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Bear Lake Project Overview

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Community & Natural Resources Institute
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Bear Lake Project Overview

Introduction

Bear Lake is a popular recreation and tourist destination on the Utah-Idaho border, often known as the “Caribbean of the Rockies.” It includes the nearby communities of Garden City and Laketown, UT, as well as Paris, Montpelier, Fish Haven, St. Charles, and Bennington, ID. Additionally, Bear Lake lies near larger metropolitan areas along the Wasatch Front, such as Salt Lake City and Logan. In the past ten years, tourist numbers have nearly tripled, putting increased pressure on the natural resources, human infrastructure, and communities surrounding the lake. Understanding key socio-environmental issues stemming from these changes can help to inform future policy, outreach, and communication initiatives.


Overview

This report summarizes a six-month multi-faceted historically-informed research project on contemporary social, economic, and environmental challenges facing Bear Lake and its surrounding communities. It incorporates the perspectives of community members, nonprofit organizations working in the area, and scientists conducting research related to Bear Lake. USU professors and students conducted qualitative interviews with twenty-one full-time community members, seven seasonal residents, four environmental nonprofit organizations, and seven scientists representing these different stakeholder groups. Additionally, an analysis of historical newspaper articles, documents and reports assessed changes over time in the community through an environmental justice lens. The following summarizes key findings from the research as well as informed recommendations. Key issues of concern include the socioenvironmental impacts of development, community capacity to handle increasing numbers of tourists, and environmental changes that could impact both human and non-human entities. More detailed information can be found in the form of research briefs at [<https://chass.usu.edu/canri/projects>]

Issue #1: Increased Tourism and Development

Bear Lake has served as a gathering space since pre-colonial times. The Shoshone, Ute, and Bannock people, among others, used Bear Lake as an annual sacred gathering place for trade in the warmer months of the year.¹ After forcefully taking over Indigenous land, early colonizers used the lake as a hub for the fur trapping industry. Efforts to develop the area's tourism industry date back to the early 1900s. Since then, the tourism industry has ebbed and flowed around Bear Lake. As population growth and tourism surge today, the development to meet related demands is causing numerous socio-environmental issues.

With an estimated 40,000 visitors each weekend during the summer, locals have seen more crowding on beaches, the lake, and trail systems, which has led to enormous, and sometimes hazardous, traffic and pinch points. The surge in tourism has also led to rising housing costs and an increased number of short-term rentals in the area, making it difficult for some year-round residents and seasonal workers to find affordable housing. The high proportion of tourists and part-time residents relative to year-round community members makes long-term environmental planning difficult. Full-time residents' involvement with advocacy groups and local government is impactful, but the increase in seasonal visitors and short-term rental properties necessitates policy that ensures access to affordable housing options and natural amenities.



“And in most of the houses, I mean, they may claim they're a single family residence when they first start building, but a lot of them before they're even finished building, they're advertising them on Airbnb... They're building them primarily for short-term rentals so they can turn that quick buck. And that's the biggest change. Since 2020 there's been a lot more people up here... And the affordability is getting ridiculous too. It, in my opinion they're trying to make it kind of like Park City or Jackson Hole, that kind of thing. And they're going to end up pricing the locals right out of existence. Because that's what happened in those two places.” - Community Member

Tourism has also created more pollution that harms local ecosystems: toxic nanoparticles from sunscreens and plastic, trash left on beaches, and gas spills from water recreation equipment are affecting water quality, causing algal blooms, and adversely impacting the organisms in and around the lake. Additionally, the sport fishing industry has created a demand for non-native species to be stocked in the lake, which compete with endemic fish for food and habitat. The introduction of non-native species has also impacted the region in the past. For example, the region's wild strawberries were permanently altered when white settlers introduced non-native strawberry species. In addition to these issues, the increase in development has also adversely impacted fish and other wildlife by cutting off fish passageways and encroaching on habitats, which can affect species' survival. Problems with increased and aging septic tanks may also result in nutrient leakage and lake pollution.

1. Parson, Robert E. 1996. A History of Rich County. Rich County Commission.

Issue #2: Water Quality and Quantity

Fluctuating water levels and disagreements about water use (particularly as they relate to power generation and irrigation) are common throughout Bear Lake's history. These issues led to the negotiation and eventual approval the Bear River Compact in 1958, and a Bear Lake settlement agreement signed in 1995 and amended in 2004. Today, water quantity and quality remain salient issues for numerous stakeholder groups. Although Bear Lake has many recreational uses, this body of water also serves as a primary water source for farmers and ranchers. Nutrient loading, caused by fertilizer runoff, compromises water quality and increases algal blooms. Water diversions for agriculture as well as demands from new development are leading to decreasing water levels—especially in drought years—which can threaten fish health, downstream ecosystems, and recreation in the long-term.


In addition, increased sediment running into the lake from the Bear River, known as deposition, is both imperiling fish health and enabling the proliferation of invasive species. As more mud and organic material accumulates on beach areas, the soft white sandy stretches turn into marshy areas where invasive phragmites can flourish. Compounding these issues is climate change, which is forecasted to decrease snowpack and increase water temperatures--both of which promote the growth of harmful invasive species and algal blooms.

Maintaining Community Wellbeing

Development, tourism, and water quality and quantity impact both environmental and social wellbeing. Thus, this research also focused on understanding the things residents value most about their community. Interviewees emphasized the significance of a small-town feel to communities around the lake. The tight-knit nature of these communities provides a sense of belonging, safety, and tranquility for many.

Some interviewees also mentioned that bonds between neighbors are important for building support systems within the community. As the social landscape continues to change within these communities, considering these needs is imperative. Additionally, many people discussed the importance of connections to the local landscape and opportunities for year-round outdoor recreation. Wildlife interactions, viewsheds, and clean air were discussed as important contributors to quality of life and maintaining and preserving them are pivotal to a high quality of life for many community members.

In light of these findings, this report offers the following recommendations for future action.

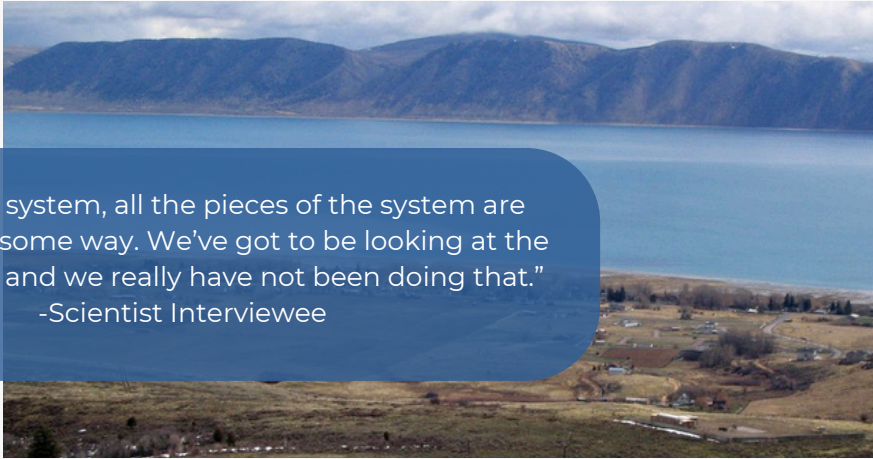


"The thing that makes Bear Lake special is its small community. And the permanent residents get along very well... they help each other whenever possible. And we like the quietness in the wintertime, and of course, the scenery."

- Community Member

Plan Ahead With Needs in Mind

As development and growth will likely continue into the next decade, leaders and decision-makers should be aware of the social and environmental needs of the area. Policies to promote more affordable housing, better infrastructure, and expanded services could help reverse the existing aforementioned trends. Developers and city planners should work more closely with scientists and advocacy groups to make informed decisions that mitigate adverse environmental impacts. Scientists stressed that near-term actions can help communities avoid long-term irreversible environmental damage. While Utah's Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands did release an updated [Comprehensive Management Plan](#) in 2022 and that plan was created in consultation with a variety of stakeholders, it is guided by Utah codes, which represent only one side of the lake. A long-term plan that transcends Utah-specific codes and considers socio-environmental concerns can help these communities work collaboratively and maintain independence while also taking important steps to address growth in ways that protect the local natural amenities while allowing for their continued enjoyment.



"It's a whole system, all the pieces of the system are connected in some way. We've got to be looking at the whole picture and we really have not been doing that."
-Scientist Interviewee

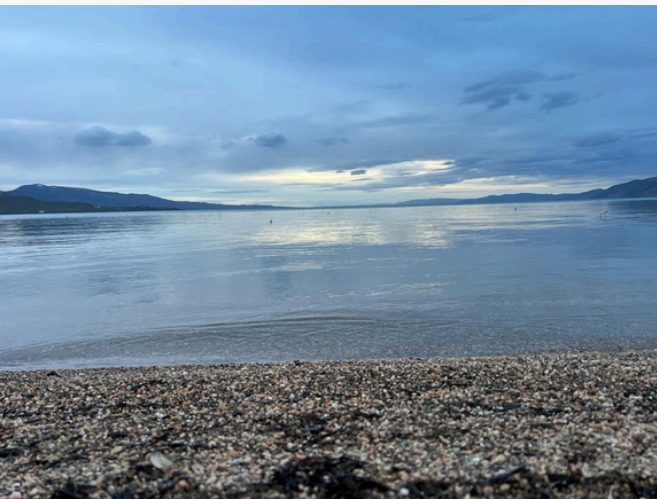
Invite Collaboration Among Bear Lake Stakeholders

The health of the lake and its surrounding communities impacts many disparate groups, including developers, business owners, tourists, farmers, and residents. While each group may have differing goals, bringing these groups together to create a common vision for the future of the lake is essential to improve the quality of life for everyone. Local nonprofit organizations are well positioned to help form these strategic alliances. For example, Bear Lake Watch has worked to engage many of these stakeholders by building relationships with them and collaborating across different organizations to foster a more active and involved community. However, additional support could help to bolster these efforts and enhance collaboration, which can then inform specific actions, policies, and initiatives.

This report was co-authored by:
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Improve Individual & Community Support

As many threats stem from increased tourism, dedicating more resources to education and outreach could help to encourage responsible recreation at the lake. Added infrastructure could also help with these efforts. For example, offering accessible trash receptacles and educational signage on beaches and other highly trafficked areas can reduce pollution. The community can make reef-safe sunscreen widely available and establish educational outreach programs such as a Bear Lake Ambassador program. This type of community-driven program, which has been implemented in high tourism areas like [Moab, Utah](#), and [Lake Tahoe and Nevada City, California](#), educate visitors on best practices for responsible recreation, including leave no trace principles, trail etiquette, and wayfinding. Community members can also engage in citizen science, which helps to provide scientists and land managers with the data needed to target invasive species, record algal blooms, and (in cases where citizens are trained) water quality monitoring. This, in part, can contribute to a tight-knit feeling within the community as people come together to preserve the lake that they love.



“We’re in this together: no one group should feel that they are responsible for the health of the lake.”
-Nonprofit Representative

“So I feel like there's a lot of opportunity, right. We're having growth, which some people really grumble about and see as a negative. But I see it also as an opportunity for the community to decide which direction we're going to go. And I'm talking about the larger Bear Lake area right now.”
- Community Member

Conclusion

Communities and ecosystems around Bear Lake face a number threats from increasing tourism, development, and environmental change. Action needs to be taken before we reach the tipping point. Many stakeholders are deeply invested in maintaining the numerous positive aspects of life around Bear Lake, including community social bonds, access to outdoor opportunities, and healthy ecosystems. Through collaboration, planning, and effective policymaking, residents of Bear Lake communities can maintain a high quality of life and Bear Lake visitors can continue to enjoy all of the amenities that the area has to offer.

