Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

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Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism researchers provide data, information, and knowledge that leads to a better understanding of how to best provide outdoor recreation opportunities. They help communities as part of Utah State University Extension that reaches every county in the state with local experts and educators. The institute’s work brings together natural sciences and social sciences to help guide policy and land use decisions that encompass trade-offs and consequences of various economic and resource management decisions.

Among the institute’s 2019 activities was a series of workshops around the state to examine challenges and opportunities associated with different areas and increased outdoor recreation and tourism. The five regional workshops included land managers, city and county government employees and elected officials, and people whose businesses depend on tourism and recreation. Discussions from those meetings will guide decisions and help focus efforts in communities that are gateways to Utah’s many recreation and tourist destinations.

The institute’s Gateway and Natural Amenity Region Initiative (GNAR) aims to assist small cities and towns near increasingly popular places to visit and live to cope with some important “big city” issues. While each town has its own special character and challenges, many common elements present challenges, including traffic congestion, too little affordable housing for the local workforce, and problems that come without comprehensive development plans to prevent sprawl (usu.edu/gnar/). GNAR is a collaboration between the USU and the University of Utah and researchers from a variety of disciplines work to help local citizens preserve qualities that make a community or region unique while proactively planning for growth and its positive and negative consequences.

The team’s Utah’s Most Visited Places project uses a modern artifact of recreation and tourism to determine which attractions drive the state’s tourism economy—more than one million photographs posted on social media platforms.

The main attractions in some places are well known: Temple Square in Salt Lake County, Arches National Park in Grand County, for example, but interest in other destinations in Utah’s 29 counties can be more difficult to quantify. Bringing together and analyzing the vast collection of social media photographs and location tags helps clarify where tourists focus their attention. The goal is to provide each county with an accurate, data-based understanding of the specific places tourists frequent. See some of the maps and data online at utahsmostvisited.com.

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