

The Salt Lake Tribune

<https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2024/01/08/opinion-collaboration-among-utahs/>

OPINION

January 8, 2024

[Commentary](#) [Letters](#) [Editorials](#) [Bagley](#) [Gehrke](#) [Share Your Opinion](#)

Opinion: How Utah is bridging the gap between health and nature

Lack of coordination risks potential redundancy or imbalance of efforts, which may lead to territoriality and competition for limited resources among groups working toward the same mission.



A growing body of research from around the world documents [the positive effects of engaging with nature](#) on human physical, mental, social and spiritual health. These studies reinforce what we instinctively feel when we take hikes in our foothills, harvest apples from our backyard trees, or take a stroll under the tall trees of Liberty Park.

Utah is a symphony of organizations that aims to increase respectful access to nature in our state. Each instrument in this orchestra offers a unique sound to enrich the quality of our lives and our environment.

But unlike a real symphony, there is no single conductor who keeps track of which instruments are represented and the pace of the music. Lack of coordination risks potential redundancy or imbalance of efforts, which may lead to territoriality and competition for limited resources among groups working toward the same mission. To avoid that, novice groups must learn about the actions of others and ensure their contribution is distinct.

One such newcomer is [Nature and Human Health-Utah \(NHH-UT\)](#), a research/practice collaborative supported by [the REI Cooperative Action Fund](#). NHH-UT was founded in 2019 by Nalini Nadkarni, forest ecologist and Professor Emerita at the University of Utah. Our group is co-lead by Tim Brown, CEO of the Tracy Aviary, and Dart Schmalz, Department Chair of Parks, Recreation and Tourism at the University.

We founded NHH-UT because we recognized the increasing societal shifts to lifestyles in nature-deficient environments, which has [negative impacts](#) on both human and environmental health. Although [recent research documents](#) significant health benefits of nature engagement, there is limited awareness in the traditional healthcare enterprise and the public.

Because of this limited awareness, NHH-UT's mission is to understand, articulate and foster relationships between nature and human health by providing a collaborative arena to engage, formulate actions and implement solutions for the people and nature in Utah.

Because many existing groups in Utah are actively working on this theme, we carried out a [landscape assessment](#) to synthesize the missions and actions of 27 groups that represent government, higher education, recreation, environment and health care across the Salt Lake Valley.

We learned that existing and well-played melodies concern nature and health topics in many harmonious keys. For example, many regional organizations are working towards improving air quality, enhancing access to urban green spaces, and providing access to recreational opportunities in schools and summer camps. Others focus on overcoming existing barriers to nature engagement such as transportation, finances and lack of gear, particularly for groups that have been traditionally underrepresented.

The surveys and interviews we conducted and synthesized allowed us to identify what is, and — more importantly — what is not yet being done. The majority of groups involved in the landscape assessment expressed interest in NHH-UT being a connector and an amplifier of existing work. Other priorities included additional research in the nascent field of nature and human health, more funding for pilot projects, and finding solutions to equitable nature access concerns. A recurring leitmotif was the need for support through political pathways to promote real, sustainable impacts on nature connections for the betterment of the health of people and the environment.

In October 2023, NHH-UT hosted [a symposium](#) designed for groups with similar missions to connect, discuss and reduce overlap. This was the first of many activities NHH-UT will provide to harmonize the efforts that engage people with nature. The keynote speaker at the event was Utah Rep. Rosemary Lesser, who spoke on the need to improve health outcomes through holistic approaches and why we, as Utahns, need to pay particular attention to the health of our environment.

Additionally, 13 community organizations participated in a poster session during the symposium to highlight the work that is currently being done in nature and health and encourage participants to connect with one another based on the issues that are most important to them.

We also announced that Nature and Human Health will be awarding a second round of [pilot grants](#) in 2024 for individuals and/or organizations that would like to implement a project that relates to increasing access to the outdoors to improve the health of Utahns. NHH-UT received 15 proposals for projects related to pediatric rheumatology, air quality, bike lane expansions, camping programs for African American families, nature-based summer camps for incarcerated youth, and mental health outdoor programming for women.

Our group welcomes continuing input and expertise of all individuals and groups who wish to connect Utahns more closely to nature in effective and harmonious ways.

Learn more about Nature and Human Health-Utah at www.natureandhealthutah.org.

Nalini Nadkarni, co-leader of NHH-UT and Professor Emerita at the University of Utah, has interwoven research on forest canopy biota with innovative public engagement throughout her career. She collaborates with faith-based groups, artists, corporations and people who are incarcerated to engage with those who do not or cannot gain access to science education and nature.

Myra Gerst, NHH-UT's program manager, has worked in preventative public health programming throughout her career. She coordinates public engagement, management of the pilot grant program and facilitating opportunities for nature-based programming within the community.

Tim Brown, co-leader of NHH-UT, has been the president/CEO at Tracy Aviary since 2005 and has paid particular attention to preserving a landscape and atmosphere that is an oasis in the middle of the city during his time as CEO. Providing opportunities for people to connect with nature is his lifelong passion.

Dorothy Schmalz, co-leader of NHH-UT, is chair & associate professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism at the University of Utah. She teaches courses in the philosophy of leisure, serving diverse populations, social psychology of human behavior and leads workshops on the importance of leisure for balance and wellbeing

By Nature and Human Health-Utah | For The Salt Lake Tribune