

# Utahs Balanced Approach to Investing in Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

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## Investing in the Future of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism: Utah's Balanced Approach To Growth

Utah's landscapes are legendary. From the towering red rock formations of Arches and Zion to the snow-covered peaks of the Wasatch, the state's natural wonders attract millions of visitors each year. Outdoor recreation and tourism have become powerful economic drivers, but ensuring they remain sustainable requires thoughtful investment. Recognizing this, Utah has developed a well-balanced approach to allocating taxpayer dollars—one that not only markets the state's attractions but also builds and maintains the infrastructure that supports them.

This approach, which has evolved over decades of experimentation and adaptation, is based on three interconnected priorities: investing in outdoor recreation infrastructure, maintaining existing assets, and promoting responsible tourism. By balancing these efforts, Utah has created a model for sustainable outdoor recreation and tourism management, ensuring that both visitors and residents can continue to enjoy these incredible landscapes for generations to come.

### A Thriving Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Economy

Tourism and outdoor recreation aren't just about adventure; they are a cornerstone of Utah's economy. Visitors to the state contribute billions of dollars annually, and the benefits ripple across communities large and small. Tourism spending alone generates over half a billion dollars for state and local education, reinforcing the direct link between a strong visitor economy and public services. Beyond education, the industry supports conservation efforts, providing \$2.5 million annually for fish and wildlife protection, helping to preserve the very landscapes that attract visitors in the first place.

Jobs are another critical piece of the puzzle. Tourism supports more than 159,800 jobs across Utah, from rural communities near national parks to service industries in urban centers. Meanwhile, the outdoor recreation sector alone was valued at \$9.5 billion in 2023, reflecting a seven percent increase from the previous year. This

sector contributes 3.4 percent to the state's GDP and sustains nearly 72,000 jobs, highlighting its role as a major economic force.

These numbers illustrate why Utah's commitment to investing in outdoor recreation and tourism is about more than just improving trails or campgrounds—it's about ensuring a thriving, sustainable economy that benefits communities across the state.

### Building the Future: Infrastructure Investments in Outdoor Recreation

Utah's outdoor spaces have long been a draw for visitors, but to support growing demand, the state has made significant investments in infrastructure. Funding from the Outdoor Adventure Infrastructure Restricted Account has supported projects ranging from new trail systems, campground expansions, and public restrooms. These investments are designed not just to improve access to recreation but also to distribute visitors more evenly, reducing strain on the state's most popular destinations. In 2023 alone, Utah allocated \$36.2 million to outdoor recreation infrastructure, ensuring that residents and visitors alike can access high-quality outdoor experiences. Through initiatives like the Utah Outdoor Recreation Grant (UORG), local communities have also received funding to develop new recreation amenities that enhance both tourism and residents' quality of life.

As Utah's outdoor economy grows, so too does the need for careful planning. Investing in infrastructure today helps alleviate overcrowding while ensuring that Utah's natural wonders remain protected and accessible for future generations.

### The Challenge of Maintaining Outdoor Recreation Assets

While new infrastructure is critical, maintaining existing assets is equally important—yet often underfunded. Utah, like many states, has historically prioritized funding for new projects over maintaining the trails, campgrounds, and facilities that are already in place. Currently, the state allocates \$52.8 million annually for new outdoor infrastructure and another \$4 million for maintenance. Trails wear down, restrooms fall into disrepair, and visitor facilities age, impacting both safety and the overall recreation experience. In response, Utah's Division of Outdoor Recreation has expanded the Recreation Restoration Infrastructure Grant Program to support trail and facility upkeep. The state has also directed a portion of outdoor recreation funding toward maintenance and launched a state-run trail crew to address high-priority repairs.

Even with these efforts, more investment in maintenance is needed. Ensuring that Utah's outdoor recreation assets

remain in top condition is essential—not just for visitor enjoyment but for protecting the integrity of the landscapes themselves.

#### **Smart Marketing and Responsible Tourism Management**

Utah's outdoor economy depends on attracting visitors, but managing tourism effectively requires more than just promotion—it demands education. The state's Tourism Marketing Performance Account, which supports the state Office of Tourism, funds advertising campaigns that showcase Utah's outdoor beauty while also emphasizing sustainable recreation practices.

The Forever Mighty campaign, for example, encourages visitors to respect natural and cultural resources, practice safety in outdoor environments, and support local communities through responsible tourism. These messages are crucial as the state navigates increasing visitation to some of its most beloved places. By providing travelers with information lesser-known recreation areas, the Utah Office of Tourism is reducing overcrowding at the state's most popular destinations while still driving economic benefits to a broader range of communities.

#### **The Role of the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism**

While state funding and planning efforts are essential, effective outdoor recreation and tourism management also requires research and data-driven decision-making. That's where the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University comes in. Since its founding in 1998, the Institute has played a vital role in supporting state and local decision-makers by providing valuable insights into the economic, social, and environmental impacts of outdoor recreation and tourism.

The Institute conducts in-depth research on tourism trends, economic impact assessments, and the relationship between outdoor recreation and public land management policies. This information helps guide infrastructure investment, visitor management strategies, and conservation efforts.

Collaboration is at the core of the Institute's work. By working with public land agencies, tourism boards, and local communities, the Institute ensures that recreation policies align with economic and conservation goals. Whether it's advising on how to balance tourism growth with environmental protection or providing insights into visitor behavior, the Institute serves as a bridge between research and real-world application.

#### **A Model for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Investment**

Utah's approach to funding outdoor recreation and tourism sets a national example. By strategically investing in infrastructure, prioritizing maintenance, and promoting responsible visitation, the state has created a sustainable model for economic growth that benefits both visitors and residents.

The numbers alone make the case for continued investment. With tourism generating billions for the state and outdoor recreation fueling job growth, ensuring long-term sustainability is not just an environmental imperative—it's an economic one.

Looking ahead, Utah will need to continue refining its strategy. Increasing maintenance funding, expanding real-time visitor data tracking, and strengthening research partnerships will all be crucial in keeping Utah at the forefront of outdoor recreation management.

As a key partner in this effort, the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism will remain at the center of research and policy development. With state agencies, local governments, and research institutions working together, Utah is well-positioned to ensure that its outdoor economy continues to thrive—preserving the state's natural beauty while driving long-term prosperity.

#### **Further Reading**

Smith, J. W., & Trout, C. (2023). An overview of state funding for outdoor recreation and tourism in Utah (pp. 1–13). Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, Utah State University. [https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/envs\\_facpub/1648](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/envs_facpub/1648)