

Use, Attitudes, and Beliefs about the Great Salt Lake among Davis County residents

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Introduction

Utah's spectacular natural environment draws millions of visitors to the state each year. As a result, nature-based tourism has long been part of the economic development strategies of most state and local government entities in Utah. Davis County has not been well-known as a tourism destination, as it is far from the spectacular national parks of southern Utah and lacks the popular ski areas that draw visitors to neighboring counties to the north and south. However, Davis County does offer the best access to another world-class natural setting, albeit one whose attractions may be less obvious to casual visitors: the Great Salt Lake. The county's tourism and economic development experts now are working to promote the lake as a visitor destination in ways that do not impair its natural qualities.

Great Salt Lake is an ecological wonder, with a unique saltwater ecosystem surrounded by wetlands that attract one of the world's largest concentrations of migrating shorebirds. Antelope Island State Park, reached by a seven-mile-long causeway built and maintained by Davis County, offers hiking, picnicking, bicycling, camping, and wildlife viewing opportunities in a natural setting that differs little from the one encountered by Utah pioneers 150 years ago. However, Antelope Island is becoming so popular that Utah State Parks officials worry whether the park's recreational carrying capacity will be met in the next few years. And development pressures in the fast-growing Salt Lake metropolitan area are transforming the land in ways that could reduce the lake's importance to birds. A question that Davis County officials must consider is: Are these circumstances favorable for development of *sustainable* nature-based tourism in the county?

The best answer to that question is: It *can* be. The challenge for sustainable, nature-based tourism development in Davis County is to promote the lake not only to bird-watchers and other potential visitors, but also to promote the lake *within* the county to local citizens. Local promotion is important for two reasons: first, word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and relatives remain one of the most important ways that tourists learn about new destinations; and second, awareness of the lake's natural qualities can encourage Davis County residents to adopt development options which can support the county's rapid growth while protecting the natural qualities of the Great Salt Lake.

A keystone effort for promoting both tourism and lake awareness in Davis County was launched in 1999 with the first annual Great Salt Lake Bird Festival, held at the county FairPark

in Farmington in early May. To assist county officials with their efforts, the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (IORT) at Utah State University designed and administered a survey of Festival visitors to measure the event's effectiveness. We found that the event did create new expenditures in Davis County although, in its first year, the event attracted few visitors from outside the northern Wasatch Front region. We also found that the people who attended the Festival came away with a greater appreciation of the Great Salt Lake as a natural wonder.

Most Davis County residents did not attend the Festival, however. Therefore IORT also conducted a second survey to assess county residents' attitudes and awareness about the Great Salt Lake and its recreation/tourism potential. Together, these surveys offer baseline information that can assist Davis County officials in developing a sustainable nature-based tourism strategy.

This report describes results of the second study, which measured Davis County citizens' beliefs about the lake as a natural setting as well as a recreation/tourism destination. The survey took place in conjunction with an ongoing study of use, attitudes, and knowledge about wetlands in northern Utah, part of a project to develop a wetlands education master plan for the Great Salt Lake region under the auspices of the Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission and the state Division of Wildlife Resources. The Davis County survey involved a partnership between IORT and Davis County's Community and Economic Development Department. IORT scientists added questions to the wetlands survey which were pertinent to the county's Great Salt Lake tourism promotion effort. In exchange, county officials helped to print and distribute surveys in Davis County communities.

Who responded to the survey?

To meet the overall goals of the wetland education study, the survey was distributed only to residents of single-family homes. A dropoff/pickup survey method was used whereby surveys were delivered in person to prospective respondents who were asked to have a completed survey ready to be picked up at a specified time. From the original sample of 200 homes on randomly selected blocks in Davis County, we were able to make contact with residents of 185 households and received 117 valid responses, a 63% response rate. This response rate is higher than is typical for general public surveys about topics that may only be relevant to a portion of the population, probably because we used the dropoff/pickup distribution method.

Because of the relatively high response rate, and because we enhanced the randomness of the survey by asking that it be completed by the adult in the household whose birthday comes earliest in the year, we feel confident that our results are representative of the larger population we sampled from. However, it's important to note that we did not attempt to contact the full range of Davis County residents, but only those who live in single-family homes.

Based on U.S. Census Bureau data, we estimate there are roughly 48,000 single-family homes in Davis County, which means that we contacted 0.4% of the county's non-apartment households. Results of a random sample of this size are likely to reflect the larger population within 6.5 percentage points above or below the survey results (for example, because 67.5% of respondents agreed that the Great Salt Lake "smells bad," we can confidently say that 61-74% of residents of Davis County's single-family households dislike the lake's odor).

The survey was completed by persons ranging in age from 18 to 79, with an average age of 37. More than two-thirds of the respondents were under 40. Thus our sample may have been slightly younger than the average for Davis County adults, perhaps because our sampling strategy emphasized neighborhoods close to wetlands which tend to be relatively recent. As is typical for surveys on science-oriented topics, the education level of respondents was higher than average. Nearly half (47%) of the respondents reported having a college degree, and half of that group had some education beyond the bachelor's degree. Only 3.5% had not completed high school, and 10% had a high school diploma but no further education. In contrast, the 1990 Census reported that 10% of Davis County residents over 25 years of age have not completed high school, and 24% had earned a bachelor's or higher degree.

Otherwise the demographic data for our respondents appear typical for Davis County. The survey was completed by slightly fewer women (47%) than men (53%). The average respondent had lived in Utah for 27 years. Slightly more than half (52%) grew up in a city, large town, or suburban area.

What do people do at the Great Salt Lake, and why (or why not)?

Most people recommend local tourist destinations to friends and relatives if they enjoy those places themselves. However, Davis County residents typically don't make much use of the Great Salt Lake for recreation. Only 5 of our 117 respondents (4%) reported that they visit the lake for recreation activities once a month or more. Twenty percent said they visit several times a year, 43% once or twice a year, and 33% said that they visit the lake "rarely or never."

For the 79 respondents who said they do visit the lake at least once a year, the activities most frequently enjoyed were sightseeing (71% of those who visit the lake) and picnicking (41%). Following are the percentages of all respondents – including those who rarely or never visit the lake – who participate in selected recreation activities at the Great Salt Lake at least once a year. (This is the figure that best describes the proportion of Davis County residents who take part in these activities at the lake):

Sightseeing	48%	Birdwatching	15%	Nature study	9%
Picnicking	27%	Bicycling	10%	Boating	3%
		Hunting	10%	Other activities	15%

The survey also listed reasons why someone might not want to visit the Great Salt Lake. We asked those respondents who rarely or never visit the lake to check off any of the reasons that applied to them. (Again, the percentages reported here are the proportion of the total sample.)

I don't know what there is to do at the Great Salt Lake	24%
I'm not interested in the activities there are to do at the lake	19%
I find the lake unattractive to look at	3%
I don't like the way the lake smells	20%
I'd like to visit more often, but I don't know where I can go	17%
I'd like to visit more often, but I don't have the right transportation	1%
I'd like to visit more often, but I don't have the time	29%

I'd like to visit more often, but my family isn't interested in going 7%

What do Davis County residents think and say about the lake?

Even if Davis County residents typically don't visit the lake very often, they might still recommend the lake to others if they believe it is an interesting place to visit. Therefore we asked the survey recipients to tell us whether and how often they recommend visits to the Great Salt Lake to anyone else. We found a sort of middling result – Davis County residents *do* tell others about the lake, but not very often:

Yes, I tell all my friends and family to visit there	26%	
Yes, I've told a few people about the lake but not very often		51%
No, I've never recommended a Great Salt Lake visit to anyone	23%	

Of course, telling someone about the lake doesn't promote Great Salt Lake tourism as effectively as taking someone there personally, so we also asked respondents how they would react if someone from outside the area wanted to be taken to visit the lake. Nearly two-thirds (65%) said they would agree enthusiastically, and most others (30%) said they would go anyway, even if reluctantly. This suggests that Davis County residents aren't likely to actively discourage Great Salt Lake visitation even if they do not actively promote visits to the lake.

Finally, we asked a question designed to measure what sorts of general beliefs respondents have regarding the lake. Knowledge about Davis County residents' attitudes is useful because it can be used to develop informational messages that can encourage more positive feelings toward the lake – and in turn, make residents more likely to promote the lake to friends and family as a recreation destination. The question was set up as a series of statements; respondents were asked to circle a number beside the statement that best fit their level of agreement with each statement.

	Strongly				Strongly
	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	
<u>Disagree</u>					
The lake smells bad.	32%	36%	23%	5%	3%
The lake is very important to migrating birds.	57%	21%	19%	2%	1%
The lake contains several species of rare fish.	8%	4%	44%	8%	34%
The lake is one of America's most important sources of commercial salt production.	35%	21%	32%	9%	3%
The lake is too salty to support any kind of life.	4%	11%	25%	22%	38%
The lake supports America's largest commercial brine shrimp industry.	47%	19%	28%	4%	1%
The lake is rarely visited for recreation.	6%	18%	28%	27%	21%

The responses to these statements suggest that a typical Davis County resident has at least a passing familiarity with the ecology and economy of the Great Salt Lake, but that there is room for improvement. A majority of our respondents knew the lake is very important to migrating birds, and that it's not too salty to support any kind of life, but they were less likely to realize that the lake contains no fish. Respondents typically were aware of the lake's economic value as a source of salt and brine shrimp. Most important for purposes of this survey, however, we found much less certainty about the lake's importance as a place for outdoor recreation. And,

as noted previously, a majority think that the lake smells bad (although that doesn't seem to stop people from visiting at least once or twice a year).

To try to understand these beliefs about the lake more fully, we performed statistical tests to see whether certain types of respondents were more likely to hold particular beliefs about the lake. We found that older respondents were more likely to know that the lake does not have any fish and that it supports a large brine shrimp industry, but age was otherwise not associated with knowledge or attitudes toward the lake. There was little connection between people's level of education and their responses, although less-educated respondents were slightly more likely to believe the lake is rarely visited for recreation.

There seemed to be a connection between a dislike for the lake's odor and negative beliefs about the lake. Not surprisingly, people who feel strongly that the lake smells bad were more likely to believe the lake is rarely visited for recreation. However, they were also more likely to believe the lake is too salty to support any kind of life. (Oddly, people who said the lake is too salty to support life also tended to agree that the lake supports a large commercial brine shrimp operation, leaving us to wonder how people interpreted the word "life" in this question.)

Finally, we wanted to know if people's beliefs about the lake were connected to their willingness to visit, recommend visits, or take others to see the lake. As one might expect, people who disagree that the lake smells bad, or who are neutral toward the smell, were more likely to say they recommend the lake to others. However, there was no significant correlation between people's beliefs about the smell of the lake and their frequency of personal visits, nor their willingness to take others to visit the lake. In other words, it seems that people who visit the lake are willing to endure an unpleasant odor themselves, but they may be less likely to expect others to make the same sacrifice.

It should surprise no one that people who visit the lake frequently themselves are more likely to recommend the lake to others, or to enthusiastically take visitors to the lake. It may be a surprise, however, that frequent visitors were no more likely than infrequent visitors to know that the lake is a popular recreation destination (e.g., more than 400,000 people will visit Antelope Island this year). For some respondents, this may mean that the lake still feels less crowded than other Wasatch Front recreation destinations, so that it appears to be *relatively* unvisited; for others, it may simply mean that people's knowledge about recreation use of the lake comes primarily from sources other than frequent personal experience.

There also was no connection between people's beliefs about the frequency of recreation use and their willingness to recommend visits or take others to visit the lake. In other words, the lake is neither so popular nor so uncrowded that this circumstance alone tends to make people more or less likely to recommend the lake as a recreation destination.

Knowledge about the lake was somewhat connected to visitation of the lake, but this connection was neither strong nor consistent. For example, people who visit the Great Salt Lake often are more likely to know about the lake's ecological importance to migrating birds and its economic importance for salt and brine shrimp production, but frequent visitors were not more likely than infrequent visitors to know that the lake contains no fish. Willingness to take others

to the lake was even less strongly correlated with knowledge about the lake. However, people who knew the lake's ecological importance appeared to be somewhat more likely to recommend visits to friends and family.

What do the survey tell us?

Local residents can be crucial to the success of a tourism program. This is true in a couple of ways. Obviously a community's friendliness helps determine whether visitors want to return, or whether they have positive experiences to describe to friends and neighbors back home. Also, positive information from knowledgeable local residents can influence whether tourists choose to come to a particular destination, as well as how long they stay.

For that reason, it's important for Davis County citizens to know about – and feel good about – the county's natural attractions. When a family in Layton or Centerville hosts guests from out of town, all county residents will benefit if those out-of-town guests are taken to visit Antelope Island State Park or Farmington Bay rather than Jordanelle State Park or Mill Creek Canyon. Or if a traveler passing through spends the night at a Bountiful motel, and asks a breakfast waitress "What's there to do around here?," it's important that the waitress knows a few answers to that question ... and that she won't add, "but I don't know if you'd like it there."

The survey responses suggest that those positive recommendations may not happen as often as tourism-based businesses might like. Only 26% of our respondents said they regularly and enthusiastically recommend Great Salt Lake visits to their friends and family. The question facing Davis County Community and Economic Development officials is: What can be done to improve that percentage?

Results of our study show that Davis County residents have some positive knowledge and beliefs about the Great Salt Lake, but they definitely could know more. One-fourth of our survey respondents – who tended to be long-time Utah residents with better-than-average educations – said they don't know what there is to do at the Great Salt Lake. Given the sampling error of the survey, this means we can say with certainty that at least 17% and perhaps as many as a third of Davis County's single-family home residents are unaware of the lake's recreation opportunities. The knowledge rate probably is even lower among residents of apartments and mobile home parks who may tend to younger, more transient, and less educated than single-family home dwellers. A campaign to publicize the lake's recreation opportunities among local residents – especially those at places other than Antelope Island – could be valuable for increasing tourism.

Nature-based tourism in Davis County is likely to be more saleable if local residents know about the uniqueness and biological value of the Great Salt Lake. In this study, we found that people who were ecologically knowledgeable about the lake were more likely to recommend visits to their friends and family. Since the county's nature-based tourism efforts focus on the area's birdwatching opportunities, it's encouraging that a large majority of local residents know about the lake's importance to migrating shorebirds and waterfowl. In fact, while there was room for improvement in respondents' knowledge about the ecology and economy of the lake, most people have a general idea about the area's unique qualities. And since knowledge was not strongly tied to recreation visitation, it's likely that school- and media-based information about the lake are sufficient to maintain local awareness.

A particular issue that affects Great Salt Lake tourism is the odor of the lake. Our results suggest that most Davis County residents don't like the way the lake smells, and for a sizeable minority the smell is bad enough that it deters them from visiting the lake. Even more worrisome is our finding that the odor may deter people from recommending visits to the lake to others. Of course, there's nothing county officials can do about the odor, and there's not much that can be done to make people like it. However, it may be possible to use educational efforts, including interpretive exhibits at local attractions, to emphasize the reasons why the lake smells as it does. In that way, Davis County residents may be better able to weigh the positive aspects of the odor ("the aroma of abundant life") against the negative aspects.

In summary, our study of randomly selected Davis County homes suggests that county residents have a general awareness of the Great Salt Lake, but don't visit it very often, nor are they highly knowledgeable about the recreation or tourism opportunities that the lake offers. As part of the county's efforts to attract visitors, along with marketing of nature-based tourism *outside* northern Utah, it would be useful to increase efforts inside the county to make citizens aware of all that the Great Salt Lake has to offer. This may lead to increased use of the lake's attractions by local citizens. It certainly should make Davis County residents better ambassadors to those visitors who might be interested in seeing the Great Salt Lake.