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## Public Support for Utah's State Parks

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### Introduction

Utah's 44 scenic, heritage, and recreation State Parks host more than seven million visitors annually. The diversity of recreation opportunities range from nature trails to off-highway vehicle trails, ice fishing to picnicking. State Park visitors can camp, swim, learn about nature or ancient civilizations, play golf, or simply rest and relax. In addition to the thousands of foreign and out-of-state visitors, over 90% of Utah residents have visited at least one of their own state parks. A recent study by the Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (IORT) found that Utahns strongly support and approve of their State Parks.

In the Fall of 1994, IORT conducted a statewide telephone survey regarding State Park visitation and satisfaction, park protection, funding for park improvements, and the acquisition and sale of State Park lands. The study was funded by the State of Utah, Division of Parks and Recreation. All findings reported here are drawn from the final study report (Anderson and Blahna 1995a).

### Survey Sample

Using a random selection of Utah residential telephone numbers supplied by U.S. West, 647 individuals were contacted. Of these, 407 (63%) responded to the survey. When the characteristics of survey respondents were compared to U.S. Census data, the sample was found to be representative of the state in terms of age groups, racial/ethnic groups, and population distribution (based on Wasatch Front residents vs. other Utah residents). As is commonly found in survey research, the sample slightly over-represented females and those with higher than average levels of education and income.

Nearly 95% of those surveyed indicated satisfaction with the Utah State Parks they have visited; 60% indicated they were "satisfied," and 34% reported they were "very satisfied." Fewer than 6% indicated dissatisfaction with the parks.

Twenty individuals gave reasons why they were dissatisfied with their State Park experiences. Four said no entrance fees should be charged. The comments "need more facilities," "too crowded," and "beaches unsuitable/unsafe for swimming" were each made by three individuals. Two people made each of the following comments: "non-Utahns should pay more," "too much trash," "need sand for the beach," "parks poorly maintained," and "need cleaner restrooms."

### Funding Park Improvements

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the Division of Parks and Recreation pursuing various possible sources of new revenue to fund State Park improvements. People generally supported increasing entrance fees (60% said "agree" or "strongly agree") and increasing fees for campgrounds or group picnic areas (65% agreement). More than half (54%) disapproved of a tax on recreation equipment, while the vote on increasing sales tax by 1/8% dedicated for State Park use, was exactly evenly split. Nearly three-quarters (74%) disapproved of generating State Park funding through a tax on real estate transactions.

### Park Visitation and Satisfaction

Over 90% of those interviewed had visited a Utah State Park at some time, with an average of eight different parks visited. The average number of different parks visited dur-

ing the previous 12 months was 3 to 4, with nearly 10% reporting visits to 6 or more parks during the past year. When people were asked why they don't visit Utah State Parks more often, the five most common answers were: lack of time (67%), money or cost (12%), too crowded (6%), lack of information (6%), and lack of interest (5%).

### Park Protection

Respondents were asked their opinions about a variety of potential measures to protect Utah State Parks for future generations (Table 1). Combining "definitely yes" and "probably yes" responses, every measure except prohibiting mountain bikes received the support of over 60% of survey respondents. Three items received the support of over 80%: restricting certain activities in some areas of parks (92%), providing special trails for mountain bikes (89%), occasionally closing a park to allow vegetation to rest and restore itself (88%), and prohibiting the removal of rocks and vegetation from the parks (84%). There was significantly less support for prohibiting off-road vehicles (70%), limiting public access (67%), and prohibiting use of mountain bikes (37%). Of those who said "definitely yes" to prohibiting mountain bike or ORV use in State Parks, however, 86% said it was appropriate to provide special areas for ORVs, and 89% said it was appropriate to provide designated bike trails.

### Sale and Acquisition State Park Lands

Support for stabilizing or increasing State Park acreage was clear. Over 88% of those surveyed opposed the sale of State Park lands for private development. Seventy-seven per cent, however, were willing to trade existing park lands for more desirable property. Eighty-one per cent would "definitely" (32%) or "probably" (48%) support state purchase of additional land for the State Parks. Most of those surveyed also approved of working to acquire private inholdings

within park boundaries (64%), and felt that the State Parks Division should work to acquire easements or rights of way on private property surrounding parks (70%).

Almost 77% of respondents were in favor of the Division of Parks and Recreation working to acquire additional land for the creation of new State Parks. While 92% would support the *donation* of private land to the State Parks, *condemnation* of private land for State Park use was opposed by nearly three-quarters (74%) of all respondents.

### Park Designation

Park support was shown again when respondents were asked questions about designating and dedesignating parks. Over 93% felt that it is important to have strong local public and political support before a new State Park is created. However, given a choice between "the characteristics of the site itself" and "local public and political support," two-thirds felt the characteristics of the site are more important in the selection of a new park location.

Consistent with the results above, there was resistance to removing parks from the State Park system. Seventy per cent of those surveyed felt that even parks with little visitation should remain in the system. Similarly, 70% felt that parks with local—not statewide—significance should remain part of the system. When designating new parks, nearly three-quarters felt historical or cultural value—not just scenic and recreational value—is important in a new State Park. More than 61% were comfortable with the idea of locating a State Park in an urban area or within a city or town.

### Respondent Subgroup Variations

These general trends for park visitation and satisfaction, funding park improvements, park protection, sale and acqui-

**Table 1. Attitudes toward various park protection measures.**

Question	Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably No	Definitely No
Limit number of people in a park at one time (n=387)	25%	42%	24%	9%
Restrict certain activities in some areas of parks (n=391)	57%	36%	5%	3%
Occasional closure of a park to allow vegetation to restore itself (n=384)	46%	42%	9%	3%
Prohibit hunting in the parks (n=377)	44%	19%	19%	19%
Prohibit removal of vegetation and rocks (n=387)	68%	17%	8%	8%
Hire more rangers and law enforcement personnel (n=358)	27%	49%	18%	7%
Prohibit mountain bikes (n=367)	16%	21%	41%	22%
Prohibit off-road vehicles (n=374)	45%	25%	20%	10%
<b><i>If not "definitely prohibit"</i></b>				
Provide special trails for mountain bikes only (n=304)	50%	39%	8%	3%
Provide special trails for off-road vehicles only (n=178)	44%	42%	10%	5%

sition of State Park lands, and park designation were consistent for several subsets of survey respondents. Subgroup analyses were conducted for eight variables:

- Wasatch Front residents vs. other residents
- Urban vs. rural residents (where they live currently)
- Urban vs. rural residents (where they lived most of their lives)
- Utah Newcomers (since 1984) vs. long-term residents
- Annual household income
- Educational attainment
- Total number of State Parks visited
- Number of State Parks visited in the last 12 months

The greatest number of differences of opinion was found among respondents with different levels of education. A pattern of increasing support for survey items related to land acquisition and access, funding for improvements, and park protection was found among respondents with higher levels of education. These differences, however, were not large. (See Anderson and Blahna 1995a for details.)

The low number of significant differences among respondents in these categories was surprising, especially given the growth and urbanization taking place in the state. The results suggest continued strong support and perhaps even increasing support for the State Parks, despite the social and demographic changes occurring in Utah (Anderson and Blahna 1995b).

## Summary

Overall, the consistency of responses is striking throughout the study's findings. Utahns report high levels of satisfaction with their State Park visits. They generally support park improvements and the expansion of the State Park System. There is widespread support for measures to protect Utah parks for future generations and resistance to the sale of existing State Park lands. Throughout the state, Utahns enjoy and support their State Parks.

## References

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