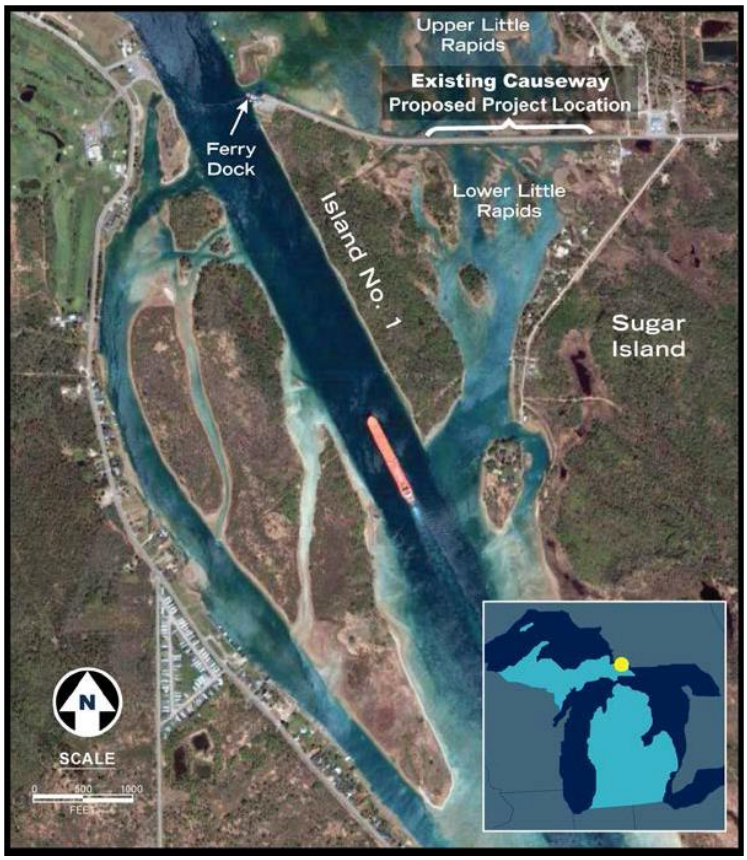
St. Marys AOC Habitat Restoration

Improving the Health of the St. Marys River

The Little Rapids Habitat Restoration Project restored healthy water flow to approximately 70 acres of aquatic habitat and re-established a portion of the historic rapids in the St. Marys River, a binational Area of Concern (AOC).



Project location along the Sugar Island causeway

Project Highlights

- Increased water flow to the rapids by replacing the existing causeway with a multi-span bridge approximately 619 feet in length
- Provided safe pedestrian access for fishing along the bridge
- Created critical habitat for game and non-game fish and other aquatic species
- Completed required restoration for the U.S. side of the St. Marys River as a crucial step toward its eventual removal from the list of Great Lakes AOCs or "toxic hotspots"
- Funded by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and U.S. EPA through a NOAA/Great Lakes Commission Regional Partnership
- The Chippewa County Road Commission and the Eastern U.P. Regional Planning & Development Commission implemented the project
- Lake Superior State University is monitoring the impact of restoration on the aquatic ecosystem

Environmental Benefits

Completed U.S. AOC restoration work

Fish spawning and aquatic habitat

Economic Benefits

Improved sport fishing

Tourism

Recreation

Community Benefits

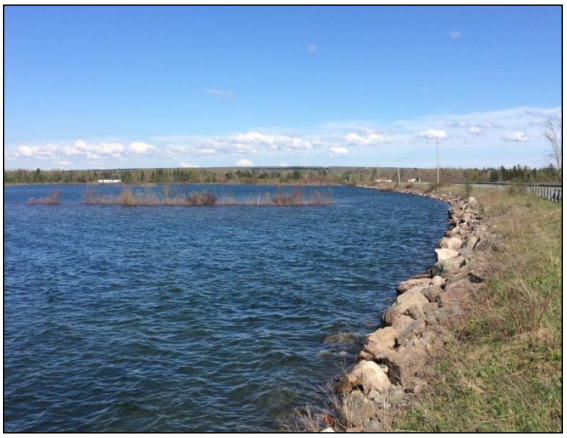
Improved fishing access

Safer roadway

Pedestrian walkway

Background of the Area of Concern

The St. Marys River is a globally unique river that forms the binational connecting channel between Lake Superior and Lake Huron, two of the largest freshwater systems in the world, with shared jurisdiction between the Canadian Province of Ontario and the State of Michigan. Both communities have a strong tourism-based economy that is centered on sport fishing and other recreational activities on the St. Marys River. Despite its popularity for recreation, the St. Marys River is designated as one of Michigan's 14 Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOCs) due to pollution and habitat alteration. The river is listed for 10 of the 14 Beneficial Use Impairments (BUIs) evaluated under the AOC program, including Degradation of Fish and Wildlife Populations and Loss of Fish and Wildlife Habitat. The Little Rapids Restoration Project addressed these BUIs and is the last anticipated habitat project necessary to remove the St. Marys River from the list of AOCs.



Impounded water along the Sugar Island causeway

History of the River

Rapids habitat on the St. Marys River has historically been impacted by various forms of development, including dredging, filling, diversion, and urban development. Construction of the causeway across the Little Rapids degraded the habitat and damaged the health of the native fish community. Shortly after AOC listing, restoring the Little Rapids area was identified as a priority for addressing fish and wildlife impairments in the St. Marys River and restoring a healthy aquatic ecosystem. This project is the culmination of over two decades of work by state and local partners to address a legacy of pollution in the St. Marys River, including removing contaminated sediments, stopping combined sewer overflows, reducing nonpoint source pollution, and controlling invasive species like sea lamprey.

> "The Road Commission is grateful for the opportunity to improve this roadway, create safer conditions for pedestrians and drivers, and support our community's long-standing efforts to restore the health of the St. Marys River."
>
> **Richard Timmer**
> Chippewa County Road Commission Board Chairman

Project Progress

Planning for this project was initiated over twenty years ago with input from local stakeholders guiding restoration efforts. Key stakeholders included the St. Marys River Binational Public Advisory Council, Soo Area Sportsmen's Club, Michigan DNR, Michigan DEQ, Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority, and Chippewa County Road Commission. In 2011, the Eastern U.P. Regional Planning & Development Commission received Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funding for preliminary modeling and engineering studies and an environmental assessment of the site. Additional site investigations were conducted in 2014 and 2015. Following approval of the final engineering and design construction was completed in 5.5 months. The new bridge restored natural water flow to 70 acres of habitat creating foraging, spawning, and nursery habitat for a wide variety of sport fish, such as whitefish and salmon, as well as other aquatic organisms that need fast flowing water over a rocky substrate to complete their life cycle. Bridge construction was completed in 2016 with ecological monitoring completed in 2018.

Funding and Partners

Funding was allocated for this project by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency through a Regional Partnership between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Great Lakes Commission (GLC). In 2013, GLC was awarded approximately $30 million through this Partnership to work with partners to implement habitat restoration in Areas of Concern across the Great Lakes Basin, approximately $9.4 million of this amount was dedicated to the Little Rapids project. The project was managed locally by the Chippewa County Road Commission, which owns and is responsible for maintaining the bridge, and the Eastern Upper Peninsula Regional Planning and Development Commission. Lake Superior State University conducted monitoring of the river before, during and after project construction.

For More Information Contact:

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LITTLE RAPIDS RESTORATION PROJECT
ST. MARYS RIVER | SAULT ST. MARIE, MI

Eastern Upper Peninsula Regional Planning & Development
Chippewa • Luce • Mackinac

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LAKE SUPERIOR STATE UNIVERSITY
Aquatic Research Laboratory