

Assessing the Investment: The Economic Impact of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

A Case Study of Ashtabula, Ohio

SEPTEMBER 2018

In Ashtabula, Ohio, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative-funded improvements have been an influencing factor in numerous economic benefits including:

- **Recreation:** Renewed interest in water-based recreation, including a 42 percent increase in pleasure boat registrations.
- **Economic Development:** An influx of waterfront business development, including 27 new businesses in the Ashtabula Harbor business district.
- **Tourism:** Increased tourist activity, representing \$434 million in tourism sales in 2016.

For decades, the Ashtabula River and Harbor provided the town of Ashtabula, OH with a livelihood based on a strong manufacturing and shipping economy, industries that built a strong middle class here. But as with most Great Lakes ports, the unchecked environmental impacts of that economy eventually resulted in polluted waterways and degraded aquatic habitats.

As manufacturing declined and city leaders began looking to tourism to boost the local economy, restoration of local waterways took on a new urgency. Thanks to 20 years of restoration initiatives, including a \$22 million investment under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), Ashtabula residents are starting to look at their city and its waterways in a new way. GLRI work in Ashtabula has included the installation of 1,400 feet of fish habitat shelves, dredging of 120,000 cubic yards of toxic sediment in Ashtabula Harbor, and restoration of coastal wetlands at Walnut Beach, including the removal of view- and access-blocking Phragmites.

As waterways have been cleaned up, water-based recreation, particularly boating and fishing, has grown significantly. Enhanced focus on the waterfront has also prompted a significant surge of business and new real estate development in Ashtabula's downtown area near the river. And the revitalized waterways and downtown area have attracted a steady increase in tourism.

"I think people don't always recognize the assets in our own backyard," says Stephanie Siegel, executive director of the Ashtabula County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "And it makes them sit up a little straighter and say, 'Yeah, look what we have here.'"

A new kind of boating economy

Ashtabula residents have long been accustomed to the sight of freighters on Lake Erie and in Ashtabula Harbor. And while the dredging and removal of contaminated sediments have provided more opportunity for commercial freight activity here, recreational boating has been the star of the area's water-based economic recovery.

The number of pleasure boat registrations in Ashtabula County increased by 42 percent between 2008 and 2017, while the number of rental boat registrations increased by 28 percent during the same period.

Of Ohio's seven lakeshore counties, boats registered in Ashtabula were most likely to stay in their home county; Ashtabula boaters make 95 percent of their trips at home.

"They're hearing the call of people coming and saying, 'Okay, now I see a lake. Now I want to experience it. So how do I get on it? How do I touch it? How do I go out on a boat?'" Siegel says.

In the years since waterway cleanup began, a new kind of watercraft has made its entrance to the area for the first time.

"There was no kayaking on the Ashtabula river when it was heavily polluted," says Fred Leitert, an original member of the Ashtabula River Remedial Action Plan Advisory Council. "More recently, that has come about."

And that's led to the opening of businesses like Harbor Yak, a kayak, canoe, and stand-up paddleboard rental shop that opened on the river in 2017. Jill Bartolotta, Ohio Sea Grant extension educator for Ashtabula and Lake counties, says Harbor Yak's opening is "pretty much a direct result" of waterway cleanup in Ashtabula, particularly GLRI projects.

"Harbor Yak has just exceeded everyone's

expectations in their first year," says Ashtabula city manager Jim Timonere.

Improved fish habitat, including the 2012 GLRI-funded construction of fish shelves in the Ashtabula River, has resulted in the Ashtabula River being added to the list of locations stocked with steelhead by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in 2017.

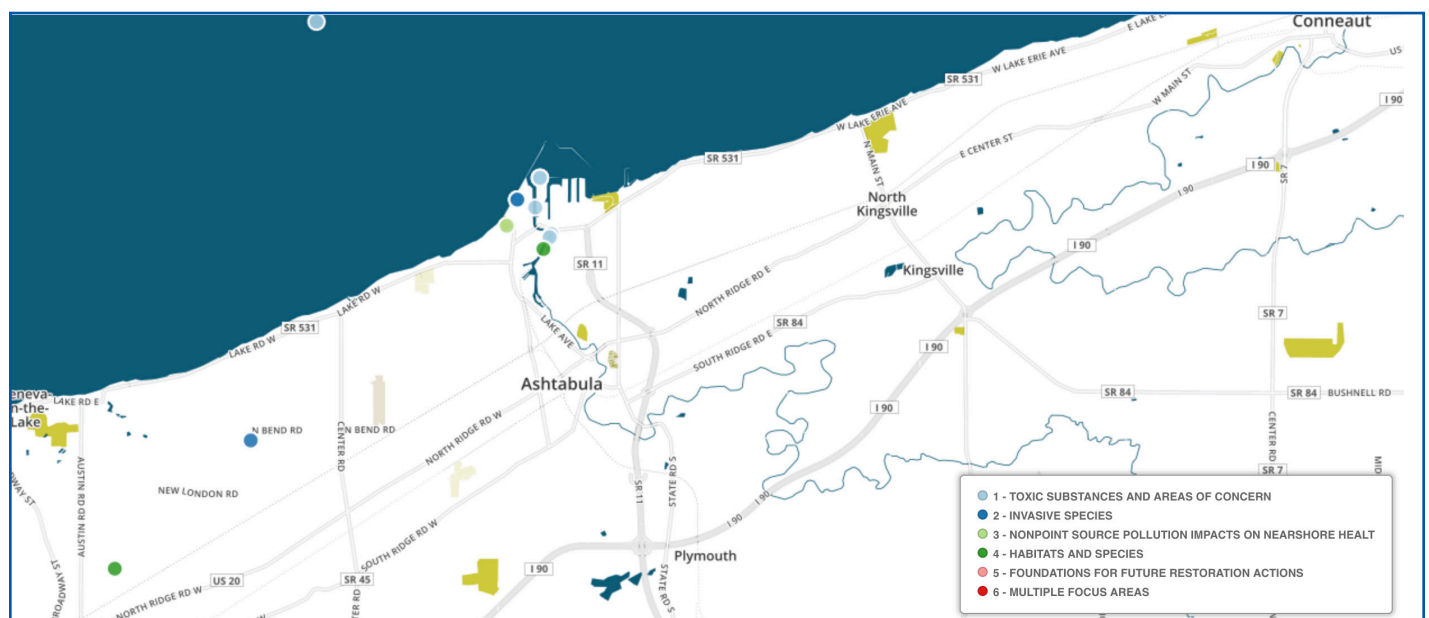
The addition of a steelhead fishery to the river adds a strong economic driver for the region; anglers place a premium on steelhead over other fish types. The dollar value for a steelhead excursion in Lake Erie tributaries is estimated at \$36 to \$46 per trip.

"After GLRI money was brought in to help dredge the Ashtabula River and create some fish habitats, you're seeing the fishing community come back to these areas," Bartolotta says. "They are allowed to catch and eat the fish coming out of the river. And so that's definitely improved the reputation for fishing in these areas as well."

From shipping to shopping

As the waterways and fisheries have grown cleaner, Ashtabula has also seen a recent swell of business development in downtown Ashtabula, next to the Ashtabula River. The Lift Bridge Community Association formed in 2008 to promote Ashtabula Harbor's development as a waterfront destination and has seen success in recent years changing the area's focus from shipping to shopping.

"For periods of time it was a very rough area," says



Great Lakes Restoration Initiative projects around Ashtabula, OH.

Lift Bridge Community Association chair Christine Seuffert. "It fell into disrepair, but it is very much on the upswing right now."

Inspired by grassroots business development in the harbor area, Ohio State University's City and Regional Planning department drew up a Harbor District Plan for the area in 2010, and the Lift Bridge Community Association drew up its own Revitalization Implementation Strategy in 2012.

Seuffert says several of the plan's goals have already been accomplished, including street reconstruction and the construction of a new parking lot.

The harbor business district has added 27 new businesses since 2010, including 10 new bars and

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restaurants and 11 new boutiques and retail stores. An eight-townhouse development is also underway in the district, with units expected to be priced at about \$160,000 apiece.

"It was pretty vacant until the past three or four years or so," Bartolotta says. "They've really done a lot of improvements and a lot of that came up with the cleanup that happened on the river."

"There are a lot of people that are really engaged and involved in breathing some new life into our towns that looked a little sleepy," adds Siegal.

A destination for food and festivals

Tourists have already begun to respond to cleaner waterways, expanded recreational opportunities, and new destination businesses in Ashtabula.

Independent studies show sustained growth in the tourism sector. Ashtabula County's tourism sales grew nearly 14 percent between 2011 and 2016. A 2016 report by Tourism Economics showed that tourism in Ashtabula County generated over \$50 million in tax revenue.

"Just living in the community and seeing how it's



Ashtabula Harbor today is the site of both shipping and tourism.

changed, there's definitely more people coming there than what you used to see," Bartolotta says.

Given the growing number of restaurants in the district, Siegel says she and her colleagues have begun to consider it "the destination foodie area."

And those food venues are supporting a growing population of younger residents as well as tourists. Between 2010 and 2016, Ashtabula's millennial population increased by 2 percent, from 17.5 percent in 2010 to 18.8 percent in 2016. Nearby Cleveland was ranked among the top ten metro areas in the nation experiencing growth of a college educated millennial population.

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Timonere says some of the county's "tremendous boost" in tourism is attributable to improved waterways and waterfront attractions.

The Wine and Walleye Festival and Beach Glass Festival both take place in the Ashtabula Harbor area

and attract 10,000-12,000 visitors apiece, according to Timonere.

"Then those people are coming back when it's not as crazy with festivals to enjoy the river and those restaurants down there," Timonere says.

The Beach Glass Festival celebrated its 10th anniversary this year with a particularly unique attraction: a 275-pound piece of beach glass found washed up on the beach in Ashtabula, which is currently under consideration for a Guinness World Record. Siegel says that's just one example of how Ashtabulans have begun to develop a sense of pride in their waterways as a major asset to their community.

"They really have embraced what's unique about us and started to capitalize on that," she says.

Information included in this case study was provided by the interviewees or obtained from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks & Watercraft; Tourism Economics, "The Economic Impact of Tourism in the Lake Region of Ohio" (2008); Kelch, et al, "The Value of Steelhead (Onchorhynchus mykiss) Angling in Lake Erie Tributaries," Journal of Great Lakes Research 32(3):424-43 (2006); the American Community Survey (2010, 2016); and a variety of other data sources.

This case study is part of a project entitled "Assessing the Investment: The Economic Impact of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative" (September 2018). A summary report and other documents for the project are available at <https://www.glc.org/work/blue-economy/GLRI-economic-impact>.

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