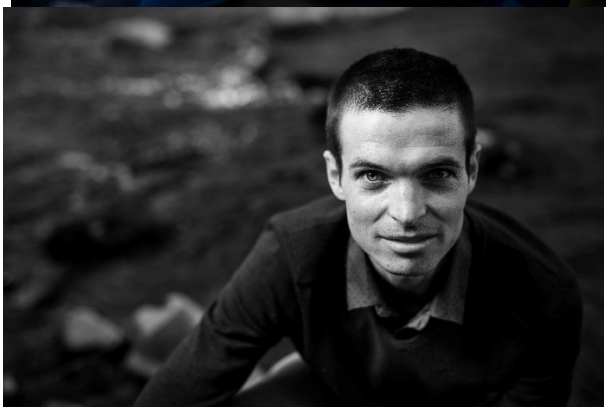
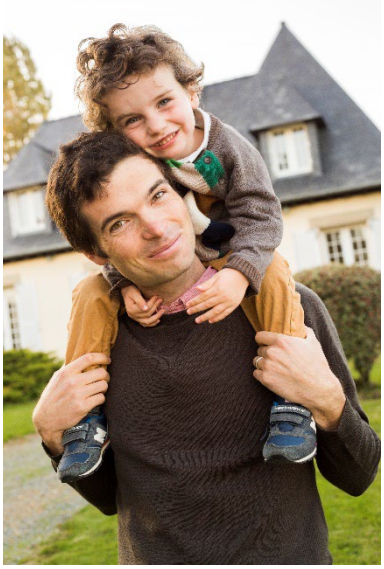
Bio for Dr. Ben Abbott

Ben is an associate professor of ecology at Brigham Young University and the executive director of the water policy group Grow the Flow. He has a B.S. in watershed and Earth systems science from Utah State University and a Ph.D. in ecology from University of Alaska Fairbanks. Before coming back to Utah in 2017, he was a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellow at the French National Science Foundation (CNRS) where he worked on water security in agricultural landscapes. He has published more than a hundred scientific articles and book chapters on hydrology, biogeochemistry, global ecology, energy systems, ecosystem feedbacks, and environmental policy. He has received over forty awards for his scientific research and public service, including the Redd Center Young Scholar Award in Western Studies, the Clarence Dixon Taylor Historical Research Award, the Stanford/Elsevier Top 2% of Scientists ranking, Research.com's Rising Star of Science award, and the American Geophysical Union's Voices for Science Policy Fellowship. Ben's work is focused on translating ecological research into positive social impact, including improved policy, technology, and public health. He has four children who take after them in their love of animals, TV, and biking.





Will Utah Pull Off the World's First Saline Lake Restoration?

Benjamin W. Abbott

Abstract:

Nearly all the world's saline lakes are in decline, and there are no examples of large saline lake restoration. The consequences of losing these lakes include damage to public health, economy, biosphere integrity, and in the most severe cases, relocation of entire communities. Great Salt Lake was once the largest saline lake in the Western Hemisphere, but it has lost over half of its surface area and over two-thirds of its water volume compared to its natural average elevation. Millions of Utahns are asking the question, will Utah be the first community anywhere in the world to save their salt lake, or will this be a repeat of the Aral Sea? After decades of creative and persistent policy innovation, education, and community organizing led by dozens of private and public groups, the state of Utah committed to restoring Great Salt Lake on September 24th, 2025. The executive and legislative branches of government joined with a new coalition of private sector partners bringing $200M for acquiring water rights and restoring wetlands. This represents a tripling of all funds directly spent on Great Salt Lake to date. The Governor led the signing of a "GSL 2034" charter committing to an aggressive timeline of achieving a healthy lake level in time for the Olympic Winter Games. If Utah succeeds, this will be one of the largest ecological success stories in our country's history. This presentation will tell the story of the events leading up to the GSL 2034 charter and explore the necessary steps and partners to have a shot at achieving this ambitious goal. Specifically, I will provide an overview of the status of Great Salt Lake and the policy, economic, and cultural movements underway to create the country's largest water market and pull off a world-first saline lake rescue.

Sound bite: This presentation is about the next stage in saving Great Salt Lake. Major policy changes over the past five years have not yielded substantial increases in water flow to the lake, but a new public-private partnership has resulted in the state committing to an ambitious goal of restoring the lake in eight years. Please come to share your criticisms, energy, and vision.