

Disadvantaged and more diverse areas are disproportionately less 'nature rich'

Nature

Access to green space — trees and grass and natural beauty — isn't just a nice thing to have. As Sharen Hauri, director of parks and community services in St. George, said, there is "a definite correlation between mental health and access to open space."

The urban areas where most of Utah's population lives are not rich in health-supporting nature, such as mountains and national parks, according to an analysis by NatureQuant, an Oregon-based company. That's particularly true in areas that are historically underprivileged — whether by way of their economic status or demographic diversity.

Applying NatureQuant's measuring system — a "NatureScore," a value between zero and 100 based on environmental conditions and other metrics — to the two Salt Lake County neighborhoods for "census tracts," to use the government's term for relatively permanent statistical areas) shows the difference: geography, income and demographics can make a difference.

The census tract in West Valley City has a NatureScore of 4.4. More than half of the residents there identify as Hispanic or Latino, and nearly half speak a language other than English at home. Fewer than 10% of that area's residents have a bachelor's degree, and the median household income is \$68,111.

Over on Salt Lake City's east side, the other census tract including neighborhoods at the mouth of Millcreek Canyon rates a NatureScore of 97.6. In that part of the county, 82% of residents identify as non-Hispanic white, and very few speak anything other than English at home. More than 30% have a bachelor's degree, and the median household income is \$128,810.

Moore noted that economically and socially underserved communities often have less green space.

That's why communities across Utah — including St. George, Salt Lake City and West Valley City — are working to bring the healing benefits of nature closer to the people, by planting trees in parks and neighborhoods and re-stocking native plants along trails.

WHY NATURE MATTERS

Decades of research have shown that proximity to nature — specifically biodiversity — is a key factor for health outcomes, said Jared Hanley, NatureQuant's founder and CEO.

Developing a NatureScore, Hanley said, is a large, machine-learning process. It analyzes about 30 data sets, including satellite images of vegetation, land use classifications, tree canopy cover, air pollution, noise levels and impervious surfaces like concrete and asphalt. The process generates a score correlating with one of five "leaf" classifications — deficient, light, adequate, rich or utopia.

Hanley added that proximity, not access, is key. It isn't enough to be able to drive to a park within five minutes, he said, because the best benefits come when people are within 500 meters — a third of a mile — of nature.

St. George has a goal of getting a park or trail within a half mile of every home, Moore said.

The city is close to that goal for most residents, Moore said, and he has frequent conversations with people about why it's important. For one, he said, it's important for families with young children.

"These park areas become a respite for [young parents] mentally to be able to... raise toddlers, raise little kids," he said, because it gives them the chance to take a break while their kids play.

Natasha Plett said she can feel



Fitts Park at 3050 S. 500 East in South Salt Lake is a "little green lung" in a diverse municipality, says Sharen Hauri, the city's director of neighborhoods.



Looking north on Salt Lake City's 1400 West near Pierpont Avenue, a neighborhood bordered by Interstates 80 (seen in background), 15 and 215.

herself calming down when she brings her two young children to Fitts Park in South Salt Lake. The park, about 8 acres, is different from typical parks, she said, because it offers a variety of plants and wildlife.

Her 7-year-old and 9-year-old will spend hours playing and enjoying nature.

"They like exploring not so much the playground but the ducks, the plants," Plett said.

Sharen Hauri, South Salt Lake's director of neighborhoods, called Fitts Park a "little green lung" in a municipality known for having a lot of immigrants and refugees. It's a place for after-school programs and exploring a natural area along Millcreek, Hauri said during a recent Saturday morning tree planting there.

Even with Fitts Park, that census tract in South Salt Lake only has a NatureScore of 28.1. The park just southwest has more demographic diversity and a median income that's \$4,342 lower. It also has a lower NatureScore, at just 17.3.

The stark difference from east to west — both in the neighborhood and across the city — doesn't surprise Nigel Marabelli, who helped with that Saturday tree planting.

He can see the dividing green

moving toward and past Interstate 15 from the air, every time he flies into and out of Salt Lake City.

"To me, that's not as healthy, because I think it's really important to make sure people have access to trees as much as possible, regardless of their economic position," Marabelli said.

WEST-SIDE WOES

Seeking that environmental fairness has become a major issue for the Healthy Environment Alliance of Utah, better known as HEAL Utah.

The nonprofit advocacy group started as a response to concerns over radioactive waste in Tooele County, west of the Salt Lake Valley — but more recently has been working on the west side of Utah's capital city to push for better air quality and environmental justice.

"The more we have access to nature, the more we have access to trees," said Melanie Hall, senior policy associate with HEAL Utah. "They are actually working as air and water purification systems for us."

Planting trees "really helps enhance [park spaces] and create more tree diversity in our urban forests and more cooling shade," said Amy May, executive director

of Tree Utah, which works to plant in the state's historically disadvantaged areas.

On Salt Lake City's west side, though, instead of a dense tree canopy, gigantic interstates, belching railroads, an international airport and an active power plant dominate the cityscape.

Four west-side neighborhoods stand out for lacking proximity to nature: Westpointe, Jordan Meadows, Fairpark and Poplar Grove. Portions of each are rated "nature deficient" by NatureQuant, ranging in score from 6.3 to 18.

Not only does the west side have an underdeveloped tree canopy, but it also has few large parks. The only green spaces of significance in the census tracts that rated poorly are Sherwood Park's three grass baseball fields and the thin ribbon of the Jordan River and its adjacent trail.

West-siders want natural spaces in their neighborhood, according to Dan Potts, a Poplar Grove resident and board member of the nonprofit Salt Lake Fish and Game Foundation.

Potts pointed to a 2020 Envision Utah survey of people who use the Jordan River Trail as evidence that people want to see more biodiversity and open space along the river. More than 75% of respondents

said they wanted to see more natural lands by the river.

"They don't care about identifying birds," Potts said. "They just want to get somewhere where they can decompress."

Decompressing can be hard when the built environment is hostile to nature and outdoor activity. NatureQuant also includes air pollution data in its rating system and uses satellite imagery to evaluate the built environment around an address. So, the concrete and semi-trailer trucks of I-80, I-15 and I-215 that ring the west side drive down the scores.

Proximity to the interstates, and the pollution that they bring, is also a factor in people's physical health — asthma rates are much higher on the west side, for example — but there's also "a mental health component," said Hall from HEAL Utah. "Just seeing the physical barriers, seeing the freeway as the thing that's next to your school or your home rather than a tree canopy — tells you over and over that you are living in a community that has not been invested in, not in the same way the east side has been invested in," Hall said.

Slightly southwest of Salt Lake City's west side lies West Valley City, Utah's second-largest municipality — where freeways divide the neighborhoods and the manufacturing industry remains a large part of the economy.

Here, the worst-off neighborhoods by scores are adjacent to the city's major thoroughfares, especially I-215, State Route 201 and Bangerter Highway. They're also concentrated in the older, eastern part of the city.

Steve Pastorik, West Valley City's community development director, said he was "not surprised" that those older neighborhoods have lower access to green space — because it's hard to locate and build new parks there.

"West Valley is approximately 90% built out," Pastorik said. "And so, there are areas where it's pretty challenging, in that there's just not vacant land left. Now, we do have vacant land in the city — but some established neighborhoods that may be lacking a park, the opportunities to acquire just vacant land are very limited."

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