

# UTAH RECREATION & TOURISM MATTERS

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## Interpreting Utah's Wetlands

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### Introduction

Utah's wetlands provide a constellation of recreational opportunities, from sailing to photography, fishing to bird- and wildlife-watching, hunting to picnicking. Even more important are the roles wetlands play in the functioning of Utah's ecosystems. These roles include flood control, maintenance of groundwater quality and levels, pollution control, water purification, and the provision of important wildlife habitat—all functions critical to a healthy environment. Interpretive efforts that focus on recreational opportunities and wetlands education have the potential to benefit both humans and their environment.

There are approximately 558,000 acres of wetlands in Utah (World Resources Institute 1992). Most of these acres are found within the Greater Great Salt Lake Wetlands Ecosystem (GGSLWE), which extends approximately 140 miles from Cutler Reservoir in Cache Valley in the north to Utah Lake's Lincoln Beach in the south (see figure 1 in Andersen and Associates 1995). Environmental and recreational values of wetlands take on special significance because the GGSLWE is located entirely within a semi-arid to arid region of the country.

Utah's wetlands have declined by about 30% since 1780 (World Resources Institute 1992). While Utah's wetlands have been declining at a decreasing rate, they are still areas of major contention. Growth and development are threatening wetlands all along the Wasatch Front, and specific proposals that may further reduce wetlands are endorsed by both environmental (e.g., draining Lake Powell) and development (e.g., building Legacy Highway) interests. In this highly charged political and economic

environment, it is important to understand Utah residents' use of and attitudes toward wetlands as well as methods for encouraging a more knowledgeable citizenry.

### Assessment of Knowledge and Values

A two-pronged study was designed to assess the public's wetlands knowledge and values and to plan appropriate interpretive messages for both current wetlands visitors and the general public -- including, but not limited to, potential visitors. In the fall of 1995, 300 visitors were interviewed at 10 locations throughout the Greater Great Salt Lake Wetlands Ecosystem, and 300 residents of the seven-county GGSLWE region were interviewed by telephone. There was a 94% response rate for the on-site interviews (n=300) and a 63% response rate for the telephone interviews (n=300).

The first priority of each interview was to establish the meaning of the term "wetlands." To accomplish this, subjects were read one of the following statements as part of the survey introduction.

#### On-site interviews:

We're conducting a short survey about wetlands along the Wasatch Front and Northern Utah and want to talk to people who visit these wetland areas. By "wetlands" we're referring to places like this—areas with marshes, shallow ponds, or riverbank vegetation.

#### Telephone interviews:

Our survey is about wetlands in Utah. By "wetlands" we mean areas like marshes, shallow ponds, and riverbanks.

The study identified gaps in public knowledge about some of the key ecological benefits wetlands provide while at the same time exploring preferences for interpretive topics and modes in wetland settings. The combination of these findings points out important interpretive needs and opportunities for increasing public understanding of and support for the protection of wetlands resources in northern Utah. (This report summarizes the study's findings; complete findings are reported in Anderson and Blahna 1995.)

### **Wetlands Visits and Activities**

More than one-half of northern Utah residents (50.9%) had visited at least one Utah wetland area in the previous 12 months. High participation rates in certain activities suggest that educational and/or regulatory information related to some recreational activities may be needed.

#### **Key findings:**

- Some of the major activities at wetlands locations include: sightseeing (55.3%), watching birds and wildlife (16%), photography or artwork (13.3%), and boating or canoeing (12.7%). High participation rates suggest there may be a need for information to support these activities.
- High percentages of visitors socializing with friends or family (picnicking or socializing with friends/family: 16.6%) suggest that opportunities for *group* recreation and learning are important.
- Similar participation rates for hiking/nature trails (4.7%) and driving for pleasure (3.3%) suggest a need for both driving and hiking opportunities within wetland areas.
- Almost three-quarters of wetland visitors (73.7%) were male.

### **Wetlands Awareness and Knowledge**

Subjects interviewed at wetlands locations were asked if they were aware that the place they were contacted was a wetland area. Although 56% knew they were in a wetland area, more than a quarter (27.9%) did not. Telephone subjects were asked simply if they were aware that wetlands exist in the state of Utah. Just 3.3% were unaware.

A large majority in both groups said wetlands are important. Compared with just half of the telephone subjects (50.2%), 78.8% of on-site respondents felt wetlands are "very important." An open-ended question asked subjects, "What benefits, if any, do you associate with wetlands?" The most often named benefit was habitat for wildlife, especially birds. Several important topics were infrequently named and could be made key interpretive topics. These include flood control, maintenance of groundwater quality and levels, pollution control, and water purification. The

role of wetlands in broader ecosystems was mentioned by about 40% of respondents and also warrants interpretation. Telephone respondents were more likely to identify recreational activities as benefits of wetlands.

#### **Key findings:**

- While there is a relatively high level of awareness that wetlands, in general, exist in Utah, interpretation may be needed to make visitors aware that they are using a wetland area when the fact is not obvious.
- Fundamental interpretive topics related to wetlands benefits include: flood control, maintenance of groundwater quality and levels, pollution control, water purification, and the role of wetlands in broader ecosystems.

### **Interpretive Preferences**

Both on-site and telephone interviews revealed great interest in learning opportunities at and about Utah wetlands. In fact, 49.2% of telephone respondents and 78.8% of those contacted at wetlands locations indicated that opportunities for learning are "very important." Survey respondents were also asked to indicate what interpretive formats, or modes, would be of greatest value to them. Orientation boards, personnel on hand, visitor centers, and exhibit signs were among the top five modes preferred by both groups.

#### **Key findings:**

- Wetland visitors *want* interpretation. Over 96% of those surveyed rate learning opportunities either very (78.8%) or somewhat (17.8%) important.
- Maps and information on area birds are highly valued information/interpretation items.
- On-site visitors are interested in a wide variety of interpretive topics. In fact, it appears that almost any site-related topic will be of interest. The quality and relevance of the interpretation will probably be more important than the specific topic. This generalized interest in interpretation suggests a clear opportunity to focus on gaps in visitors' knowledge of the value and importance of wetlands.
- History topics should be considered when planning for wetlands interpretation.
- Interpretive modes preferred by both on-site and telephone subjects include: orientation boards, personnel on hand, visitor centers, and exhibit signs. On-site subjects would add brochures and other print materials to the list, while telephone respondents would like to see nature trails.
- Auto tours, which are commonly offered in wildlife refuges, and organized programs for children rated *lowest*

among interpretive preferences. This suggests that planners should not automatically default to auto tours as the interpretive mode of choice.

- Off-site, outreach interpretation should explain the value and importance of wetlands (see knowledge results, above) and focus on the experience opportunities to be found there.
- Employing *and publicizing* the telephone respondents' preferred modes (personnel to answer questions, exhibit signs, nature trails, visitor centers and orientation boards) may be an effective strategy for bringing *potential* visitors to wetland areas.

### **Interpretive Preferences by Subgroup**

Interviewers asked individuals to rate their preferences for both interpretive topics and modes. Some of the preferences expressed varied between the genders, between consumptive and appreciative recreationists, and among age groups. These preferences might be utilized to reach groups presently under-represented among wetlands visitors.

#### **Key findings:**

- Women displayed a significantly higher preference than men for four particular interpretive *modes*: personnel on hand, exhibit signs, nature trails, and visitor centers. Emphasizing women's preferred modes and *publicizing* their availability in wetlands locations may increase women's interest in visiting wetlands.
- Information on area birds is a high priority topic for both men and women.
- The 25 to 44 year olds (39.8% of visitors) had high positive responses to a variety of interpretive topics and modes, suggesting an interest in interpretation in general.
- Visitors in the oldest age category (65 and older) show a preference for visitor centers and personnel on hand to answer questions. They also rate auto tours and group outings higher than visitors in other age groups.
- Half of past wetlands users are hunters, trappers, or fishermen. This suggests that interpretation should include information on consumptive uses, laws, and safety.

### **Utah vs. Out-of-State Visitors**

Almost half of wetland visitors (46% on-site) were not Utah residents. Interpretive preferences of Utah residents were compared with the interests of out-of-state visitors.

#### **Key findings:**

- Out-of-state visitors demonstrated greater enthusiasm than Utah residents for interpretation in general.

- Most non-residents were found at Great Salt Lake sites and Antelope Island State Park. Topics and modes of interest to out-of-state visitors should be concentrated in these locations.

- Preferred *topics* for out-of-state visitors include information on what to see and do, what activities are allowed or prohibited, and about wetlands and how they function.
- Preferred interpretive *modes* for out-of-state visitors include: auto tours, brochures and other printed materials, visitor centers, group tours or outings, personnel on hand, and viewing blinds or observation towers.
- Consideration should be given to encouraging more visits by Utah residents (e.g., publicizing wetland activities and access points, inviting school visits, etc.).

### **Preferences by Level of Past Experience**

Nearly one-half (46%) of those interviewed by telephone had never visited a wetlands area. The responses of these "potential visitors" were compared with those who had visited varying numbers of times.

#### **Key findings:**

- Individuals with no previous experience favored one interpretive mode over any other: personnel on hand to answer questions. If encouraging first time visitors is a goal of interpretation, supplying and publicizing on-site interpreters may be critical, since many might never visit a wetland area without the assurance of personal assistance when they arrive.
- Telephone respondents rated auto tours higher than on-site visitors did, and those with no previous wetland visits considered this a particularly important mode of interpretation. Offering and publicizing auto tours—either organized or self-guided—may be an effective way to attract potential visitors.
- Other topics and modes of particular interest to those with no previous visits include: information on area birds and wildlife, exhibit signs, and visitor centers. These, too, may help first-time visitors feel more welcome.
- Since on-site interpreters and visitor centers are comparatively expensive modes of interpretation, probably just the areas that could potentially attract large numbers of first-time visitors (e.g., Great Salt Lake sites and Antelope Island State Park) should be specifically designed for this purpose.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

These results indicate several important implications for interpretation and recreation in wetlands areas, particu-

larly the Greater Great Salt Lake Wetlands Ecosystem. Nearly 50% of the residents of northern Utah who were surveyed had visited wetland areas in the past year, and both past and potential visitors indicated a high level of interest in wetlands education and on-site interpretation.

The selection of interpretive topics is a critical consideration for both enhancing awareness and encouraging wetland visitation. While most respondents to both the telephone and on-site surveys indicated that bird and wildlife habitat are important benefits of wetlands, few respondents were aware of benefits related to groundwater quality and levels, water filtering and pollution control, flood control, and the role of wetlands in broader ecosystems. Popular topics such as birds and wildlife may be used at all sites to attract visitors and hold visitor attention on-site, but these topics should lead to the less exciting but equally important topics related to wetland functioning, broader ecosystem values, and social benefits of wetlands. Providing information on activities that are allowed or prohibited was a major concern for telephone respondents. Both on-site and telephone respondents felt maps are one of the most important types of information they would like to have made available in wetland areas.

Most interpretive modes were rated relatively high by both survey groups, with "orientation boards," "exhibit signs," "visitor centers," and "personnel to answer questions" rated among the top five interpretive modes by respondents to both surveys. One surprise in the findings was the relatively low rating given to forms of interpretation targeted for children. In surveys conducted in park settings, interpretation for children is usually ranked relatively high. This could indicate that few children are currently visiting wetlands and suggests that the focus of children's interpretation should be in outreach rather than on-site materials, and that encouraging group visits (schools, scouts, etc.) is also needed to both encourage visitation and increase wetlands awareness of this important subgroup. An active educational outreach campaign is also important for reaching visitors who tend to be under-represented in wetland areas, including women and younger adults. Most of the respondents who indicated they would be interested in visiting in the future are the same individuals who had already visited during the previous 12 months.

Thus, expanding interest in and awareness of wetland functions, importance, and recreational opportunities must start with an off-site educational plan designed to reach people in their homes. First time visitors' interpretive pref-

erences overlap with older visitors and non-Utah (tourism based) visitors, all of whom are most concentrated at, and therefore can be served at, Great Salt Lake sites and Antelope Island. The protection of wetlands is dependent on increased public support. The key to increased public support is increased public knowledge of more of the vital ecological functions wetlands perform. We must provide interesting, relevant, and significant interpretation to both current visitors and the general public if increased wetland enjoyment and protection are to be achieved.

It is important to note that these results are not representative of all wetland visitors, because funding was only available for conducting the on-site surveys during a two week period in September, a time when there was no hunting and school was in session. Since the results provide only a "snapshot" of current visitors, they must be supplemented with input from a variety of other sources (resource professionals, hunting and fishing groups, environmental groups, educators, etc.) to provide a complete picture of the wetland interpretation and education needs of the Greater Great Salt Lake Ecosystem Wetlands.

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