

INSIGHTS INTO THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OUTDOOR RECREATIONISTS IN UTAH FROM A STATEWIDE SURVEY

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About the Institute

The **Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism** at Utah State University does research, outreach, and teaching focused on outdoor recreation and tourism management – inside Utah and beyond its borders. Our work focuses on the social and economic trade-offs associated with providing outdoor recreation opportunities on public lands.

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Insights Into the Characteristics and Preferences of Outdoor Recreationists in Utah From a Statewide Survey

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	5
Methods	5
Survey Development	5
Data Collection and Analysis	6
Findings	6
Frequency of Participation in Outdoor Recreation	6
Duration of Average Outdoor Recreation Trip	6
Perceptions of Threats to Outdoor Recreation	7
Importance and Adequacy of Different Types of Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure	7
Perceptions of Outdoor Recreation Funding Priorities	8
Sociodemographic Characteristics	9
Conclusion	10



Executive Summary

Understanding the characteristics and preferences of outdoor recreationists in Utah can inform the administrative, funding, and management decisions of the many entities who provide outdoor recreation opportunities within the state. There is currently a lack of data on characteristics, preferences, and opinions of the state's outdoor recreating public. As one component of the analysis supporting the development of the state's outdoor recreation strategic plan, we launched a short online survey to begin to address this need. The survey was administered in spring of 2023 to an online panel of individuals who indicated that they are current residents of Utah and had participated in outdoor recreation within Utah during the previous 12-months.

The data from the survey provide a cursory look into the demographic characteristics of outdoor recreationists in Utah and their perceptions of different threats to the future of outdoor recreation, the importance and adequacy of different types of outdoor recreation infrastructure, and the importance of different funding priorities. Major findings from the study include:

- **The greatest perceived threats to outdoor recreation within Utah are the lack of water for water-based recreation, the overuse of recreation resources, and the inadequacy of emergency services such as search and rescue.** These perceptions mirror those reported by outdoor recreation managers and elected officials in a series of stakeholder workshops held in fall 2022 and spring 2023 (Smith et al., 2023). These threats can be mitigated through a variety of actions by different entities. For example, the Utah Division of State Parks may want to begin strategically diversifying recreation opportunities at the many state parks they manage that cater to water-based recreationists, if they have not already begun to do so. Perceived “overuse” can be dealt with by ensuring adequate and appropriate infrastructure is provided in the locations where demand is already exceptionally high (e.g., hardening sites) while also ensuring there are opportunities for individuals to escape and experience solitude. Finally, the need for emergency services can be addressed through rethinking how county sheriff's offices are financially supported to provide these services.
- **Outdoor recreationists, by and large, believe current infrastructure is important, available, and meeting community needs.** However, there were several types of infrastructure that many outdoor recreationists indicated were important, but either not adequate or completely unavailable within their

community. These include environmental/education centers, bike lanes on existing highways and shared use paths, and campground facilities of all kinds. The lack of dedicated funding sources for some of these types of infrastructure, such as environmental/education centers, may signal a gap in current state policy and funding mechanisms. If existing grant funding programs can be used for infrastructure that is important to Utahns but absent or insufficient locally, outdoor recreation grant managers are encouraged to prioritize these sorts of projects in funding requests.

- **The vast majority of outdoor recreationists believe state funding for outdoor recreation is important.** Of the specific ways the state can fund outdoor recreation, “maintaining existing park and recreation areas” was indicated as being very or extremely important to the greatest portion of survey respondents. Nearly nine out of ten (87%) respondents noted state funding for this effort as very or extremely important. Additionally, an inability to sufficiently maintain existing infrastructure was a major concern of outdoor recreation managers expressed during the stakeholder workshops (Smith et al., 2023). Thus, the survey findings coupled with the need voiced by stakeholders at the project's workshops indicate that prioritizing funding for maintenance of existing assets is important to stakeholders and outdoor recreationists alike.

Collectively, these results reinforce many of the findings of the stakeholder workshops conducted as part of the outdoor recreation strategic planning effort (Smith et al., 2023). The survey data serves as “corroborating evidence” and also provides more concrete metrics that can be used to inform the outdoor recreation development and management decisions that will stem from the statewide outdoor recreation strategic plan. It is by no means a comprehensive assessment of the characteristics, behaviors, and beliefs of outdoor recreationists in Utah, but provides initial information regarding outdoor recreationist demographics and opinions in Utah. More detailed efforts in the future could be used to assess additional characteristics of Utah's recreating public.



Introduction

Understanding the characteristics and preferences of outdoor recreationists in Utah can inform the administrative, funding, and management decisions of the many entities who provide outdoor recreation opportunities within the state. While many individual agencies, such as the National Park Service and USDA Forest Service, have monitoring programs in place to characterize visitors to their lands, there is currently a lack of data on the state's outdoor recreating public as a whole. In the spring of 2023, we launched a short online survey to begin to address this need.

The survey effort was tailored to inform the decisions of the Utah Outdoor Adventure Commission (OAC), a relatively new state board tasked with both overseeing the development of a statewide strategic plan as well as making recommendations to the state Legislature on how to allocate roughly \$18 million in outdoor recreation infrastructure development funding (Smith & Trout, 2023). Consequently, questions asked in the survey focused on outdoor recreationists' perceptions of major threats to outdoor recreation within the state, the adequacy of different types of outdoor recreation infrastructure, and state funding priorities.

We also organized and facilitated a series of 14 stakeholder workshops with outdoor recreation managers and elected officials in Utah during fall 2022 and spring 2023 (Smith et al., 2023). The workshops focused on assessing major threats to outdoor recreation within the state as well as identifying major policy, program, and project needs. Consequently, the data reported on this report can corroborate the qualitative data generated through the workshops.

The survey effort is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. It was developed and delivered for the specific purpose of informing the development of the statewide outdoor recreation strategic plan and the decisions of the OAC. There has been, and still remains, an exceptional need for more detailed research into the characteristics and preferences of outdoor recreationists in Utah.

Methods

Survey Development

The characteristics and perceptions quantified through the survey effort included:

- **Frequency of participation in outdoor recreation.** How often individuals participate in outdoor recreation serves as a basic metric for which the state cur-

rently lacks any data. Relative to the binary measure of participation versus non-participation, the frequency measure provides slightly more insight into the importance of outdoor recreation to the lifestyles of Utahns.

- **Duration of average outdoor recreation trips.** Similar to the frequency measure, the duration metric provides a basic measure of how long Utahns generally spend recreating.
- **Perceptions of threats to outdoor recreation.** Understanding recreationists' perceived threats to the activities they participate in can help guide prevention and mitigation efforts that outdoor recreation managers and policy makers can take action on. Similarly, in the stakeholder workshops, we ascertained key stakeholders' perceptions of threats to outdoor recreation (Smith et al., 2023). The data reported here can be used to determine if the concerns of the outdoor recreating public align with those of managers and elected officials.
- **Importance and adequacy of different types of outdoor recreation infrastructure.** Given the current focus of the OAC in receiving and vetting infrastructure development proposals, this question can be used to support their review and decision making processes. We included a broad array of different types of outdoor recreation infrastructure that could be invested in more directly through the OAC's project recommendations to the state legislature. This data can also be used to inform the review and decision making processes of grant programs administered by the Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation and the Utah Office of Tourism (see Smith and Trout (2023)).
- **Perceptions of different types of outdoor recreation funding priorities.** Many county and state entities develop and deliver state-funded programs designed to support outdoor recreation opportunities within Utah. These include programs like the Utah Outdoor Recreation Grants (UORG) program as well as responsible recreation messaging campaigns led by the Division of Outdoor Recreation and the Utah Office of Tourism (see Smith and Trout (2023) for a full list). To date however, information on the need for these different programs has remained limited. Soliciting this information from the outdoor recreating public can help in determining if there are some potential areas that are not currently being served by existing programs within the state.
- **Sociodemographic characteristics.** The state currently lacks any definitive data on the sociodemo-



graphic characteristics of outdoor recreationists within Utah. Collecting this information is a vital first step to determining if, and how, the characteristics of the outdoor recreating public differs from the characteristics of the state’s population as a whole.

Findings

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through an online Qualtrics panel survey geographically bounded to target only those individuals who currently live within Utah and who have participated in outdoor recreation within the state at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey. A quota of 400 was set to ensure the data collected were sufficient enough to accurately represent the population of outdoor recreationists within the state, currently estimated at 2.4 million individuals (Smith & Miller, 2020). A sample of 385 or more is needed to have a confidence level of 95% that the real value for any statistic generated by the survey is within a 5% margin of error. The survey was administered in the spring of 2023. Data analysis involved basic univariate statistics for all measures.

Frequency of Participation in Outdoor Recreation

On average, outdoor recreationists in Utah participate in slightly more than one outdoor recreation trip per month (Table 1, Figure 1). This may seem low to many individuals, but is representative of the outdoor recreating public as a whole. Many individuals are much more avid recreationists, as indicated by the ranges in recreation participation shown in Table 1 and the long right-hand side tail in Figure 1.

Duration of Average Outdoor Recreation Trip

The average day trip involving outdoor recreation in Utah is just over 5 hours long, while the average overnight trip is just under 3.0 days long. These values are very generic averages and would vary widely depending upon the specific activity that individuals were participating in, the age of the outdoor recreationist, and even the season during which the activity occurs.

Table 1
Frequency of Participation and Average Outdoor Recreation Trip Duration

Measure	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Frequency of Participation				
Frequency of participation in past 3-months (<i>trips</i>)	4.3	4.2	1	30
Frequency of participation in past 12-months (<i>trips</i>)	13.1	27.2	1	350
Average Outdoor Recreation Trip Duration				
Day trips (<i>hours</i>)	5.3	3.1	1	20
Overnight trips (<i>days</i>)	2.9	2.0	1	14

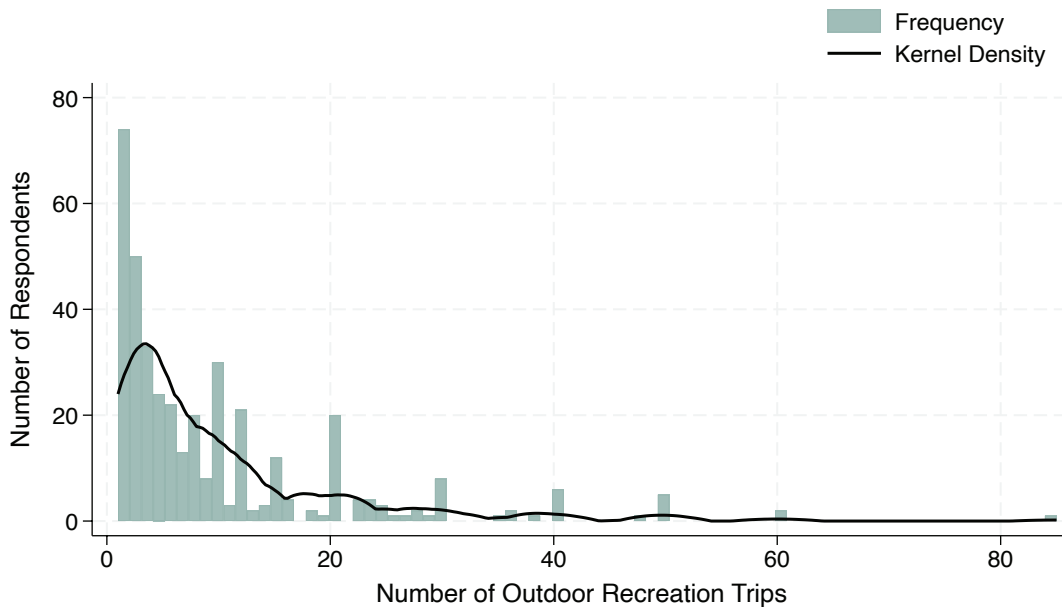


Figure 1
Frequency of Outdoor Recreation Participation During the Past Year



Perceptions of Threats to Outdoor Recreation

The major threats to outdoor recreation, as perceived by the outdoor recreating public within Utah, are shown in Figure 2. The greatest perceived threat was the availability of water for water based recreation. 32% of outdoor recreationists believed this threat was an “above average threat” to outdoor recreation within the state. This is particularly notable given the survey was administered in spring 2023, immediately after the state received the most snowpack in recorded history.

Nearly as many outdoor recreationists were concerned with the overuse of recreation resources (30% believing this is an above average threat). The adequacy of emergency preparedness resources, such as search and rescue services, was seen as the third greatest threat by survey respondents, with one-quarter indicating it as an above average threat. These threats were very similar to those noted in the stakeholder workshops held as part of the project (see Smith et al., 2023).

Outdoor recreationists in Utah also appear to be slightly more concerned with the ability to plan for future growth (Figure 2). 24% of outdoor recreationists indicated the ability to plan for future growth at the local level was an above average threat. Similar concerns were noted when the question was asked at the state (23%), regional (23%), and federal (21%) levels.

Importance and Adequacy of Different Types of Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure

When asked about the importance and adequacy of different types of outdoor recreation infrastructure, respondents by and large believe current infrastructure is important, available, and meeting community needs (Figure 3). For each type of infrastructure asked about, at least 42% of outdoor recreationists within the state believe it is important, available, and meeting the needs of their local community.

There were several types of infrastructure that many outdoor recreationists indicated were important, but either not adequate or completely unavailable within their community. Most notably, a majority (51%) of the state’s outdoor recreationists believe that environmental/education centers are important but either inadequate or unavailable in their community. This indicates a notable “gap” in the types of infrastructure the state currently funds, as there are no funding mechanisms or programs dedicated exclusively to environmental/education centers (Smith & Trout, 2023). While UORG and county transient room tax funding could be used to fund environmental/education centers, it is unclear the extent to which they are currently doing so. In other pieces of analysis to support the development of the outdoor recreation strategic plan, we highlight the relatively marginal amount of funding dedicated to outdoor recreation and environmental education efforts (Smith & Trout, 2023).

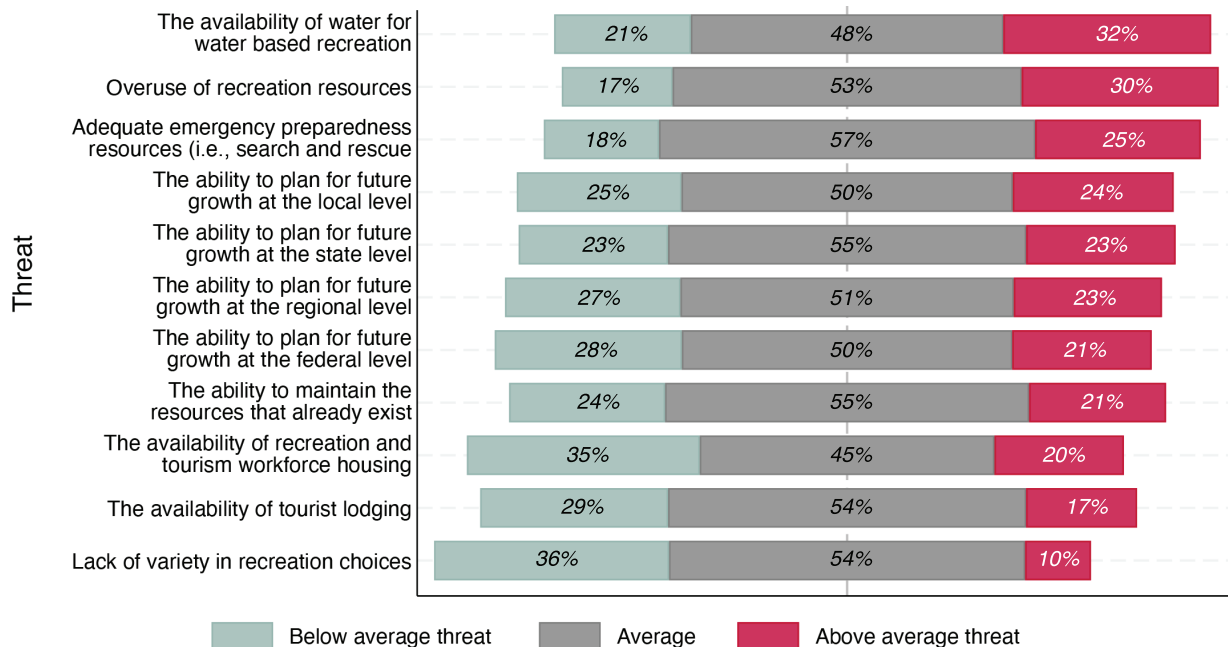


Figure 2
Assessment of Different Threats to Outdoor Recreation in Utah



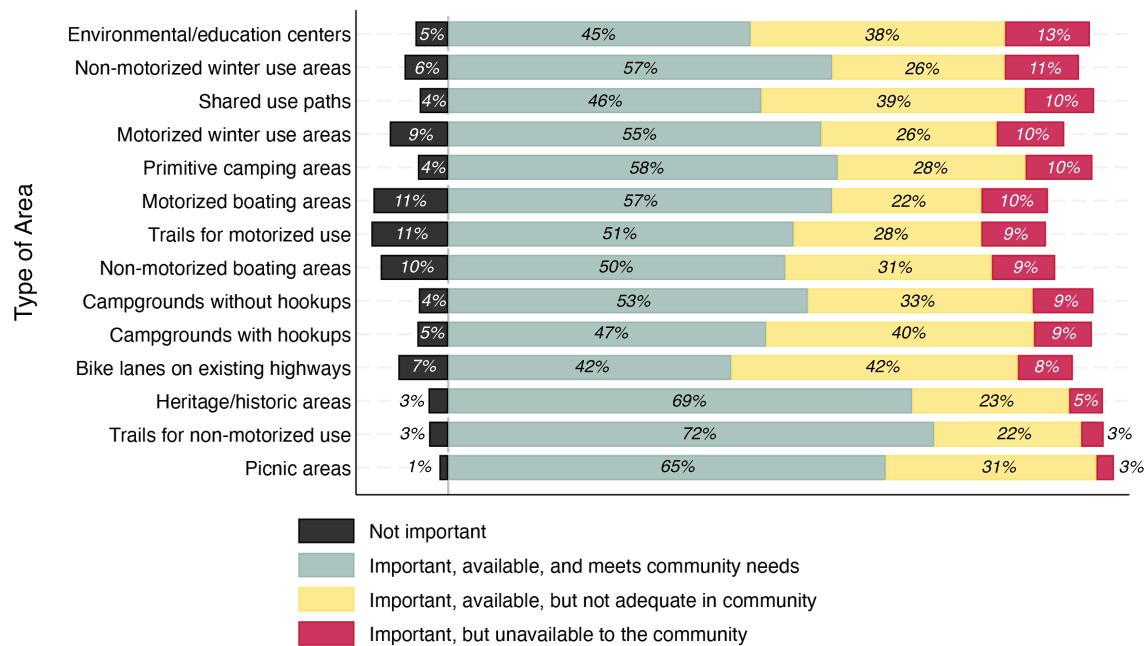


Figure 3
Importance and Adequacy of Different Types of Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure

Nearly half of the outdoor recreationists within the state believe bike lanes on existing highways (50%) and shared use paths (49%) are important but either inadequate or unavailable in their community. This perceived gap may be filled by the state’s new commitment to fund the development of paved shared use trail systems statewide (Smith & Trout, 2023).

Another notable perceived “gap” in the supply of outdoor recreation infrastructure across the state is a lack of campgrounds. 49% of outdoor recreationists believe there is a need for more campgrounds with hookups within their communities. This percentage drops to 42% for campgrounds without hookups. 38% indicated the presence of primitive campgrounds are currently inadequate in their community.

Of note, only 25% of outdoor recreationists believe that trails for non-motorized use are currently inadequate or unavailable within their community. Non-motorized trails appear to be the most adequately supplied type of asset within Utah. This may signal a need for current grant programs that have flexibility in the types of outdoor recreation assets they fund (e.g., UORG grants, LWCF grants, etc.) to move away from funding non-motorized trail development.

Perceptions of Outdoor Recreation Funding Priorities

The vast majority (> 94%) of outdoor recreationists in the state believe state funding for outdoor recreation within Utah is important (Figure 4). Of the specific ways the state can fund outdoor recreation, 87% of outdoor recreation-

ists indicated that “maintaining existing park and recreation areas” is either very or extremely important. This aligns with the concerns of outdoor recreation managers expressed during the project’s stakeholder workshops (Smith et al., 2023) as well as an ancillary poll of Utahns’ perceptions toward the environment (Trout, 2023). Funding for the maintenance of existing park and recreation areas is likely to be the most important issue for both outdoor recreation managers and outdoor recreationists themselves.

Outdoor recreationists also expressed a strong preference for state funding to be used to conserve the resources that either support or enhance outdoor recreation opportunities. 85% of outdoor recreationists indicated “protecting wildlife habitat and conserving wild resources” was either very or extremely important. Funding to “restore damaged rivers and streams” (77%) as well as funding to “acquire and protect open space” (67%) was nearly as important to outdoor recreationists within the state.

The majority of outdoor recreationists also indicated funding to “provide information on outdoor recreation opportunities” was important; 60% indicated funding for this purpose was either very or extremely important. This datapoint is a good signal to state agencies, like the Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation and the Utah Office of Tourism, that there is an unmet need to provide information to the public on where they can recreate within the state.



59% of outdoor recreationists within the state believe funding to support “state assistance to local government with open space and recreation planning” is either very or extremely important. This finding is a good indicator that allocating state funding for outdoor recreation planning assistance (via one full-time staff person within the Division of Outdoor Recreation), is a step in the right direction. In another project report (Trout & Smith, 2023), we detail how the state could leverage this funding through collaborations with private consultants, university Extension programs, and others.

Outdoor recreationists also believe funding for outdoor recreation related programming both within and outside of parks is important to outdoor recreation within the state (Figure 4). This finding highlights the value of interpretive programs offered by national and state land managers; it also highlights the importance of providing these programs outside of parks as well.

Sociodemographic Characteristics

The average age of respondents was 53.1 years old (Table 2). Respondents, on average, had 1.8 children living in their household. This is slightly lower than the statewide average of 2.1 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), suggesting outdoor recreationists within the state tend to have fewer children than non outdoor recreationists.

Racially, outdoor recreationists in Utah are very homogenous, with 90% reporting being white or caucasian. US Census data also report 90% of all Utahns report being white or caucasian. Only a very small proportion of Utah’s outdoor recreationists report being of any other race (Table 2).

Nearly 61% of outdoor recreationists within the state reported an annual personal income below \$75,000 per year. By comparison, nearly 70% of the state’s population as a whole report an annual income of \$75,000 or less; this suggests outdoor recreationists within the state tend to earn slightly more when compared to the state’s population as a whole.

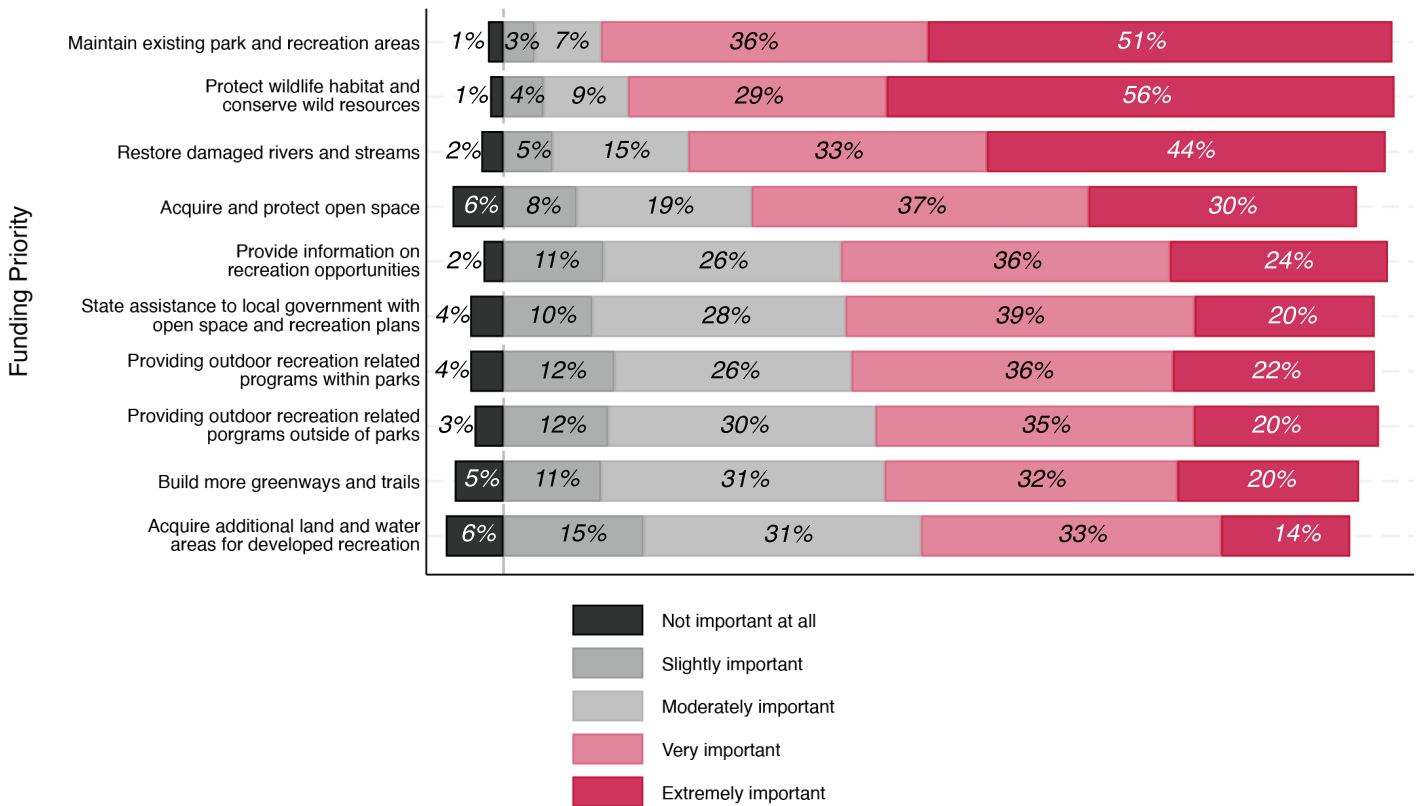


Figure 4
Importance of Different Types of Outdoor Recreation Funding Priorities



Table 2
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Outdoor Recreationists in Utah

Characteristic	Mean	Std. Dev.	Percent
Age	53.1	17.1	
Number of Children	1.8	1.3	
Race			
White or Caucasian			90.0
Black or African American			2.3
American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native			2.5
Asian			2.9
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander			3.2
Other			2.7
Income			
Less than \$25,000			12.5
\$25,000 - \$49,999			25.7
\$50,000 - \$74,999			22.7
\$75,000 - \$99,999			17.7
\$100,000 - \$149,999			13.2
More than \$150,000			6.5

Conclusion

Data from this statewide survey provide a cursory look into who outdoor recreationists in Utah are and their perceptions of different threats to the future of outdoor recreation, the importance and adequacy of different types of outdoor recreation infrastructure, and the importance of different funding priorities. The data reported on for these three topic areas can inform the decisions of not only the OAC through their development of the strategic plan, but also the many allied agencies and entities that facilitate and manage outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the state. Major findings from the study include:

- **The greatest perceived threats to outdoor recreation within Utah are the lack of water for water-based recreation, the overuse of recreation resources, and the inadequacy of emergency services such as search and rescue.** These perceptions mirror those reported by outdoor recreation managers and elected officials (Smith et al., 2023). These threats can be mitigated through a variety of actions by different entities. For example, the Utah Division of State Parks may want to begin strategically diversifying recreation opportunities at the many reservoirs that cater to water-based recreationists, if they have not already begun to do so. Perceived “overuse” can be dealt with by ensuring adequate and appropriate infrastructure is provided in the locations where demand is already exceptionally high (e.g., hardening sites) while also ensuring there are opportunities for more solitary, Wilderness-style, opportunities (see

Smith et al. (2023) for a more detailed review of how this can be achieved). Finally, the need for emergency services can be met by rethinking how county sheriffs offices are financially supported to provide these services (see Smith et al. (2023) for a detailed review of sustainable financing for search and rescue in Utah).

- **Outdoor recreationists, by and large, believe current infrastructure is important, available, and meeting community needs.** However, there were several types of infrastructure that many outdoor recreationists indicated were important, but either not adequate or completely unavailable within their community. These include environmental/education centers, bike lanes on existing highways and shared use paths, and campground facilities of all kinds. The lack of dedicated funding sources to target some of these types of infrastructure, such as environmental/education centers, may signal a gap in current state policy and funding mechanisms. If any of these types of infrastructure are allowed to be funded under existing grant programs, grant managers are encouraged to weigh the perceptions of the outdoor recreating public into funding allocation decisions and prioritize funding these sorts of infrastructure projects.
- **The vast majority of outdoor recreationists believe state funding for outdoor recreation is important.** Of the specific ways the state can fund outdoor recreation, 87% of outdoor recreationists indicated that “maintaining existing park and recreation areas” is either very or extremely important. This aligns with



the concerns of outdoor recreation managers expressed during the project’s stakeholder workshops (Smith et al., 2023).

Collectively, these results reinforce many of the findings generated through the 14 stakeholder workshops conducted as part of the outdoor recreation strategic planning effort (Smith et al., 2023). The survey data serves as “corroborating evidence” and also provides more concrete metrics that can be used to inform the many outdoor recreation development and management decisions that will stem from the statewide outdoor recreation strategic plan. While it is by no means a comprehensive assessment of the characteristics, behaviors, and beliefs of outdoor recreationists in Utah, it is an initial effort to better understand outdoor recreationists in the state that could also be used to lay the groundwork for more detailed efforts in the future.

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