

Duluth's Revitalization



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

As one of the largest Great Lakes Areas of Concern, the St. Louis River AOC spans the communities of Superior, Wisconsin; the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa; and the most populous city in the region, Duluth, Minnesota. Historically, Duluth was dependent on the iron ore and lumber industries, but when many of these businesses moved to other regions of the world, Duluth was faced with economic and ecological hardships from pollutants left behind. Through federal and local funding as well as community mobilization, remediation efforts to clean up the St. Louis River and the Duluth-Superior Harbor were implemented. Since then, Duluth has experienced substantial economic growth, a growing tourism industry, and expansive habitat restoration.

Joining the National Water Trail System

As one of the largest Minnesota habitat restoration projects, hundreds of wetland acres were restored at Grassy Point and Kingsbury Bay as of 2021. Invasive cattails were removed, new islands were built to shelter the wetlands from waves, and native grasses were planted. In 2020, the St. Louis Estuary became part of the National Water Trail System—established by the National Park Service,—in part, to conserve and restore exemplary waterways. This designation has helped increase recreation and foster greater community connection with the river, including monthly sunset paddle sessions, supported by a partnership between the St. Louis River Alliance, Ski Hut, and Northland Paddlers Alliance.

Duluth as a destination

As the St. Louis River and Duluth port slips have become cleaner and safer, hotels and businesses—as well as tourists—have been drawn to the city. In 2016, an old shipping pier was converted into the 27-acre Pier B Resort Hotel with a restaurant, a boat launch, and other multi-use spaces. Growth in the hotel industry is paired with other forms of development, too. For example, several breweries and a distillery in neighborhoods near the river and Lake Superior have led to more waterfront economic activity and engagement. As a result, Duluth brought in \$12.4 million in tourism tax revenue in 2019—an all-time high and up 2% from 2018.

Connecting nature to neighborhoods in need

In 2010, the City of Duluth saw the river cleanup as an opportunity to invest in local parks in the western part of the city. By connecting declining neighborhoods with hundreds of miles of improved and expanded hiking, biking, snowmobiling, and horseback riding trails, quality of life could be enhanced, as would residential and commercial development. Since then, the St. Louis River Corridor Initiative has added outside funding to allocated tourism tax dollars and implemented park master plans.

A good place to call home

Though Duluth's population has stayed consistent over the last decade, younger generations have seen a rise in numbers, according to the U.S. Census. In 2020, while people ages 20-39—older Gen Zs and Millennials—made up 27% of the overall Minnesota population, that same age group made up 34% of the population in Duluth. This is up from 27% in 2010. More recreational activities and waterfront opportunities may contribute to young adults calling Duluth home.

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By the Numbers



The contaminated sediment removed from the harbor would fill

120,000
dump trucks



250 acres
of habitat was restored
at Grassy Point,
Kingsbury Bay,
and Perch Lake



\$1.4 billion
in economic activity
at the Port of Duluth-
Superior
in 2017



34%
of the population
is 20–39 years old