

# WELLBEING AND CONNECTION WITH NATURE IN THE FACE OF UTAH'S SIGNIFICANT GROWTH



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## INTRODUCTION

Personal wellbeing, also referred to as subjective wellbeing, refers to personal feelings about the quality of one's life.<sup>1</sup> Personal wellbeing is known to be impacted by a variety of factors, often referred to as domains.<sup>2</sup> Connection with nature refers to a person's sense of oneness with the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Research suggests that feeling connected with nature increases personal wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> However, significant population changes within communities often result in development of natural or open spaces,<sup>5</sup> which may reduce the amount of connection residents feel with nature.

Between 2010 and 2020, Utah experienced a state-wide total population growth rate of 18.4%, the fastest in the nation over that period.<sup>6</sup>

“My wellbeing is greatly connected to nature. Looking up at the night sky and seeing stars, having space between me and my neighbors, and the ability to drive where I need to go without traffic congestion and engaging with people I know as I walk the streets or local trails.”

Utah Wellbeing Survey Respondent 2022

According to the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, in-migration accounted for two-thirds of Utah's total growth in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Using data from the Utah Wellbeing Surveys, the research described here was undertaken to determine if and how growth in Utah impacts personal wellbeing, connection with nature, and beyond.



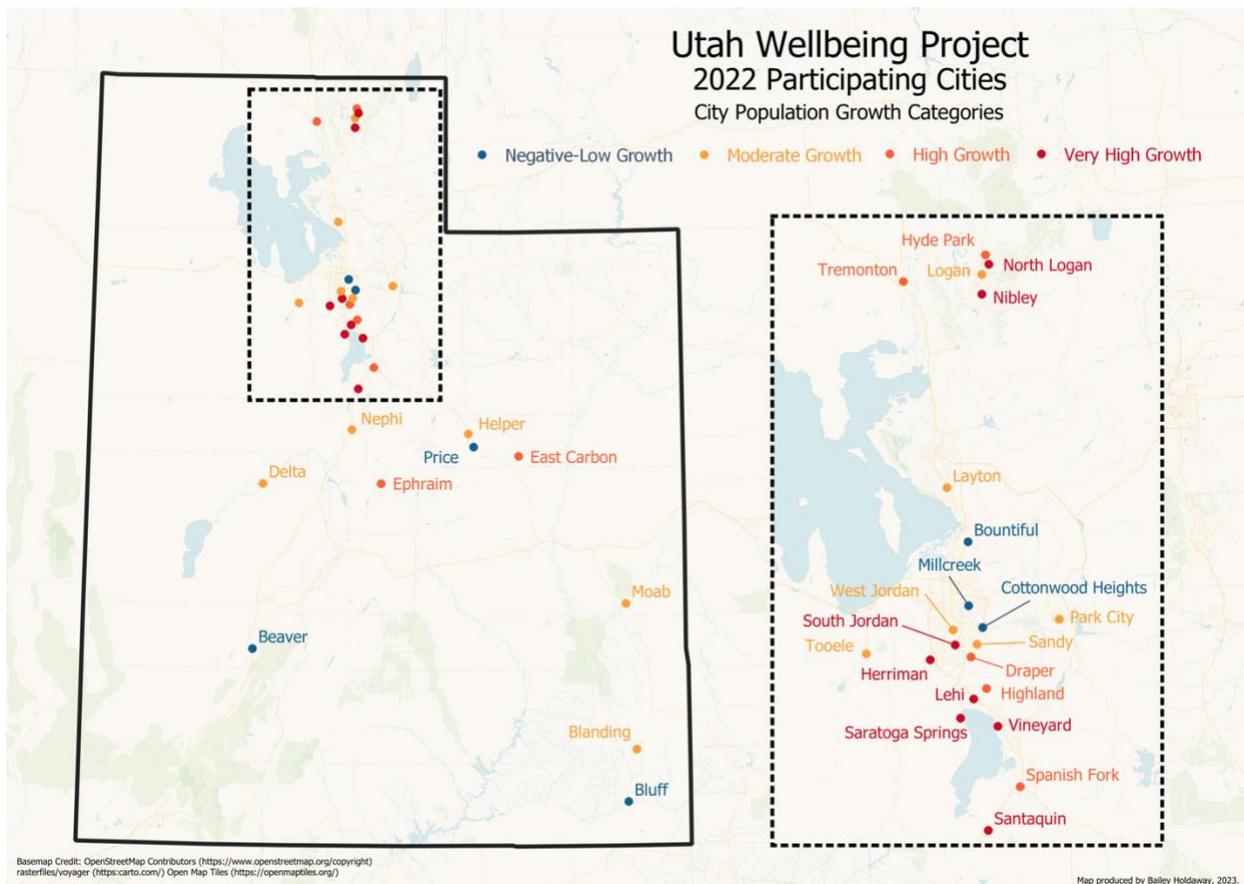
## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The Utah Wellbeing Survey has been conducted annually since 2018 with the goal of tracking resident wellbeing and assisting with local planning processes.

Drawing from survey data from the 2022 Utah Wellbeing Survey, this research investigated 32 communities across Utah that vary considerably in size and growth trends. A total of 9,895 surveys were collected from residents of these cities. All adult residents aged 18 and over were

encouraged to participate. For more information on the Utah Wellbeing Survey please visit the [Utah Wellbeing Project Website](#).

Utilizing American Community Survey population estimates from the US Census as well as input from city leaders, each of the 32 cities were categorized by percent population change between 2010 and 2020, resulting in four groups: cities with declining or very low growth (<0% to 5%), moderate growth cities (>5% to 20%), high growth cities (>20% - 40%), and very high growth cities (>40%) (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Map Detailing Categorization of Cities Based on Population Growth (2010 - 2020)**

*Note: Due to recent Census inaccuracy, Bluff and Ephraim were placed in categories that are different from what Census data indicates.*

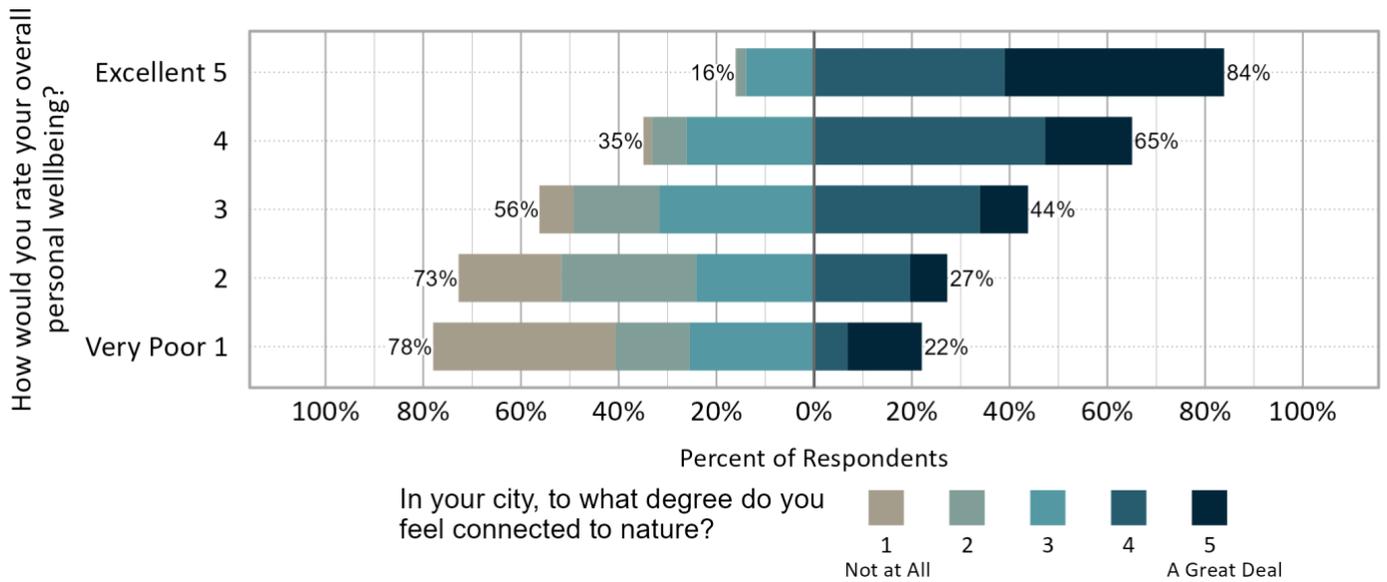


Figure 2. Comparing Personal Wellbeing and Connection with Nature

## NATURE CONNECTEDNESS AND WELLBEING

Respondents rated their levels of personal wellbeing and connection with nature on 5-point scales. Figure 2 shows that those who felt highly connected to nature typically rated their personal wellbeing higher than those with lower connection with nature ratings.

## THE ROLE OF GROWTH

Contrary to expectations, population growth rates did not have a large impact on nature connectedness and wellbeing in this study. As shown in Figure 3, average scores across growth categories for personal wellbeing and connection with nature were not strikingly different.

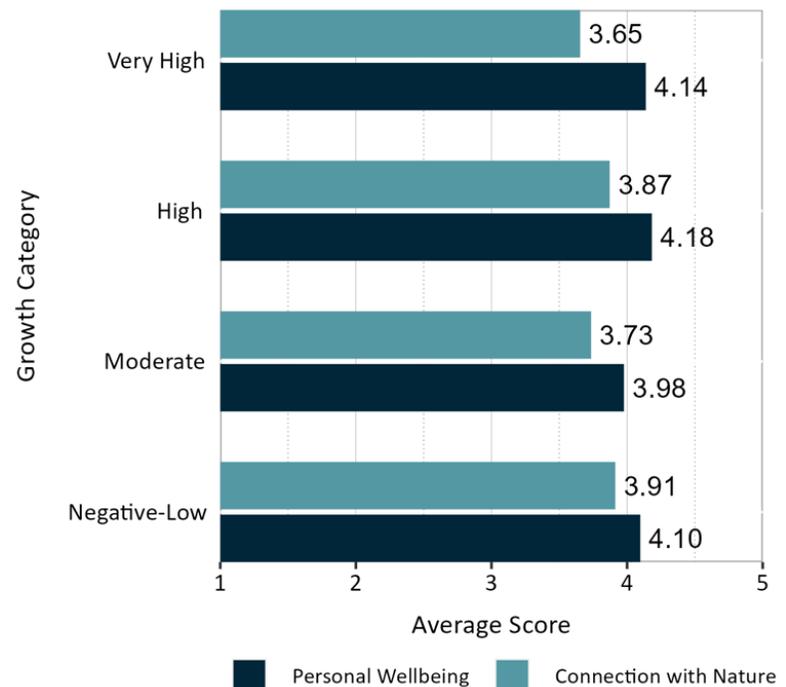


Figure 3. Average Connection with Nature and Personal Wellbeing Ratings by Growth Category

However, respondents in the survey were also asked whether the rate of population growth and the pace of economic development in their city was too slow, just right, too fast, or that they had no opinion.

Figure 4 (below) shows respondents were most likely to feel that population growth was 'too fast', even within communities that are declining in population. In terms of economic development, responses were more evenly distributed but still leaned toward viewing development as 'too fast'.

Additionally, respondents who felt that the rate of population growth and the pace of economic development were 'just right' consistently gave *higher* ratings for connection with nature and personal wellbeing.

Likewise, those who felt that the rate of population growth and the pace of economic development were 'too slow' consistently rated their connection with nature and personal wellbeing *lower* compared to those who chose all other response options (Figure 5).

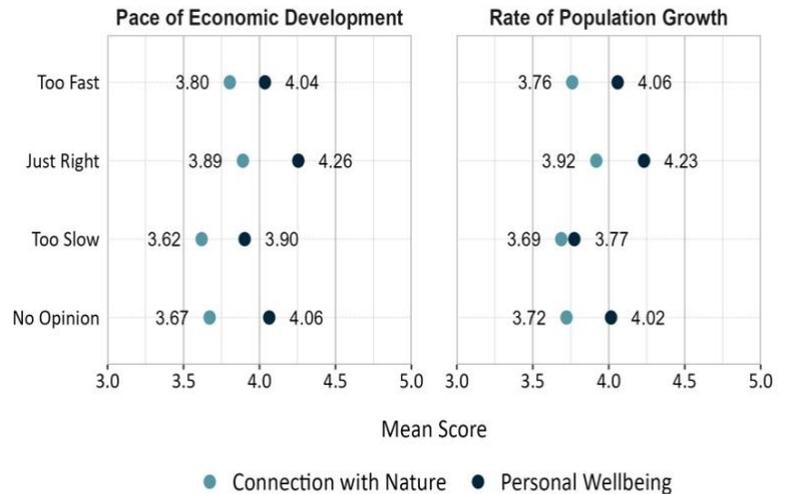


Figure 5. Average Connection with Nature and Personal Wellbeing Ratings by Growth Perceptions

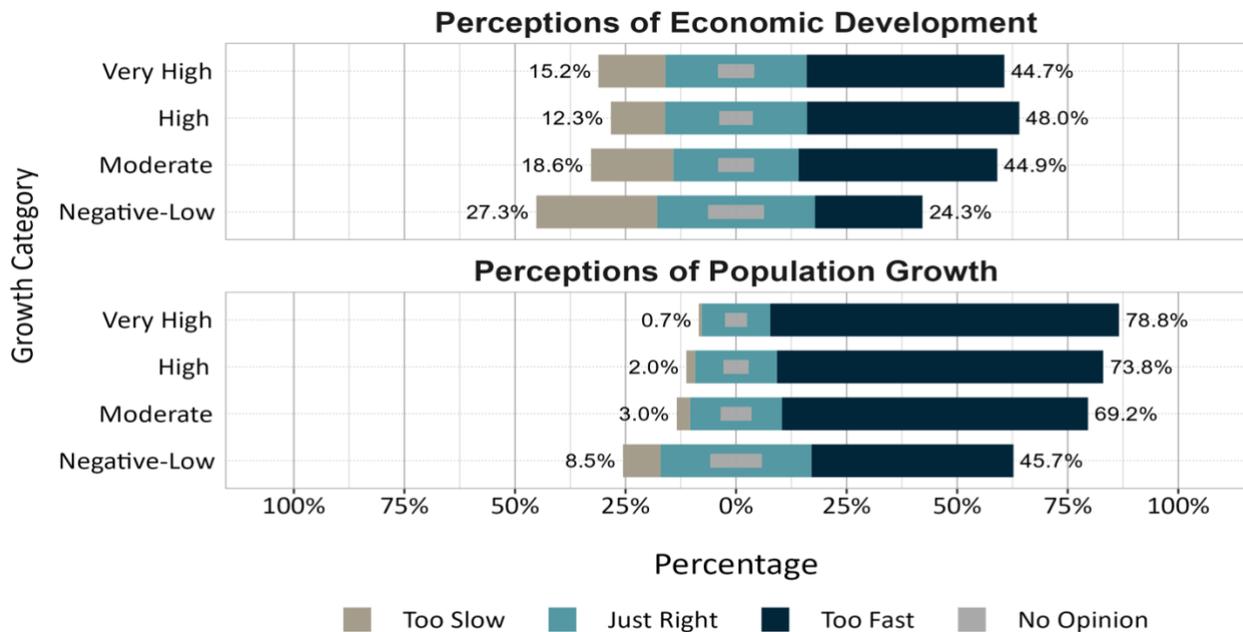


Figure 4. Perceptions of Economic Development and Population Growth by Growth Category

## DEMOGRAPHIC DRIVERS OF CONNECTION WITH NATURE

Demographic characteristics were found to be relevant to levels of connection with nature. Specifically, connection with nature increases with both income (Figure 6) and age (Figure 7).

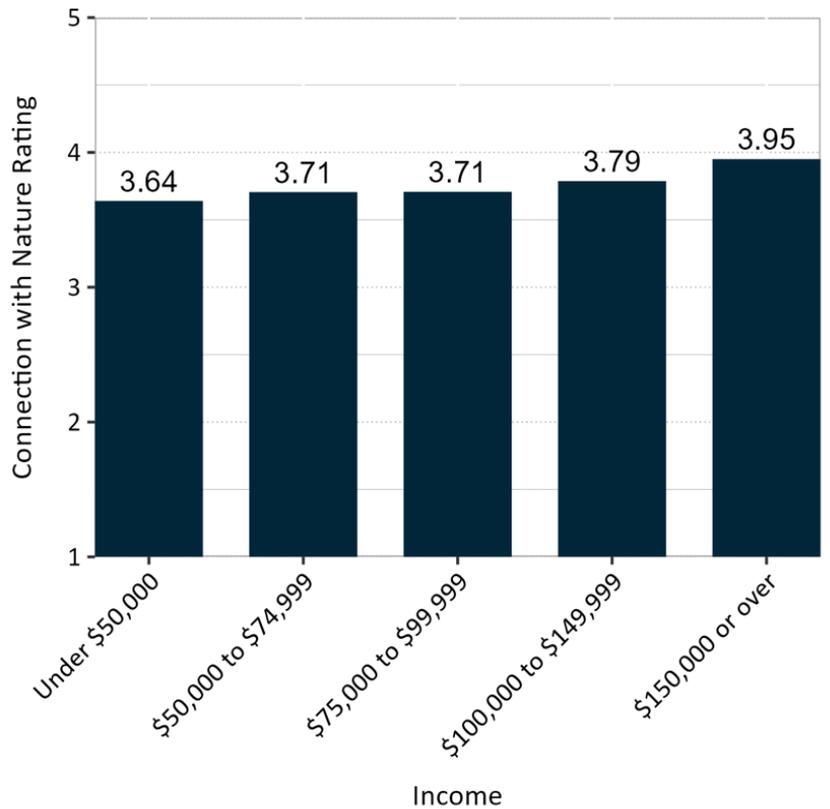


Figure 6. Average Connection with Nature Ratings by Household Income

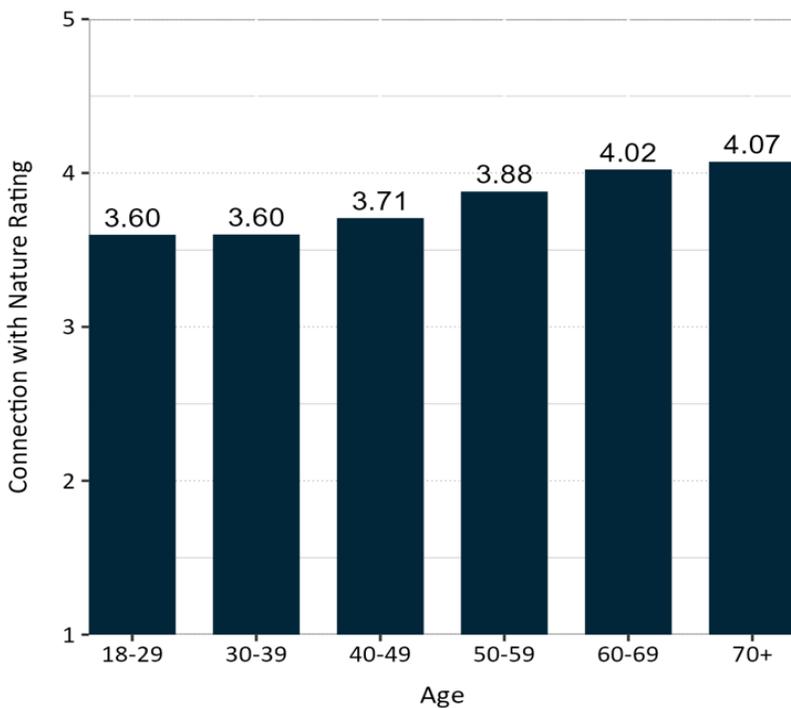


Figure 7. Average Connection with Nature Ratings by Age

# DEMOGRAPHIC DRIVERS OF PERSONAL WELLBEING

In terms of personal wellbeing, ratings varied by income and religious preference. Specifically, personal wellbeing increases with income (Figure 8), and respondents from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints rated their personal wellbeing higher than those from other religions or those who identify as Agnostic, Atheist, or as having no religious preference (Figure 9).

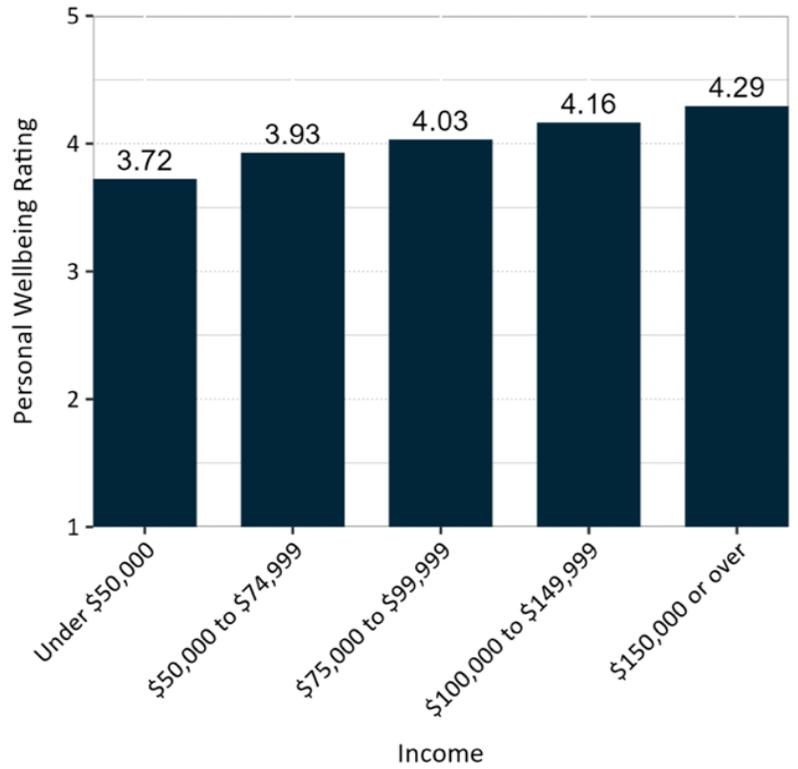


Figure 8. Average Personal Wellbeing Ratings by Household Income

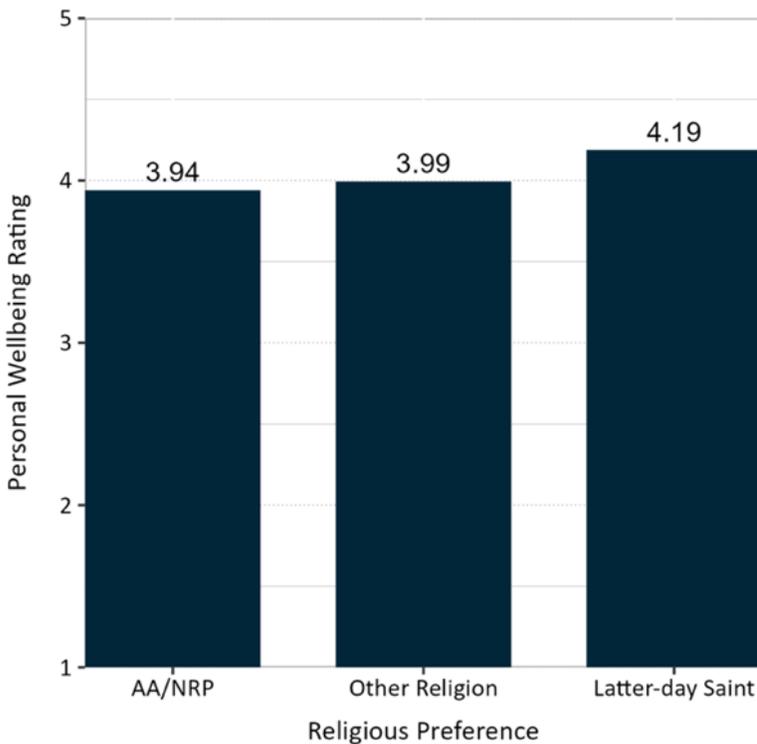


Figure 9. Average Personal Wellbeing Ratings by Religious Preference

## CONCLUSIONS

This fact sheet describes the findings of a research project that used data from the Utah Wellbeing Survey. Results suggest that connection with nature is an important factor that improves people's personal wellbeing. Although Utah is growing rapidly, community growth rates were not found to strongly correlate with nature connection ratings or personal wellbeing in this study.

Rather, demographic drivers, including age, income, and religious preference, were more impactful. However, perceptions of population growth and economic development were also found to be important. In all but a few of the smallest rural places participating in the survey, people within Utah tended to view

population growth as too fast regardless their actual growth rates. Those who viewed population growth and economic development as just right rated their connection with nature and personal wellbeing higher than those who felt it was too fast or too slow.

Thus, people in Utah are aware of and sensitive to population changes. If wellbeing is a planning goal, local decision makers should consider how population changes and economic development may lower resident ability to connect with nature in their communities. Likewise, considering how opinions of community changes impact wellbeing and nature connectedness and engaging community members will help build cities where both new and longtime residents can be happy and thrive.



## USEFUL RESOURCES

### Connection with Nature Resources for Cities

- [The Practice of Biophilic Design](#)
- [Preservation of Scenic Areas and Viewsheds](#)
- [City Parks Alliance](#)
- [Smart, Sustainable, and Resilient Cities](#)
- [USU Extension: Time Spent in Nature](#)
- [USU Extension: GNAR Initiative](#)
- [Guidelines for Parks, Recreation, and Greenspace](#)

### Other Wellbeing Resources

- [Community Connection](#)
- [Living Standards](#)
- [Safety and Security](#)
- [Environmental Quality](#)
- [Physical Health](#)
- [Mental Health](#)
- [Substance Use](#)

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