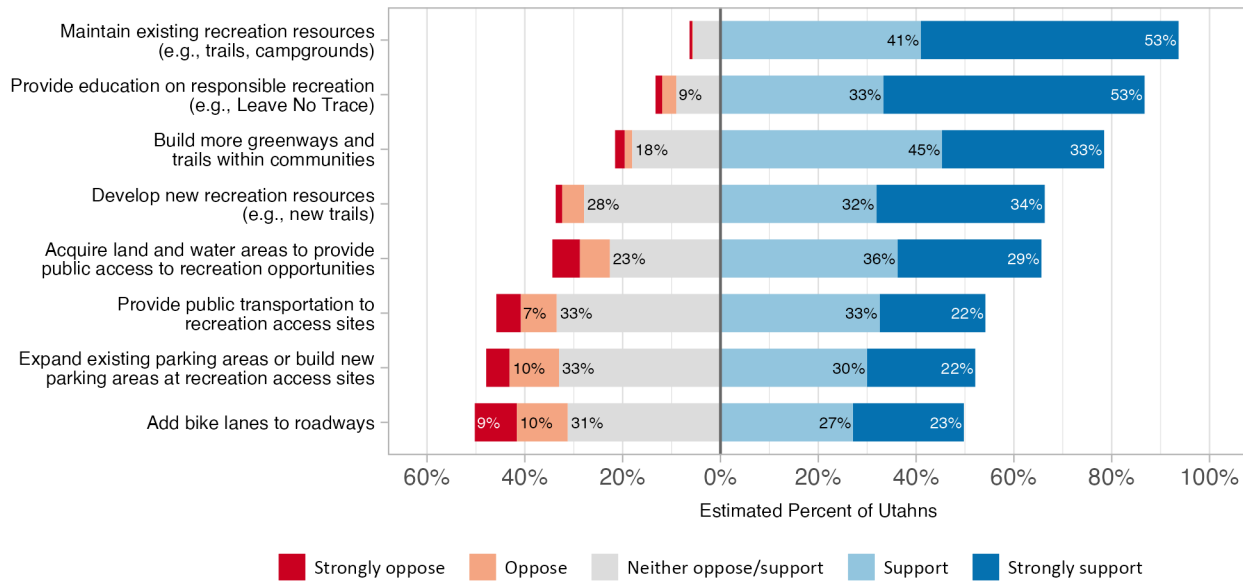
Survey respondents were asked how much they supported or opposed using state funds for various outdoor recreation efforts (see Figure 2). We found that half or more of Utahns support or strongly support using state funding for all efforts examined in the survey. The efforts with the highest support are maintaining existing recreation resources (94%), providing education on responsible recreation (86%), and building more greenways and trails within communities (78%).

There is slightly less support for efforts aimed at providing new recreation opportunities, including developing new recreation resources (66%) and acquiring land and water areas to provide public access to recreation

opportunities (65%). Transportation-related initiatives are the least supported, including providing public transportation to recreation access sites (55%), expanding parking options at recreation access sites (52%), and adding bike lanes to roadways (50%).

Comparatively, very few Utahns are opposed to using state funds for any of the efforts asked about, though opposition is strongest regarding the transportation-related efforts. Roughly 19% oppose using state funds to add bike lanes to roadways, 15% oppose adding or expanding parking areas at recreation access sites, and 12% oppose providing public transit options to recreation access sites. Comparatively, less than 1% oppose using state funds to maintain existing recreation resources, 4.2% oppose providing education on responsible recreation, and 3.5% oppose building more greenways and trails within communities.

Figure 2 Utahns' Support of Using State Funds for Outdoor Recreation Investments



Source: 2023 Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP)



Policy Implications

These findings highlight that Utahns view outdoor recreation and access to wilderness and public lands as important to their lifestyle and are overwhelmingly supportive of state-funded investments in outdoor recreation. Additionally, they provide insight into which outdoor recreation efforts have the broadest support. This is especially relevant to policymakers regarding how existing state funding streams for outdoor recreation might best be allocated. A recent analysis of Utah's existing funding streams for outdoor recreation found that a relatively small proportion of state funding is dedicated specifically to maintenance of existing infrastructure and less than 0.1% of state funding is dedicated specifically to education efforts⁴. However, the UPEP finds that Utahns are more supportive of using state funds for maintenance of existing infrastructure and responsible recreation education as compared to other initiatives. This indicates that policymakers may consider allocating more funding specifically to maintenance of existing outdoor recreation infrastructure and education efforts, in order to be more responsive to the priorities of Utahns.

Data and Methods

In spring 2023, Utah State University (USU) faculty and students started the Utah People and Environment Poll, or UPEP, to track Utahns' perceptions on environmental issues of importance to the state to help inform policy to address environmental issues. A random sample of 3,750 households were contacted using postal mail to respond to the survey online or on paper. 441 individuals responded to the survey for a final total response rate of 12%. Weights for survey design and to adjust for age, education, and gender representation are applied. To access other briefs and learn more about the UPEP, please visit: chass.usu.edu/sociology/canri/projects

About CANRI

The Community and Natural Resources Institute, or [CANRI](#), produces and promotes interdisciplinary and applied social science and humanities research focused on challenges at the intersection of people and the environment in the Intermountain West.

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About the Author

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2. Utah State Legislature. 2022. H.B. 409 Recreation Infrastructure Amendments. 2022 General Session. [le.utah.gov/~2022/bills/static/HB0409.html](https://leg.utah.gov/~2022/bills/static/HB0409.html)
3. Note that this survey question was adapted from a similar question in the Utah Outdoor Partners Survey of Tech Sector Employees carried out by the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, with a report available online at: gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/Utah-Outdoor-Partners-Survey-Jan2021.pdf?x71849&x71849
4. Smith, Jordan W. and Casey Trout. 2023. "An Overview of State Funding for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism in Utah." *Environment and Society Faculty Publications*. Paper 1648. digitalcommons.usu.edu/envs_facpub/1648