

Buffalo's Revitalization

A photograph showing two young women sitting on a wooden picnic table outdoors. The woman on the left is wearing a black sleeveless top and sunglasses, while the woman on the right is wearing a purple tank top and sunglasses. In the background, there is a large blue sign with the letters 'FLO' and 'BUF BLUE' below it. A Ferris wheel is also visible in the background, suggesting a park or waterfront setting.

This factsheet is part of a series focused on revitalization in Great Lakes Areas of Concern.

In 1968, a bridge in Buffalo, New York was closed for several months due to a fire that had broken out in a layer of oil that floated on the Buffalo River. The river, which flows into Lake Erie, had become heavily polluted after years of industrial activities. Many of these businesses have since closed or moved to other parts of the world, and the Buffalo River Area of Concern was neglected for decades. Now it's experiencing a revival. By removing contaminated sediments and restoring wildlife habitat, federal and state agencies, along with local organizations, have prepared Buffalo for a revitalization. On the banks where the river was once on fire, recreation and entertainment venues have taken the place of industrial facilities, and the waterfront is now available for residents and visitors to enjoy.

Bringing Buffalo wildlife back

Through combined efforts of the U.S. EPA and other agencies and organizations in the Buffalo River Restoration Partnership, over one million cubic yards of contaminated sediment were remediated and several habitat restoration projects completed. From 2014 to 2019, approximately 3.5 miles of river shoreline was restored. Up to 30 species of fish are now living in the lower river, a welcome change from 1968 when the river caught fire and fish were dying in the polluted waters. Peregrine falcon populations are also increasing in Buffalo after being absent in the area for over three decades.

New and better river access

The Buffalo Blueway, an initiative to create and enhance public water access, builds on river remediation and restoration efforts. With \$10 million in state funding, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper is implementing paddling, boating, fishing, and birding opportunities. In 2021, a public water access site on Ohio Street, owned by the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation, was renovated to include an updated boat launch, parking facilities, and an accessible fishing pier. Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper will create or enhance 10 access points along the Buffalo River.

The riverfront is where it's at

When the unused Erie Canal Harbor was renovated in 2008 and renamed Canalside, the riverfront saw a surge in engagement. From 2010 to 2016, visitors increased from 150,000 to 1.5 million annually, and now Canalside hosts hundreds of events each year. The site includes an entertainment complex with restaurants, ice skating, fitness classes, a hotel, and a children's museum. Another complex, RiverWorks, opened in 2015 with a concert venue, kayak rentals, ziplining, a hockey rink, and an amusement park. Former grain silos on site have been repurposed into a \$2.2 million brewery and painted as a Labatt Blue six-pack. RiverWorks averages over 1 million visitors per year.

Young adults are choosing Buffalo

In 1950, upwards of 580,000 people called Buffalo home, but a steady decline over the decades had almost halved the population. Now, young adults are more likely to stay in the Western New York region—U.S. Census data reveals that from 2010 to 2020, the Buffalo population aged 20 to 39 increased over 15%. The proportion of Buffalo's young adult population is growing more than New York's as a whole, with growth of less than 1%. Millennials' attraction to Buffalo is also reflected in local real estate—in 2018, they accounted for more than half of Buffalo's mortgages.

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By the Numbers



Contaminated
sediment removed
would fill
400,000
dump trucks



Nearly
4 miles
of shoreline restored
in 2019



\$428 million
in waterfront
development from
2012–18



900% increase
in Canalside visitors
2010–16