

The Utah Trails Initiative: Partnerships, Research, and Action

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Introduction

As a result of changing social values regarding the development and use of our natural resources, more and more emphasis is being placed on the value of amenity resources, concerning scenery and aesthetics, opportunities for a diversity of recreation experiences, providing habitat for wildlife, and preserving biological diversity (Burr & Blahna, 2000; Siehl, 1990). Many people enjoy a variety of trail-based activities as a source of their recreation. With all their attributes and varieties of usage, trails and pathways are high priorities for many people, including the citizens of Utah. Trails provide access to Utah's outstanding public lands, opportunities for physical fitness and better health, economic benefit for local communities, and contribute to overall quality of life. In fact, Utahns are demanding more and better trails and pathways, as their use is a significant part of recreational activity, tourism, and lifestyle in Utah.

As part of his Quality of Life endeavor, former Utah Governor Michael Leavitt responded to this demand by initiating an effort to create a statewide trails initiative, the "Olympic Legacy of Trails in Utah," with the aim of developing a framework for future funding processes, planning, development, and maintenance for both motorized and non-motorized trails in Utah. Major objectives of the initiative include: 1) improving the quality of life in Utah; 2) encouraging business growth and vitality; 3) improving economic benefits for rural communities and improving statewide tourism; 4) encouraging local planners and developers to incorporate innovative open space and pathways design into developments; 5) increasing "walkability" in communities; 6) improving health and fitness of citizens; 7) ensuring and improving public access to public lands; and 8) identifying at least three priority trail projects in each of the seven Planning Districts in the state—urban and rural/motorized and non-motorized (State Division of Parks and Recreation, 2002).

At the request of the Governor's office, the State Division of Parks and Recreation facilitated the formation of the Governor's Trails Initiative Steering Committee, a collaborative partnership comprised of stakeholder groups represented by community leaders and planners, recreation professionals, and representatives from cities, towns, counties, and state and federal agencies, in order to guide development of the initiative. From July, 2001, through September, 2003, the Steering Committee held a number of meetings, provided general direction, and developed vision and mission statements for the initiative. Additionally, the Steering Committee identified six major issue categories for consideration and prioritization: 1) a list of trails for priority development; 2) new and expanded funding sources; 3) effective coordination and cooperation among government agencies at different levels; 4) protecting access to public lands by overcoming access and trail closures and developing alignments for linkages on public and private lands; 5) ensuring adequate access and trails opportunities for all citizens and visitors, including access for people with disabilities; and 6) enhancing natural, wildlife, cultural, and heritage resources (State Division of Parks and Recreation, 2002).

At its first meeting, the Steering Committee authorized Utah State University's Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (IORT) to conduct a statewide telephone survey of Utah residents in order to substantiate their opinions on the values and benefits of recreational trails, their awareness and use of trails, and their perception of needs and preferences related to trails in the state, with the intent that resulting information generated from this survey would provide supporting elements for the Governor's Trails Initiative. From September 6-17, 2001, research scientists affiliated with IORT telephone interviewed 2,590 adults living in Utah's seven Planning Districts throughout the state. This paper reports summary results of this telephone survey research on trails (Blahna, Burr, Reiter, & Butkus, 2001 September), along with subsequent actions associated with the Utah Trails Initiative that included seven, regional Trails Workshops, the development of a web-based "Trails Toolbox," and a 2003 Utah Trails and Pathways Conference—"Coming Together for Trails."

Generally, there are three broad types of trails in Utah: 1) recreation trails, where the primary purpose of use is for recreational activity such as hiking, biking, Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) driving, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, and other activities; 2) transportation trails, located primarily in urban/suburban areas, where the primary purpose of use is travel to get from one point to another, although oftentimes such trails are also used for recreation (walking for pleasure, running/jogging, skating, etc.); and 3) historic or heritage trails, where the primary purpose is to preserve important travel routes of historic significance, such as the Mormon Pioneer Trail, Spanish Trail,

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and Pony Express Trail, although again, such trails are also used for recreation, especially automobile touring and driving for pleasure. *Motorized Trails* are specifically designated or allow for motorized recreational activities such as OHV driving, Jeep touring, All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) driving, motorcycling, dirt biking, snowmobiling, and automobile touring. *Non-Motorized Trails* are specifically designated or allow for non-motorized recreational activities such as walking, hiking, jogging/running, in-line skating, skateboarding, backpacking, cycling, mountain biking, horseback riding/horse packing, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing.

Methods

The telephone survey was developed with input from the Trails Initiative Steering Committee. In September of 2001, after pilot testing the survey instrument, research scientists affiliated with IORT implemented the telephone surveying. A random sample of household telephone numbers was selected for the telephone survey, stratified by the seven, multi-county Planning Districts in the state (Figure 1).

In each household contacted, an adult, 18 years or older, was asked to participate in an interview as part of the telephone survey. In each Planning District, 370 telephone interviews were conducted, proportionately divided based on individual counties' population percentage within the district. This sampling approach was selected in order to facilitate data analysis at both a statewide and Planning District level. Of 4,346 personal telephone contacts made to households in Utah, 2,590 adults agreed to participate and completed the telephone survey, for a response rate of 59.6%.

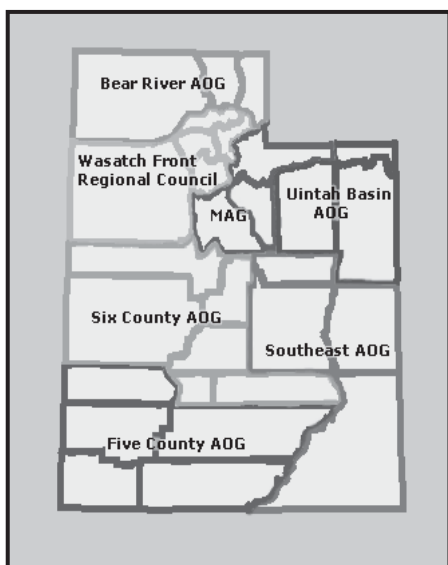


Figure 1- Utah's Seven Planning Districts

AOG stands for Association of Governments. MAG stands for Mountainland Association of Governments.

Results

Among trail users, those individuals who had used a trail in Utah in the past 12 months, the proportion of males (51.5%) to females (48.5%) was close to even. However, for non-users of trails, there were many more females (64.2%) than males (35.8%). The average age of trail users was almost 40 years old, while the average age of non-users of trails was almost 48 years old.

Based on the telephone survey results, it is clear the use of trails in Utah by residents is significant, as statewide, almost half of the respondents (49.7%) indicated they had used trails in Utah in the previous 12 months. Slightly over half of the respondents in the Mountainland (51.4%), Six County (52.2%), and Five County (50.8%) Planning Districts are Trail Users, while somewhat less than half of the respondents are Trail Users in the Wasatch Front (49.7%), Bear River (46.8%) and Southeastern (45.9%) Planning Districts. Interestingly, only 37.8% of respondents in the Uintah Basin Planning District reported using trails in Utah in the previous 12 months.

Trail Users indicated a wide range of trail use with an average of slightly over 20 times and a median of six times in the past 12 months. Statewide, three of five Trail Users indicated their use from 2-4 times to 5-10 times in the past 12 months, almost one-quarter used trails from once a month to 2-4 times a month, and another 10% of Trail Users indicated their use as being from once a week to more than once a day. Thus, the use of trails appears to be a significant part of

these Trail Users' recreational activity and lifestyle. In addition, the use of trails in Utah appears to be a family affair, as over three-quarters of Trail Users statewide indicated there are other members of their household who have used trails in Utah in the past 12 months, with an average of three other members in each household using trails.

Trail Users were able to identify any number and variety of activities in which they participated on trails in Utah. Statewide, Hiking was the most frequently mentioned trail activity with slightly over 71% of Trail Users indicating this as an activity they participated in on trails in Utah. Hiking was followed by Biking/Mountain Biking at 23%, Walking at slightly over 18%, All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) Driving at slightly over 13%, Horseback Riding and Backpacking at almost 7%, and Jogging/Running at 5%. A number of other pedestrian, motorized and non-motorized conveyance, and educational/cultural trail activities were identified by less than 4% of Trail Users.

There is a high level of awareness of trails among residents in Utah. Statewide, slightly over 86% of Trail Users and almost 60% of Non-Users of Trails, those who had not used a trail in Utah in the previous 12 months, said they knew of a trail within 15 minutes of their home or workplace. Over one-quarter of Trail Users used this particular trail from 2-4 times a year, and over one-quarter used this trail from once a week to more than once a day. Well over one-third (37.7%) of Trail Users statewide indicated their favorite trail is within 15 minutes of home, almost two-thirds (65%) said within 30 minutes of home, and over four-fifths (82.7%) said within one hour of home. Over 60% of Trail Users said use of their favorite trail was between one and 10 times a year, almost 16% of Trail Users use their favorite trail from one to four times a month, and another 16% use their favorite trail from once a week to once a day.

Both Trail Users and Non-Users of Trails indicated they would like to use trails in Utah more than they did in the past 12 months. Statewide, almost four of five Trail Users indicated they would like to use trails more. The main reason slightly over two-thirds of Trail Users did not use trails as much as they would have liked is not enough time and/or too busy with other activities. Even a substantial majority of Non-Users of Trails (almost 60%) indicated their desire to use trails more. More than half of these Non-Users of Trails said they did not use trails more was because they did not have enough time and/or were too busy with other activities. However, a substantial proportion of Non-Users of Trails (13%) said they did not use trails more because of personal constraints associated with health concerns, age, and/or disability.

Statewide, although Trail Users are fairly evenly split on their support for the use of additional public funds for motorized trails in Utah, support for the use of additional public funds for non-motorized trails is significantly greater (almost 86%). Although almost half of Non-Users of Trails would not support the use of additional public funds for motorized trails, still slightly over 43% would. An even greater percentage of Non-Users of Trails, slightly over 66%, would support the use of additional public funds for non-motorized trails. Almost 51% of Trail Users would support a tax increase if the additional money would be used to enhance their use and enjoyment of trails in Utah. However, a clear majority of Non-Trail Users, slightly over 60%, would not support such a tax increase for trails.

Statewide, almost 95% of Trail Users and 66% of Non-Users of Trails strongly agreed or agreed having quality trails in Utah was personally important to them. Almost 90% of Trail Users and over half of Non-Users of Trails recognize they personally receive benefits from trails. Among Trail Users, almost two-thirds strongly agreed or agreed having trails in their area results in economic benefits for local communities, and slightly less than half of Non-Users of Trails also strongly agreed or agreed. Preservation of historic trails in Utah is important to both Trail Users (slightly over 90%) and Non-Users of Trails (slightly over 77%). Also, more than nine of ten Trail Users and slightly over two-thirds of Non-Users of Trails strongly agree or agree having trails in or near their community allows them to be physically active and lead a healthy lifestyle. Finally, almost nine of ten Trail Users and seven of ten Non-Users of Trails recognize having trails in or near their community contributes much to their quality of life.

Discussion and Implications

About half of Utah residents used trails in the state during the last year, but a majority of both Trail Users and Non-Users of Trails would like to use trails more than they currently do. Large majorities of respondents feel trails provide important benefits and add to their quality of life. A majority also feels trails provide local economic benefits. Utahns are also willing to use additional public funds for trails, but only about one-third of Non-Users of Trails to one-half of Trail Users said they would support a tax increase to provide additional funding for trails. Thus, while there is strong demand and basis of support for trails and trail funding, the support for a tax increase for trails is more marginal. Increasing support will require political and educational outreach to increase awareness of lesser-known values of trails, such as open space, watershed, and wildlife habitat benefits, while still allowing for public use and access. There is also less support for funding motorized trails, indicating that getting political and economic support for OHV-designated trails may be more difficult than for non-motorized or mixed-use trails. Strategies could include increasing collaborative relationships and providing matching funding with OHV groups, emphasizing the benefits of OHV trails for open space protection and providing access, and additional hiking and biking opportunities. Also, the environmental costs and

benefits of on-trail versus off-trail driving need to be examined more. Finally, the many differences in the findings among the seven Planning Districts and in urban and rural areas indicate different approaches to planning and development will be necessary throughout the different regions of Utah.

Results from the Statewide Telephone Survey of Resident Attitudes Toward Recreational Trails were utilized in seven regional Trails Workshops, held between November 27th and December 12th, 2001, in each of the seven Planning Districts. The purpose of the Trails Workshops was to gather stakeholder input for the Utah Trails Initiative at the regional level. Participants received background information on the Trails Initiative, viewed graphics and maps of different trails systems in their region, and the importance of their regional and local participation and input was emphasized. Specific Planning District results of the Statewide Telephone Survey gave participants a better picture of trail users, trail preferences, and attitudes toward recreational trails in their region, while allowing them to make comparisons with other regions and the statewide results. Participants also were involved in breakout sessions to map priority trails, prioritize trails issues, and develop suggestions for a “Trails Toolbox.” The Trails Workshops confirmed some regional differences and some statewide similarities, while also validating the results of the Statewide Telephone Survey. More importantly, the Trails Workshops connected with and informed a knowledgeable, experienced, motivated, and representative constituency for trail advocacy in Utah. With three priority trails projects identified by participants in the Trails Workshop in each Planning District, a total of 21 different trails and trail segments of approximately 715 total miles (38% motorized and 62% non-motorized trails) were documented. Interestingly, this only represents 20% or less of many potential, desired, and lesser trail projects identified in the regional Trails Workshops.

The Trails Initiative Steering Committee also approved a proposal by Utah State University's Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism to develop a web-based Trails Toolbox. The Steering Committee identified the development and provision of a “dynamic trails toolbox” as an important step in establishing an Olympic Legacy for Trails in Utah. This Trails Toolbox is designed to provide a variety of information and resources related to trails, including such topics as planning, design, construction, funding, social benefits, and much more, in order to provide useful and relevant information to communities and trails advocates as they plan, design, construct, and maintain trails. “Trails 101” guides trail planners through the planning process from beginning to end. The website also provides valuable information on how to gain community support, find funding, handle legal issues, and acquire new lands for trails. Once such preparations are complete, the website also offers information on construction techniques, use of materials, and how to maintain trails. One of the goals of the website is to provide trail advocates, planners, sponsors, and communities with the most accurate and up-to-date information available.

An additional result of the Utah Trails Initiative was the 2003 Utah Trails and Pathways Conference—“Coming Together for Trails,” held in Park City, Utah, September 18-19, 2003. Over 200 participants from throughout Utah attended to hear a number of keynote speakers and participate in concurrent session tracks on 1) Community Support, Planning, and Benefits, 2) Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance, and 3) Funding and Partnerships. This conference was extremely well received, and plans are in the making for a 2004 Trails Conference to be held in St. George, Utah, this coming fall.

The results of the Utah Trails Initiative are many, but especially important are the connections and partnerships that have been made with a representative and motivated constituency of Utah trails advocates and stakeholders. A substantive base has now been provided for the clarification of trails-related issues, determination of user-group preferences, and identification of trail project priorities. Furthermore, a strong political foundation is now established for current and future trails-related proposals. Most of Utah’s citizens realize the benefits of trails. The Utah Trails Initiative has assisted in bringing those benefits closer to home. There is great momentum, and the future outlook for trails in Utah appears bright.

For More Information

The full report cited above, along with other publications and reports are available through Utah State University’s Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (IORT), and can be accessed on IORT’s website at www.cnr.usu.edu/iort.

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