Nature

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BIODIVERSITY, EVEN PLANNED, ISN'T EVENLY DISTRIBUTED

When people think of Utah, often what comes to mind is the image of people out in nature — such as hiking in the "Mighty Five" national parks or skiing "The Greatest Snow on Earth."

Yet NatureQuant's analysis classifies about half of Utah's census tracts as "nature rich" or "nature utopia." That's the ninth lowest of all 50 states and Washington, D.C. — and several points lower than the national rate of almost 70%.

All but one of the 10 states with the highest proportion of census tracts with at least a "nature rich" score are east of the Mississippi River — which would seem to contradict the view Westerners have of their home as being the "open range" of the West.

Most Eastern states, Hanley said, have denser vegetation and a larger variety of it.

"One thing Utah doesn't have going for it, frankly, is its desert," he said.

However, many counties in southeastern Utah have scores indicating higher proximity to nature than its urban counties, though they also have fewer census tracts.

Less than 30% of the 251 census tracts in Salt Lake County are classified as "nature rich" or "nature utopia" — while all three of the census tracts in Grand County fall into those categories.

Many Utah counties are entirely natural "utopias" — from Beaver County in the southwest to San Juan County in the southeast, and from Rich County in the central north to Daggett County in the northeast corner. Those counties all also have three census tracts or fewer.

In Utah's more populated counties, areas are more built-up and have less biodiversity. And where people living in cities are closer to nature, they tend to be in wealthier, less diverse areas.

How much of the state is at least "nature rich"?

Based on ratings of census tracts, which usually match or are close to neighborhood boundaries

Source: NatureQuant

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | The Salt Lake Tribune

For example, the average median household income in neighborhoods rated as "nature deficient" is $69,400. That increases up to $100,597 for "nature rich" neighborhoods, though it dips down to $92,934 for census tracts classified as a "nature utopia." Many of those tracts are in rural counties that have lower household incomes.

People are also generally more likely to make at least $150,000 a year as a census tract's leaf rating increases.

And neighborhoods become more white with fewer residents who identify as Hispanic or Latino as they get closer to nature, from 67.3% white and 25.8% Hispanic or Latino on average in tracts rated as "nature deficient" to an average of:

» 76.8% white and 21.1% Hispanic or Latino in neighborhoods classified as "nature light."

» 82% white and 15.1% Hispanic or Latino in neighborhoods classified as "nature adequate."

» 85.1% white and 11.5% Hispanic or Latino in neighborhoods classified as "nature rich."

» 87.1% white and 10.1% Hispanic or Latino in neighborhoods classified as "nature utopia."

Individual tracts may differ from these trends.

You can find your own neighborhood's NatureScore by going oline at **naturequant.com/naturescore/**.

Hanley said the analysis tends to show trees and biodiversity often aren't evenly distributed, and he agreed there are inequities behind those distributions that society needs to fix.

PLANTING MORE TREES, INCREASING BIODIVERSITY

City officials across Utah have been working to make some of those fixes.

In recent years, Salt Lake City has planted thousands of trees, with mixed success, as part of a push by Mayor Erin Mendenhall. Salt Lake City's public lands department is also looking to boost biodiversity on the west side by planting more native greenery along the channelized Jordan River.

The Fife Wetlands Preserve, on the southern end of Poplar Grove, is one of the target locations for that program. Tyler Murdock, deputy director of the department, said he wants to make places like Fife Wetlands lush but still proximate.

"Many people within Salt Lake City don't have access or the ability to get to really wild, natural lands," Murdock said on a recent visit to another property along the river. "And when you think about, even, the proximity to the Wasatch Mountains, many people in our west-side communities aren't frequently visiting Little Cottonwood or Big Cottonwood [canyons]."

Hall, with HEAL Utah, also advocated for creating safer, more pleasant walking routes in west-side neighborhoods, to encourage people to get out on foot more often and reduce fears of auto-pedestrian crashes.

St. George has tried to make sure its urban trail system offers "little oases in the desert," Moore said, by keeping the riparian zones intact. Doing so means city residents can "kind of get out of the density and get into nature within a pretty easy walk," he said.

In Logan, city officials are concentrating their efforts on the northwest and southwest neighborhoods, which are more built up than other residential areas, said Russ Akina, the city's parks director.

Logan is looking to put in a neighborhood park and other amenities west of Main Street, Akina said, where people don't have a park or recreational experience within a mile and a half of their homes.

West Valley City is trying to leap on those rare opportunities to buy land when it becomes available. The city recently acquired one of the last remaining parcels of farmland within city limits at 4430 Maple Meadows Drive.

While the property isn't in one of those nature-deficient neighborhoods, it is just three blocks west of one of the census tracts bisected by Bangerter Highway.

Pastorik, with West Valley City, also said the city can incorporate green spaces into redevelopment projects, even if new construction results in greater density.

Similarly, West Valley City has landscaping rules on the books that require some property owners to install and care for trees. So, as redevelopment happens in neighborhoods that weren't built with those rules in mind, Pastorik said he expects more trees to be planted, too.

NatureQuant works with local governments to identify neighborhoods most in need of trees to boost health and cool down city streets.

It can be expensive to plant a lot of trees and build new parks, Hanley acknowledged, but some evidence suggests that even looking at nature helps calm people.

"Even when you don't have access to the green, if you're close to it, it does have a positive health impact," he said.

Megan Banta *is The Salt Lake Tribune's data enterprise reporter, a philanthropically supported position. The Tribune retains control over all editorial decisions.* **Jose Davila IV** *covers west-side communities.*

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