

The Economic Value of Utah Wilderness

Where the Jobs Are

Due in large part to its scenic beauty and excellent recreational opportunities, Utah has become a world-class tourist destination and a magnet for new businesses ranging from mom-and-pop restaurants to high tech corporations. Though the state's economy has suffered recent setbacks due to a national economic downturn, Utah typically outperforms the nation in job growth and is expected to reclaim that distinction over the next couple of years.

According to the Utah Department of Workforce Services, jobs are projected to grow at an average rate of 2.3 percent annually between 2000 and 2005 (a full percentage point above the national average). All new jobs and 80 percent of total employment during this five-year period will be in the sectors of transportation, communication and utilities; trade, finance, insurance and real estate; services; and government. The services industry alone, which accounts for nearly 30 percent of all employment in Utah, is expected to contribute 48 percent of all new jobs in the state. Contrary to popular belief, much of the employment in services is in higher paying professional and technical occupations, including healthcare, engineering, architecture, accounting, business services (advertising, data processing, etc.), and public and private education.

Sign of the Times

As Utah's economic base has expanded and diversified in recent years, extractive industries (e.g. mining, oil and gas development, and timber production) have played an increasingly smaller role in the state's economic health. Whereas Utah's rural economies were once subject entirely to fluctuations in national and global energy markets because of a dependence on mineral production, recent growth in these regions has occurred primarily due to an increase in tourism. According to the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, tourists pumped \$4.15 billion into the economy and generated \$332 million in taxes in 2002 (note: this is not just skiing; visitors to Utah's national parks double the number of visitors to Utah's ski resorts.). By contrast, mineral production contributed only \$1.8 billion to the state economy, a decline from 2001. In light of these economic trends, Utah's future prosperity will depend not on exploitation of the state's natural resources, but rather on the continued diversification of its economy and the long-term preservation of its outstanding public lands.

The Economics of Land Protection: An Investment in the Future

Protected landscapes have economic impacts far beyond their borders because they provide the high quality environmental backdrop that makes an area an attractive place to live, work, and do business.

Research from Idaho State University and the University of Montana has shown that the "amenity value" of pristine places acts as a draw for both visitation and population growth. This is why wilderness counties tend to show such dramatic economic vitality. For example, the cluster of counties located in south-central and southwestern Utah (including Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, and Washington counties) consistently ranks number one in Utah in terms of employment growth rate. According to the Utah Department of Workforce Services, "Nearly 50 percent of these new jobs will be concentrated in the trade [wholesale and retail] and services industries, reflecting the tourism, travel, and recreation economic base of the district."

Economic data aside, Americans have long valued their wilderness heritage as a precious asset in and of itself—a source of national pride in a world where few unspoiled places remain. In the words of late author and Utah resident Wallace Stegner: "We need wilderness preserved; as much of it as is still left and as many kinds, because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. The reminder and reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health, even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there; important, that is, simply as idea."