GREAT LAKES AREAS of CONCERN

Six Strategies to Support Community Revitalization



Introduction

n Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOCs), sediment remediation and environmental restoration projects are improving the health of local waterways. In addition to an improved environment, some towns and cities associated with AOCs have also experienced community revitalization.

In 2021–22, a team of researchers from Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant and Purdue University conducted interviews and focus groups with 37 community leaders in five AOCs; the goal was to identify lessons learned in their efforts to capitalize on environmental cleanup for community revitalization. What follows is a synthesis of the main strategies reported by these leaders.





Strategy 1: Create opportunities to coordinate environmental and community planning projects.

SEDIMENT REMEDIATION AND HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECTS in AOCs are focused on removing beneficial use impairments (BUIs¹) and do not specifically target community revitalization outcomes. Connecting environmental cleanup to revitalization requires intentional and regular communication among partners and others from the development (e.g., city planners, officials, developers) and environmental cleanup sectors (e.g., engineers, fish and wildlife biologists, conservation technicians).

Environmental sector participants need to clearly convey technical aspects of the environmental projects to those in the development sector. This will encourage development sector participants to consider environmental cleanup in their projects, leverage overlap between environmental and city development goals, and connect transformed waterfronts to desired revitalization outcomes. Communication should begin early in the cleanup process and continue throughout the life of the AOC to reduce conflicts and ensure that all actors are aware of all projects.

What you can do:

- Invite people from partnering groups to present project updates in one-on-one or group meetings (e.g., invite an environmental practitioner to present progress to city planners).
- Participate in community events with people from other sectors or groups to build relationships.
- Plan annual summits to bring together leaders from across sectors and communities in the AOC.

Here's an example:

The <u>Black River AOC</u> hosts the Annual Black River Summit to bring together participants from multiple sectors, including the City of Lorain and EPA, to reflect on work completed and to coordinate future activities.

ⁱ A BUI is defined as "a change in the chemical, physical or biological integrity of the Great Lakes system, which caused significant environmental degradation" (EPA, 2022). All designated BUIs must be removed for an AOC to be delisted.



Strategy 2: Celebrate environmental cleanup progress along the way.

RESTORING AND DELISTING AOCS is a time-intensive process, which can include unexpected delays. This long timeframe makes it important to recognize progress by celebrating milestones regularly throughout the cleanup process. Communicating with local decision makers and the public about project progress could take many forms (e.g., events, news articles, social media campaigns).

These efforts can shift previously negative perceptions of the area and promote revitalization by drawing the attention of residents, business owners, housing developers, and tourists to the improvements. Commemorating completed work can also increase support for future projects and build a sense of community by bringing multiple groups of interested parties together. Finally, celebrating progress can encourage community involvement by building excitement around the AOC transformation.

What you can do:

- Collaborate with other organizations to host community events on the shoreline.
- Participate in existing events (e.g., set up an informational table at farmers markets, festivals) to showcase environmental cleanup.
- Start social media campaigns to communicate project progress.

Here's an example:

The Detroit River Water Festival is a oneday event for middle schoolers to learn about and experience the Detroit River on Belle Isle, part of the Detroit River AOC. This gives students and teachers the opportunity to learn about multiple aspects of the river, including its history and wildlife, and their roles as stewards.



Strategy 3: Use visual cues to communicate restored environmental quality.

THE PUBLIC OFTEN HAS NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF AOCS due to past pollution, and these perceptions may continue even after cleanup progresses. This is partly due to visual cues that traditionally indicate industry or pollution (e.g., waterfront factories, solid waste).

Community leaders should pay attention to the waterfront's appearance and assess how visual cues might positively or negatively shape residents and visitors' perceptions. This is especially important when cleanup results are not obvious, as is often the case in sediment remediation because it happens under water. Environmental and community leaders must rely on visible and permanent indicators of environmental cleanup to shift public perceptions.

What you can do:

- When possible, remove unused industrial infrastructure from waterfront areas.
- Add signage in high traffic areas that explains the cleanup process.
- Install infrastructure for public use (e.g., benches, restrooms, walkways, playgrounds) that communicates new uses of the waterfront.
- Use social media to share pictures and videos of the transformed waterfront.

Here's an example:

In the Muskegon Lake AOC, smokestacks were removed from the shoreline, transforming the aesthetics of the area. The lakeshore trail now has frequent signage explaining the clean-up process and describing the surrounding environment. Additionally, Watch Muskegon, an online promotional campaign, was created to communicate about recreation opportunities and events in the area.



Strategy 4: Prepare for ongoing waterfront maintenance.

MAINTAINING THE WATERFRONT after sediment remediation and habitat restoration projects are complete is a necessary component of sustaining environmental quality and supporting revitalization. This is especially the case if public use of the area increases or if new development threatens the environmental quality of the area.

Maintenance planning and coordination should begin well in advance of the final stages of the cleanup and include city planners and environmental professionals. This will ensure that funding is in place and parties responsible for waterfront maintenance are identified before the AOC is delisted.

What you can do:

- Develop a plan for "life after delisting" that includes revitalization priorities alongside environmental protection.
- Partner with environmental organizations (e.g., watershed groups, wildlife organizations, environmental justice advocacy groups) early in the cleanup process and work together to find resources (e.g., funding, staff) needed for continued maintenance.

Here's an example:

Multiple AOCs are forming partnerships and plans that will support continued protection of the area after delisting. For example, in the Sheboygan River AOC, the ongoing partnership of the <u>Sheboygan River Basin Partnership</u> and the AOC working group is laying the groundwork for post-delisting maintenance. In the Muskegon Lake AOC, partners have developed the <u>Muskegon Lake Action Plan</u> that builds on completed work.



Strategy 5: Plan for inclusive public access in advance of waterfront development.

IN SOME CASES, environmental cleanup contributes to an increasing number of businesses and housing

developers interested in building on the waterfront. This can be an important component of revitalization. This development, however, can also limit the waterfront available for public access. Therefore, it is important for city planners and environmental professionals to work together well in advance of final clean-up to designate public access areas.

Public access should be aligned with community preferences in terms of types and locations. Protection and prioritization of public access should also continue throughout the revitalization process. This is especially important when shoreline development increases as restoration progress. Communities should work alongside developers to prioritize public access. Finally, as much as possible given environmental constraints, public access areas should be distributed equitably throughout neighborhoods in an AOC.

What you can do:

- Set aside areas for public access early in the cleanup process based on diverse community input regarding use and location.
- Seek input from organizations for people with disabilities to increase accessibility of public spaces.
- When possible, adopt policies that require or incentivize developers to maintain public access in their waterfront projects.

Here's an example:

In the Buffalo River AOC, the once industrial Ohio Street has become a center for recreation—it includes the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Ohio Street Boat Launch, an ADA accessible fishing dock, a pedestrian walkway, and seating. This is a part of the Buffalo Blueway, which connects natural spaces for recreation along the river.



Strategy 6: Prioritize diverse community involvement in decision making.

AOC RESIDENTS HAVE DIVERSE PRIORITIES surrounding the use of the waterfront and revitalization outcomes. For example, some residents may want public access for recreation while others may envision a waterfront shopping district. Including a range of perspectives in decision making will ensure a more equitable process and a waterfront that represents broad community priorities. This, in turn, can increase use of the waterfront and surrounding developments, as well as the continued maintenance of waterfront areas.

What you can do:

- Hold public meetings at multiple locations and at different times of day.
- Present information in multiple languages, using online and in-person communication.
- Collaborate with community organizations that have existing relationships with diverse groups of residents (e.g., neighborhood associations, churches, schools).

Here's an example:

Friends of the Rouge River (an

AOC partner) regularly works with organizations that have relationships with diverse groups of residents, especially those who may be excluded from the outdoors and decision-making processes. These partners include Outdoor Afro, which supports people of color in the outdoors; the Concerned Residents of South Dearborn, a community group from an area of the AOC with high pollution loads and percentage of racial and ethnic minorities; and Black to the Land Coalition, which supports outdoor experiences for people of color. The strategies described in this document are not meant to prescribe specific solutions, rather, to add to a toolkit of possible approaches that can be adapted and applied by environmental practitioners, city planners, environmental non-profit representatives, developers, and other AOC actors. Each AOC has unique social and environmental contexts and communities with different priorities for, and definitions of, revitalization. There is no "one-size-fits-all" strategy to promote revitalization, nor will revitalization look the same in every AOC. However, these strategies can be used to inform discussions about revitalization and adapted to align with the environmental and social conditions of the area.

References and additional resources

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