

Evaluating Bears Ears

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The sandstone hoodoos and shaded canyons of Bears Ears National Monument are high on the bucket list for hikers, climbers, birders, bikers and camping families—and communities in Utah’s San Juan County are coming to economically depend on these visitors. With the creation of the monument in late 2016, and its subsequent downsizing less than a year later, managers wondered if, and to what extent, these designation changes would impact outdoor recreation and recreation-related industries existing in these communities. [Recent research](#) takes a retrospective look at the influence of the monument designation on outdoor recreation and its related industries in San Juan County, Utah.

Using geotagged photos from social media sites, and county-level economic indicators, analysis conducted by the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University found interesting trends:

1. Data show a 105.1% increase in outdoor recreation participation in the three years following the creation of the monument in late 2016 relative to a ten-year baseline period spanning 2004-2013. Importantly, the concentration of outdoor recreation occurring within the county was already on the rise before the monument was created; the three years prior to designation saw a 36.2% increase relative to the ten-year baseline period. A comparison of the three years before and after the creation of the monument shows a 50.6% increase in the concentration of outdoor recreation occurring within the county.

2. Several types of outdoor recreation-related industries have expanded in the area since Bears Ears National Monument was created. The following industries all experienced significant and positive economic expansion in the three years after the monument was created:

- Retail trade (e.g., hardware and drug stores)
- Professional, scientific, and technical services (e.g., accounting, engineering, and law firms)
- Food services (e.g., restaurants)

This growth may be attributable to business owners responding to either a perceived increase in the number of visitors, or an actual increase in recreationists willing to spend more money during their visit. This finding should be received as good news for local leaders who are actively working to expand and advocate for businesses that support outdoor recreation within the county.

3. Many outdoor recreation-related industries have maintained levels of economic activity matching the three-year period before the monument was created; these include:

- General and building construction (e.g., contractors)
- Food and beverage stores (e.g., grocery stores)
- Gas stations; and
- Real estate, rental, and leasing (e.g., realtors).

Collectively, the analysis suggests that, despite an existing upward trend, the creation of Bears Ears National Monument led to a substantial and persistent shift in the volume of outdoor recreation occurring within San Juan County. The results also suggest the creation of the monument has positively influenced several, but not all, of the county’s outdoor recreation-related industries. Local efforts to increase the amount of outdoor recreation occurring within the county should be paired with economic programs that allow outdoor recreation-related industries within the county to capitalize on ongoing increases in visitation.

[Read the complete paper](#)

[Read IORT's technical report](#)