

Destination Stewardship in the Utah Office of Tourism

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By: Flint Timmins

From Amsterdam to Zion National Park, destinations around the world are speaking up about being “loved to death,” a feeling that too many tourists are overwhelming local infrastructure, damaging the environment, and generally degrading a community’s quality of life. Many North American GNAR communities reeling from the effects of increased visitor numbers are employing strategies to manage visitation and make tourism a sustainable part of the community. These strategies are known as *destination stewardship*.

Destination



Stewardship

Destination stewardship means acting as a caretaker of a destination's people, culture, and environment. It consists of destination *messaging*, *development*, and *management* activities.

Destination management can broadly be considered as the policies, practices, and professional proficiencies used to manage the role of tourism in the community. Destination development is typically used to refer to the physical infrastructure put in place to improve the destination’s ability to accommodate visitors. Destination messaging is the thoughtful communication of the destination’s values and assets to the right audience, inviting them to visit responsibly.

The right policies and practices can not only improve the visitor experience but the quality of life for residents. Destination stewardship has the ability to increase a destination’s visitor capacity, reduce congestion, protect housing affordability, and other aspects of community life. Proactive destination stewardship can ensure that tourism becomes an asset to the community rather than a stumbling block.

Destination Stewardship in Utah

Utah is no stranger to tourism struggles. The state is home to 5 national parks, 9 national monuments, 43 state parks, 15 ski resorts, a world renowned film festival, and hosted the Winter Olympics in 2002. Aggressive and creative marketing campaigns throughout the 2010s meant to set Utah apart from its neighbors Arizona and Colorado were hugely successful. Millions of domestic and international visitors discovered Utah for the first time and made their marks. Gateway communities like Moab, Park City, and Springdale bore the brunt of this increase. In these and other gateway and amenity rich communities, the sudden influx of visitors had significant impacts on daily life, from traffic jams and skyrocketing property values to graffiti and wildfires.

To address these impacts, the Utah Office of Tourism (UOT) began to engage in destination stewardship activities. UOT’s [Red Emerald Strategic Plan](#) outlines five key imperatives for how the office can be a better steward. The principles in the Red Emerald Strategic Plan focus on attracting quality visitation, which means shaping traveler itineraries to promote longer stays, increased spending, dispersed visitation throughout the state and deeper engagement with local communities. This strategy also champions a community-led vision for tourism development. In 2018 UOT introduced [destination development planning grants](#) to help local communities identify their resources and needs, create new branding and messaging, and lay out a community-led strategic action plan to achieve their tourism visions. More recently, UOT unveiled its [Forever Mighty Initiative](#), an educational campaign intended to encourage responsible visitation. UOT is also a member of the [Global Sustainable Tourism](#)

Council, a worldwide entity that helps destinations understand how to develop a sustainable tourism industry.

Lessons learned



UOT's experience with destination stewardship has taught us a few lessons:

First, communities need to understand that destination stewardship is community development.

Tourism has many unintended consequences, and communities need to understand those as they plan items like for roads, housing, and EMS. Likewise, those in the tourism industry need to become acquainted with community development issues and search for ways to become part of the solutions to those issues.

Secondly, destinations should create a vision for the role they would like tourism to play in their communities. A vision will help to guide strategy and policy, mitigating adverse tourism impacts and telling the story to residents and partners.

Finally, don't let the perfect solution get in the way of good ones. It is very tempting to delay action on destination stewardship because the perfect solution with absolute consensus has not been found. When destinations fail to manage visitors, they allow visitors to manage the destination. Incremental, low-stakes, good solutions to tourism impacts are important, and communities should work for those easy wins. Small, simple solutions can create enthusiasm, and support for larger projects.

To learn more about the Utah Office of Tourism's destination stewardship practices and their Forever Mighty Initiative, Please visit:

- visitutah.com/forever (Forever Mighty overview)
- visitutah.com/prepare (Visitor Education hub)



Flint Timmins is the destination development lead with the Utah Office of Tourism where he assists local governments in developing and managing the amenities, infrastructure, and leadership necessary to become welcoming destinations for visitors. He previously worked for the State's Division of Housing and Community Development where he conducted rural research, provided local government planning assistance, and supported the division's infrastructure funding programs. Flint graduated with a master's degree in public administration from the Romney Institute of Public Management at Brigham Young University.