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UPEP 2023 Executive Summary

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Utah People & Environment Poll (UPEP)

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
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Executive Summary 2023

Introduction

Utah's people and environment are currently experiencing significant changes as the population continues to grow, droughts and flooding pose threats to agriculture, air quality leads to health concerns, energy needs rise, and public lands see increased use. Action is needed to address these changes, especially given how rapidly they are occurring. Political leaders, environmental organizations, Tribal Nations, and universities play a critical role in ensuring Utah's environment, economy, workforce, and underserved communities have a sustainable path forward. Understanding residents' views, values, and concerns can help better craft the policy, inform infrastructure, and identify the services needed to do so. With this goal of understanding in mind, Utah State University's Community & Natural Resources Institute (CANRI) launched the Utah People and Environment Poll in spring of 2023. The following summarizes some of the notable results of the survey.

Overview

The 2023 Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP) is a statewide survey of adult Utah residents to assess attitudes towards and perceptions of a variety of environmental issues facing Utah today as well as respondents' values and beliefs. The results form a rich body of data that will be able to inform actions and initiatives across the state. Subsequent surveys will be able to assess change over time and potentially offer insights into the impact of various interventions.

The poll was designed to reach a representative population for the state. Close to 450 residents completed the poll from 25 counties across Utah. Survey respondents were rather evenly dispersed across gender, education, political affiliation, and profession. Respondents were 93.1% white, which is just above the state's 90.0%, with 64.6% indicating they were residents of Salt Lake, Utah, or Davis county.
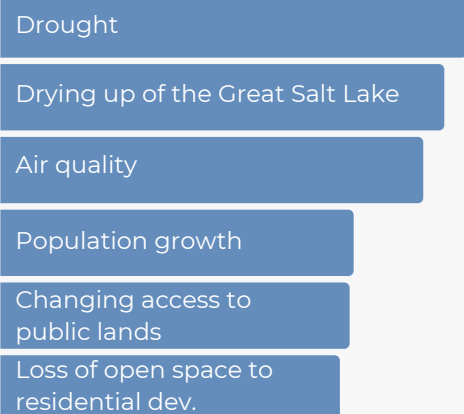
A Collaborative Effort

The survey was a collaborative effort led by Dr. Jessica Schad and her SOC 7100 (Advanced Survey Methods) class. Faculty and students from departments across College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHaSS) as well as the department of Environment and Society (ENVS) contributed questions.

Utahns: Connected to Home

Overall, respondents indicated a strong connection to Utah, which may be tied to the amount of time they have lived in the state. Respondents reported living in Utah from one to 88 years, with an average of 37.5 years. Most plan to stay, with 67.1% saying that they intended to still live in Utah in five years and 66.6% either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they would regret having to move to another place. 71.4% either somewhat or strongly agrees that Utah is the best place for what they like and do and 66.7% somewhat or strongly agreed that if this place changes too much, they may want to leave. For those considering leaving Utah, drought/lack of water and air quality were the most significant concerns (38.8% and 31.4%, respectively).

Issues of Concern

Drought was the most concerning environmental issue asked about to respondents (57.6% very concerned). Relatedly, the drying up of the Great Salt Lake ranked second (54.8%) followed by air quality (52.2%), population growth (43.6%), and changing access to public lands (43.1%).

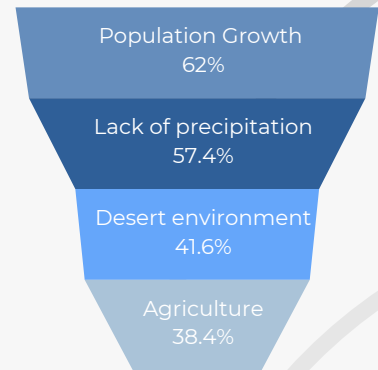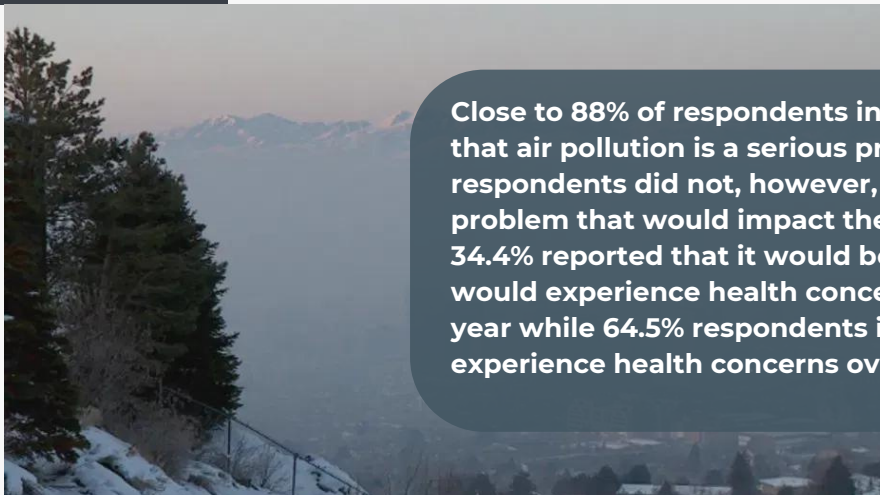| |
|---|
| Drought |
| Drying up of the Great Salt Lake |
| Air quality |
| Population growth |
| Changing access to public lands |
| Loss of open space to residential dev. |

Water

Water is a top concern among Utahns, with 79.7% of respondents ranking Utah's water crisis as a 6 or higher on a 10-point scale of severity. When asked what factors are contributing to the current water crisis, people perceived the top 5 factors as: population growth (62%), lack of precipitation (57.4%), desert environment (41.6%), agriculture (38.4%), and residential uses (21.9%).

Overall, respondents expressed that government was not managing water responsibly, with more people agreeing that the federal government was not being responsible (~60%) than the state (57.4%) or local governments (44.8%). Residents cited water management (63.3%), residential uses (54.2%), population growth (52.1%), agricultural uses (50.4%) and local or political involvement as areas that could be changed to mitigate Utah's current water crisis.

What factors are contributing to Utah's water crisis?

Population Growth
62%

Lack of precipitation
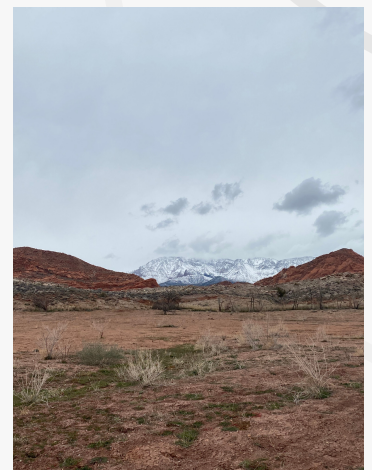57.4%

Desert environment
41.6%

Agriculture
38.4%

Air

Close to 88% of respondents indicated they agree or strongly agree that air pollution is a serious problem that can cause harm. Most respondents did not, however, consider air pollution to be a problem that would impact them in the near term. In fact, only 34.4% reported that it would be likely or extremely likely that they would experience health concerns from air pollution in the next year while 64.5% respondents indicated that they were likely to experience health concerns over their lifetime.

Land

The tourism industry is a major economic driver in Utah. In 2021, Utah visitors spent $10.56 billion, which supported 130,600 jobs and resulted in $1.81 billion in state & local tax revenue. Much of this tourism is dependent upon public lands.

The majority of respondents (93.8%) indicated that outdoor recreation options and/or access to wilderness and public lands was moderately, very, or extremely important to them. Over 80% expressed attachment to Utah's National Parks and public lands. When asked how much they support or oppose the use of state funds to manage recreation, respondents expressed the greatest support for maintaining existing resources (93.7%), education on responsible recreation (86.7%), and more greenways and trails within communities (78.5%).
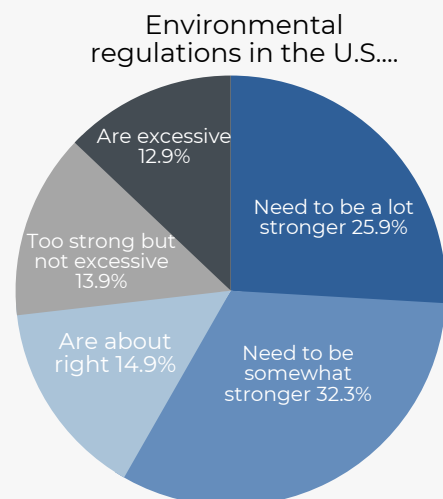
The Great Salt Lake

The Great Salt Lake is at risk of drying up and, with this loss, comes the loss of whole ecosystems as well as air pollution and changing weather patterns. A vast majority of respondents (93.2%) are somewhat or very aware of the drying up of the Great Salt Lake, but only 74.6% were somewhat or very aware of agriculture as one of the main drivers of this problem. Over 70% of respondents were, however, somewhat or very aware of the environmental impacts of the shrinking lake and an equal percentage were somewhat or very concerned about these issues. This suggests that while people are aware of desiccation and concerned about its various impacts, they are less aware of its causes.

In general, people were supportive of a variety of strategies to protect the Great Salt Lake. People expressed greater support for incentives for households, businesses, and agriculture to reduce water consumption over mandates, though over 50% of respondents did support a mandate for businesses.

Are Politicians Doing Enough?

Support for stronger environmental policy exists in Utah. 58.2% of respondents expressed that they think environmental regulations in the U.S. need to be somewhat or a lot stronger and 77.4% reported that protecting the environment should be more important than slower economic growth and job loss. The top three issues respondents reported that Utah politicians are not doing enough to address are drought, air quality, and loss of space due to residential development. The drying up of the Great Salt Lake was a close fourth.

Environmental regulations in the U.S....

- Are excessive 12.9%
- Too strong but not excessive 13.9%
- Are about right 14.9%
- Need to be a lot stronger 25.9%
- Need to be somewhat stronger 32.3%

Want to know more?

In addition to these topics, the UPEP also collected data about Utahns attitudes toward energy, water heritage, wildfire, values, environment & equality, and climate change & vulnerability. If you are interested in additional information, please visit our website (https://chass.usu.edu/sociology/canri/upep) or email Dr. Jessica Schad at jessica.schad@usu.edu.