Utahns Support Tribal Engagement in Climate Change Initiatives and Land Management

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Utah is home to eight federally recognized Tribes whose ancestral territories overlap with public lands managed by state and federal agencies. As sovereign nations, federally recognized Tribes hold government-to-government relationships with the federal government and are on equal footing with states.¹ In fact, the federal government is legally mandated to protect tribal treaty rights, lands, and resources.² Among the mechanisms to protect tribal interests is government-to-government consultation, in which tribal leaders are formally engaged by federal and state officials to provide policy guidance.³

In recent years, the State of Utah’s commitment to protecting tribal interests has been put into question. In 2022, the State filed a lawsuit to rescind President Biden’s expansion of Bears Ears National Monument, which stood in opposition to the interests of the majority of the chapters of the Navajo Nation, as well as the Ute Indian Tribe. For Tribes, Bears Ears represents a culturally indispensable landscape that many believe the Monument’s expansion would help protect.⁴ Furthermore, Bears Ears is the site of a recently signed, historic tribal co-management plan, in which Tribes will collaborate with federal agencies to play an active role in land stewardship.⁵ As such, the state’s lawsuit also threatens to reduce the magnitude of the tribal co-management plan.

The State of Utah has also been criticized for its lack of tribal consultation pertaining to the desiccation of the Great Salt Lake. On Feb 7, 2023, the Salt Lake City Tribune published an article detailing how House Speaker Brad Wilson’s $40 million Great Salt Lake Trust will be guided by an advisory council that excludes tribal leaders, “even though some have ties to the Great Salt Lake that go back millennia.”⁶ In light of these recent events, the Utah People & the Environment Poll (UPEP) sought to gauge Utahn’s perspectives regarding tribal consultation and co-management to determine if state officials’ actions reflect or contradict public opinion.

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KEY FINDINGS

- In a representative statewide survey, most respondents (61%) agreed that Tribes should be consulted regarding climate change initiatives on public lands.
- The majority of respondents (69%) also agreed that federal and state land managers in Utah should pursue more co-management agreements with tribal governments.
Most Utahns Believe that Tribes Should Be Consulted Regarding Climate Change Initiatives

In the survey, respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement with the following statement: “Utah’s federally recognized Tribes should be consulted in future climate change initiatives on Utah’s state and federal lands.” Most respondents (61%) either agreed or strongly agreed (see Figure 1), while 28% of respondents expressed a neutral opinion (neither agree nor disagree). Only 7% of respondents disagreed, and 4% of respondents strongly disagreed.

Utahns Support More Co-Management Agreements Between Tribes and Federal and State Agencies

Respondents were also asked for their level of agreement with the following statement: “Federal and state land managers in Utah should pursue more co-management agreements with tribal governments, where they collaborate to make joint land management decisions.” The majority of respondents (69%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (see Figure 1), while 21% were neutral (neither agreed nor disagreed), 6% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed.

Policy Implications

These findings indicate that there is strong support among Utahns in favor of tribal consultation and co-management agreements as they pertain to climate change and land management. Policymakers in Utah can reflect the views held by the majority of their constituents by honoring government-to-government relationship with Tribes. In particular, state policymakers could re-affirm their commitment to adhere to former Governor Herbert’s 2014 Executive Order on Tribal Consultations7, and—if not already in place—create accountability measures that gauge tribal satisfaction with the state’s consultation practices. Furthermore, policymakers should pursue policies that facilitate and secure resources to
support co-management agreements between Tribes and state agencies. Finally, policymakers should consider whether legal pursuits such as the lawsuit to overturn the expansion of Bears Ears National Monument align with the State’s commitment to being reflective of its constituency.

Data and Methods
In spring 2023, Utah State University (USU) faculty and students started the Utah People and Environment Poll, or UPEP, to track Utahns’ perceptions on environmental issues of importance to the state to help inform policy to address environmental issues. A random sample of 3,750 households were contacted using postal mail to respond to the survey online or on paper. 441 individuals responded to the survey for a final total response rate of 12%. Weights for survey design and to adjust for age, education, and gender representation are applied. To access other briefs and learn more about the UPEP, please visit: https://chass.usu.edu/sociology/canri/upep

About CANRI
The Community and Natural Resources Institute, or CANRI, produces and promotes interdisciplinary and applied social science and humanities research focused on challenges at the intersection of people and the environment in the Intermountain West.

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References