

Digging in to Where We Are | Office of Research

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Digging in to Where We Are, with Dr. Courtney Flint

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For the last seven years, Dr. Flint has been a researcher and professor in the Sociology Department here at USU. Now she is in an extension role doing research and has done a “swan dive” into the land-grant mission. Her research is framed around how people relate to nature and landscapes, how landscapes influence their well being and how people’s experiences lead them to change and alter landscapes. The research inquiries are connected with the needs of local leaders, and her goal is to try and give back by answering key questions for decision makers around the state. Dr. Flint says it is an “exciting turn in her career.” This episode features our interview with Natural Resource sociologist Dr. Courtney Flint. Dr. Flint was going to be a part of our Research Landscapes event and share with us her research of how people of all backgrounds relate to the mountain communities and landscapes they call home. But in the wake of COVID-19 and the cancellation of Research Landscapes, we instead decided she would be a great first guest for Instead.

According to Dr. Flint, the Western U.S., particularly the Intermountain West, has been historically viewed as a wild frontier, full of open space and rugged vastness. But today she says it is no longer a crossroads or flyover space. It is a dynamic destination, not just for those seeking to see the national parks or ski, but for families, careers, and entrepreneurship. There’s a vibrant economic environment and dynamic growth which is bringing in diversity of people and thought, and creating an excitement that doesn’t go with the historical framing of the West. The West has spaces to grow, and cities have room to sprawl out. Thus, the numbers have grown and the people who come to settle here, whether for quality of life or other reasons, have found space to grow ideas as well.

Dr. Flint also believes that Utah itself is different from the other states in the Intermountain West. In Utah 60% of our lands are public, unlike other places where there is a completely different way of interacting with nature. Utahns have a particularly unique relationship with mountains, based off of her research. There’s a certain “spiritual connection” that is changing and evolving, but is always present. In Utah, the relationship with mountains isn’t based on extraction like it once was (i.e. timber and mining industries). Utahns have moved on to a whole new phase where the relationship is based off of extracting experiences rather than natural resources. Dr. Flint says it is “surprising how common it is across all Utahns to value mountains...there’s not much variation in that across the board.”

Dr. Flint’s research is survey based, as she and students have carefully sampled households throughout Utah and the Western Region. The method used, often called the “Utah Survey Method”, is a drop-off pick-up method where a relationship is developed with the subject. By telling the subject “you were selected and we would really appreciate your feedback”, they received a 70-80% response rate to the surveys and have systemic data regarding these individual’s feelings towards the landscape of their home. It also allows for conversations to understand how it affects feelings about communities and identities, as opposed to just a cross section of the data. Through her research, some city leaders have been skeptical about Dr. Flint’s research. They “don’t want everyone getting uptight.” But she works hard to create a partnership and see what information they want added to her surveys, which in turn gets them invested in her project. The project has allowed Dr. Flint to “open up the box of local government” and see all the different roles that go on in there. To see what an engine it is to keep a city moving has given her a new appreciation for its complexity.

Dr. Flint’s current research is working with the city of Herriman, where many are concerned about rapid growth. She says there are “growing pains that need to be dealt with at the local level, but also exciting opportunities.” We appreciate Dr. Flint for taking the time to talk to us and be a part of our new podcast, available on your favorite podcast app.