Reimagining the River

A first look at potential recreation & economic opportunities along a restored Mississippi River in the Twin Cities

NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Focus on the Mississippi National River & Recreation Area
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Explore
The Recreation Potential of a Restored River

For the first time in over a century, we have the opportunity to establish a new relationship with the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities. Commercial barge traffic ended at the Lower St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam and Lock and Dam No. 1 in 2015. Now the Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the structures, is studying options for both sites. The choice now is whether these locks and dams remain with some new use or are removed.*

Removing the structures is a real possibility. Doing so would restore a free-flowing river through the heart of the Twin Cities and reshape the river's ecology and how people interact with it recreationally, culturally and economically.

The eight-mile stretch of river from St. Anthony Falls to the upper confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers lies within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, the only national park unit dedicated to this mighty river. This stretch—known as the Gorge—is one of the most distinctive and culturally significant urban river reaches anywhere in the country.

That's why the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) commissioned this preliminary study to explore how a restored river might change outdoor recreation and influence community and economic benefits.

This report is part of a broader suite of studies led by agencies, nonprofits and academic partners that aim to inform decision-making about the river's future. NPCA's contribution focuses on recreation and economic opportunity, complementing engineering, sediment, feasibility, safety and cultural studies being led by others.

NPCA does not have a formal position supporting or opposing dam removal. *Much remains to be examined, including the safety and feasibility of removal. NPCA supports rigorous analysis, stakeholder engagement and community-centered processes to evaluate restoration opportunities within the river corridor.*

** The Army Corps of Engineers is conducting a separate study for the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock.*

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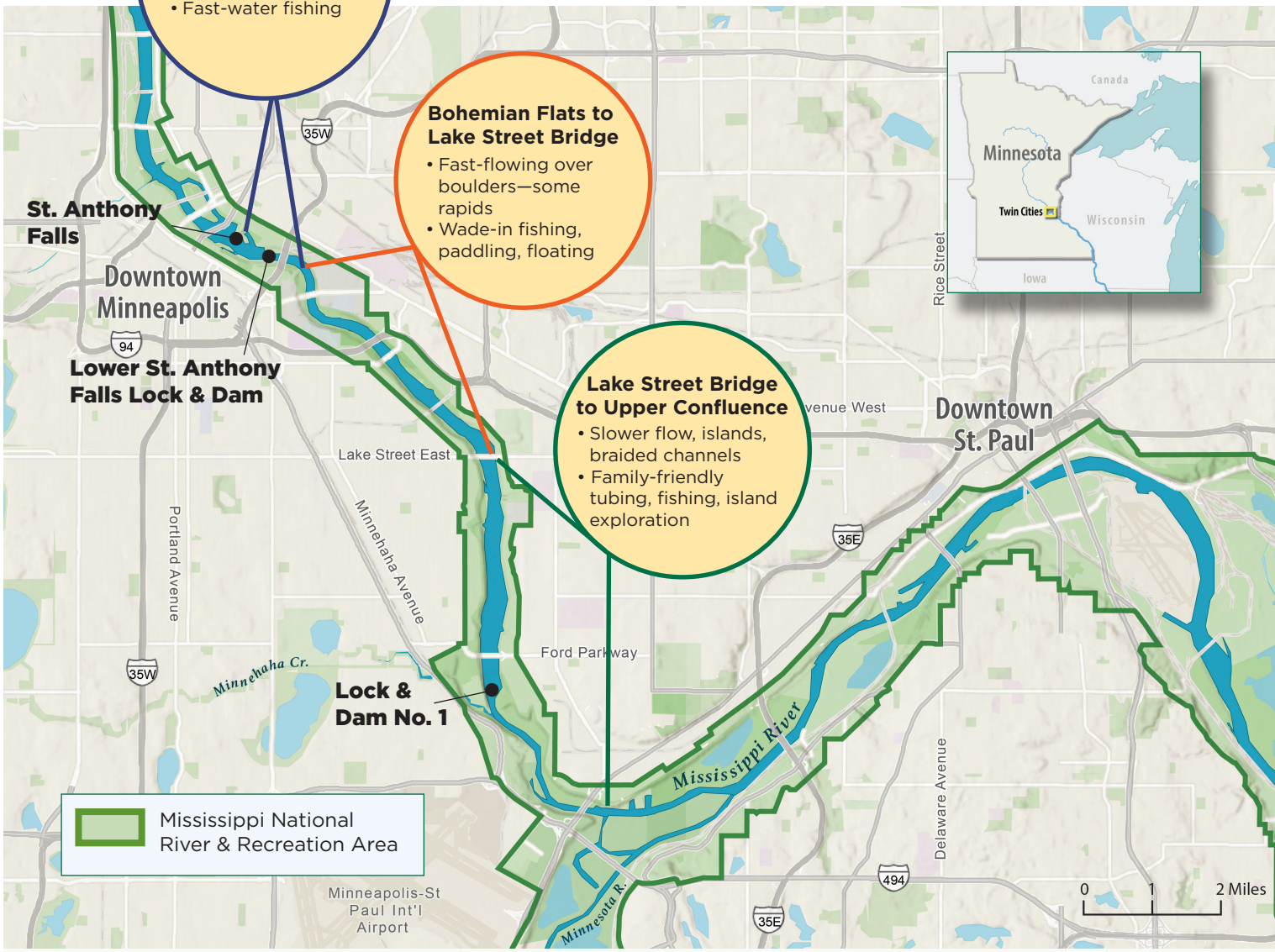
Restoring an eight-mile stretch of the Mississippi River could open a slate of new opportunities for outdoor recreation, cultural preservation, habitat restoration and fish and wildlife diversity in the heart of the Twin Cities.

Research, analysis and report production: The Harbinger Consultancy
Cover images: John Anfinson (photo), LVBrown Studio (illustrations)

Learn more at npca.org/missriver

Looking forward: removing the locks and dams could offer new recreation on the river

The exact character of the Gorge without locks and dams cannot be predicted. Still, historic descriptions of the natural river provide strong clues. Restoring the river could bring back distinct segments, offering a diversity of recreation opportunities unique in the Twin Cities. This map illustrates the recreation opportunities these segments might offer.



← *The 2020 drawdown of the pool above the Lower St. Anthony Falls dam offers a glimpse of what the river might look like if the dam were removed. Dam removal would lower water levels even further, exposing more riverside access, riffles and rapids. (Photo: John Anfinson)*

Number of Fish Species in the Gorge

Now (~30)

After dam removal (~90)

A Minnesota Department of Natural Resources study of 11 dam removals in Minnesota found that an average 66% of the species that had been absent upstream of the dams returned after their removal. Dam removal could increase the number of fish species from around 30 to 90.

Discover
Current & Future River Recreation

How might recreation on and along the river change?

The Gorge supports a wide range of recreational use on land and in the river. Today, most recreation in the river corridor happens on land—on park trails, overlooks and open spaces. A restored river would change the river's character, opening new recreational opportunities in and along the river itself and precluding some existing river recreation.

The stretch of the Mississippi River from St. Anthony Falls to Lock and Dam 1 is a defining feature of the Twin Cities, offering a unique blend of natural beauty, cultural heritage, history and urban access. This corridor includes some of the region's most popular parks and trails, and serves as a year-round destination for a wide range of outdoor activities.

Estimated Annual River Users
In the Gorge

River Boat Tours	Rowing	Guided & Rental Paddling
26,000 Passengers	**400+** Participants 25,000+ days on the river per year	**1,600** Customers & participants

Casual River Recreation
Largely uncounted

Casual recreation along the river—shore fishing, wading, dog walking, private paddling and shoreline visits—isn't systematically counted. Army Corps of Engineers observations in 2023 identified watercraft use and shore fishing as the most common river activities in the Gorge.

At Bohemian Flats, the corridor's busiest river access, a National Park Service counter logged about 20,000 visits over seven months in 2023, capturing paddlers, rowers, dog walkers, shore anglers and people playing in the water. Even so, river-focused recreation is a small fraction of the millions of annual visits to river corridor parks.

Walking, running and biking on trails are the most common activities reported by park and trail users. Birdwatching, nature observation and photography are popular, especially in the Gorge's natural areas. Winter activities include cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and hiking on bluff-top trails.

Few data are collected about river recreation. Our research suggests that the river attracts a small fraction of the numbers of land-based recreation users within the river corridor, but that there are significant on-water activities that include organized, guided and leisure paddling, commercial riverboat tours, competitive rowing and recreational fishing.

How Could Removing the Locks and Dams Change River Recreation?

Current recreational activities would be affected by removing the locks and dams and restoring a free-flowing river. The 2019 master plan for the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park, which encompasses parklands along most of the eight-mile stretch of the river, considers both "with dams" and "without dams" futures. It offers insights into how recreation might shift under a restored, free-flowing river scenario. This long-range plan anticipates that, if the dams were removed, the river would revert to a dynamic, shallow system with riffles, rapids, pools, mid-channel islands and backwaters.

The plan projects that this transformation would open up significant new opportunities for natural, water-based and nature-immersive recreation such as:

- **Expanded wading, hiking, fishing, birdwatching and picnicking** in newly exposed floodplains and on emerging islands;

- **More adventurous canoeing and kayaking** through moving water, whitewater-like segments and braided channels winding between more than a dozen islands, replacing today's flatwater paddling experience; and
- **Richer nature education opportunities**, tied to restored river habitats and the return of more diverse fish, bird and wildlife communities.

At the same time, the shift to a free-flowing system would displace or fundamentally alter some existing recreation uses:

- **Competitive rowing**—currently supported by the University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Rowing Club—would no longer be viable due to reduced channel depth and increased water velocity;
- **Riverboat cruises and deep-draft motorized boating**, now launching from Bohemian Flats and downstream marinas, would no longer be feasible in the shallower, rockier riverbed; and
- **Angling would shift from boat-based to wade-in fishing**.

The plan notes the importance of careful planning to manage transitions in user groups, facilities and ecological systems. It also underscores key uncertainties about future recreation opportunities that will require further study, including sediment quantity and quality in the current pools and potential infrastructure impacts (e.g., bridges, outfalls and boathouses).

Rivers Restored: Three Cities Reshaped By Urban Dam Removal

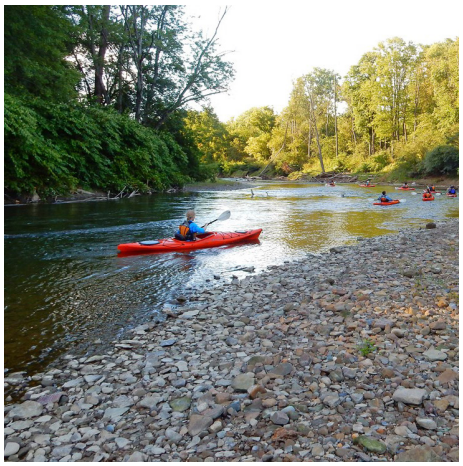
Urban dam removal isn't a new idea. Nearly 1,500 dams have come out across the United States in the last three decades, many of them in cities. Here are three places where dam removal opened new chapters for the river, for recreation and for the community.

Columbus, Georgia

Two downtown dams were removed as part of a 15-year restoration of the Chattahoochee River. Today the 2.5-mile RushSouth Whitewater Park hosts roughly 50,000 whitewater visitors a year. In 2025, the International Canoe Federation designated Columbus the world's first Center of Excellence for canoe freestyle. Columbus tourism officials describe the restored river as the city's main draw. (Photo: Whitewater Express)

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The North Avenue Dam came out in 1997 and the Estabrook Dam in 2018, opening eight miles of free-flowing river through the city's heart. The 878-acre Milwaukee River Greenway—12 connected parks linked by 28 miles of trails for hiking, biking and paddling—runs through the restored reach, joining downstream with Milwaukee's downtown RiverWalk. Fish species above the former North Avenue Dam climbed from eight to 30 within a decade. (Photo: City of Milwaukee)

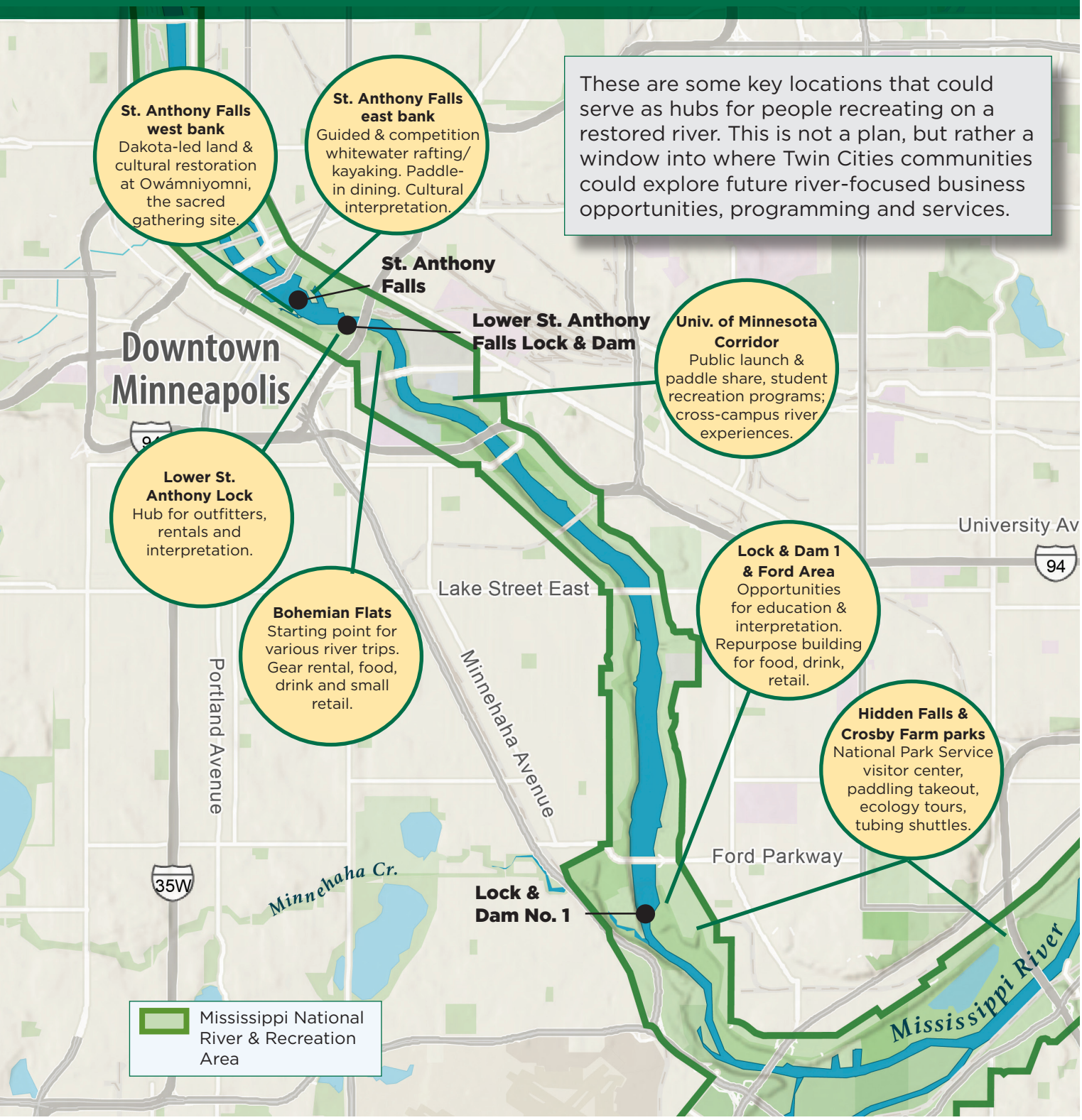


Cuyahoga River, Ohio

Five Cuyahoga River dam removals over 15 years opened paddling routes that hadn't existed for a century. The 2020 removal of Brecksville Dam—inside Cuyahoga Valley National Park, and once the river's most dangerous obstacle for paddlers—was the largest. The Cuyahoga is now an Ohio State Water Trail with 24 access points along 90 miles. Cleveland's planned $3.5 billion riverfront redevelopment includes 12 acres of new riverside parks. (Photo: NPS / D.J. Reiser)

Imagine
New Economic Opportunities

Key Potential Zones of Opportunity Along a Restored River
to Enhance Recreation and Business and Community Benefits



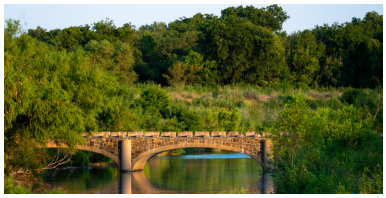
Learning from Other River Communities

To better understand what a restored Mississippi River through the Gorge could offer, we studied four peer communities that have invested in river recreation. These cities share similar characteristics with the Twin Cities—urban settings, river corridors with constrained access and efforts to enhance public access—offering valuable lessons about the potential for new recreation, business opportunities, and community or economic impacts here.

Richmond, Virginia — James River Park System
This 550-acre, seven-river-mile park system turns a downtown gorge with rapids, granite outcrops and forested islands into a connected network of riverfront recreation. Commercial outfitters and 23 water-trail access points support paddle sports, tubing and whitewater rafting. Some 1.9 million annual visits support over $33.6 million in visitor spending and 400 park-related jobs.

Golden, Colorado — Clear Creek Whitewater Park
Engineered whitewater and a connected downtown trail network make the park a regional recreation hub; 42% of visitors come from 50+ miles away. The whitewater park draws about 305,000 visits a year along a compact 800-foot course in downtown Golden. Park visitors spend $16.3 million a year across Golden, supporting 162 jobs and $406,000 in city tax revenue.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — Three Rivers Heritage Trail
The Three Rivers Heritage Trail (land) and Three Rivers Water Trail (kayak/canoe) share access points along the riverfront, letting visitors combine paddling, walking and biking. Trail extensions and gap-closing helped double land trail visitor numbers over a decade to 1.3 million in 2023. More than $22 million in annual local spending and some 160 jobs are tied to trail use.



San Antonio, Texas — Mission Reach
San Antonio restored eight miles of channelized river with canoe chutes, hike-and-bike trails connecting to downtown, new recreation and education amenities and links to four Spanish colonial missions designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2015. Trail use jumped 144% in the three years after restoration (2013–2016), reaching 560,000 annual users. River and trail use yields $11–34 million in visitor spending per year, supporting 130–240 jobs.

(Photos: Adobe Stock)

Lessons from these cities suggest that with thoughtful design, programming, and partnerships—including honoring cultural connections—a restored Gorge in the Twin Cities could become a regional recreation and economic asset on par with the nation's best. In these cities, in-river recreation like paddling, tubing and whitewater activities complement robust land-based trail use, expanding the range of users and benefits. Strategic investments in river access, cultural programming and events have generated sustained growth in both visitation and community and economic benefit.

What Could a Restored River Deliver?

Peer river community economic benefits from recreation

In peer cities, economic impacts of river recreation are substantial: visitor spending ranges from $11–$34 million per year, contributing to local tax coffers and supporting jobs in local businesses, recreation services and hospitality.

Comprehensive on-water visitor counts for the Gorge don't currently exist, so we have not attempted to project the impacts of dam removal, river restoration and new investments in recreation infrastructure to the Twin Cities. The experience of peer river cities offers an idea of the magnitude of annual river-recreation impact a restored Gorge could support.

Figures noted on this page are based on visitor and economic impact studies in the four peer river communities.

Look Ahead

Removing the locks and dams could reshape how people experience the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities.

If it can be safely done, removing Lower St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam and Lock and Dam No. 1 would make it possible to restore natural river dynamics—shallower water, exposed bedrock, seasonal rapids and new mid-channel islands. These changes could make the river more accessible to more people.

A restored river could be an outdoor recreation asset providing a distinctive experience in a metro area loaded with some 450 lakes and the recreation opportunities they afford. A free-flowing stretch of river could offer a rare, linear, immersive and seasonally dynamic environment for water-based activities, with three stretches of the river providing different experiences, including whitewater kayaking, tubing, casual paddling, wade-in fishing, small boat access, riverside exploration and bird watching.

Removing this infrastructure could restore fish passage and reestablish a broader diversity of fish species. Island and shoreline restoration could support birds, turtles and pollinators. Better water quality and sediment flow could support long-term river health.

Restoration could also offer an opportunity to reconnect with sacred Dakota places along the river throughout the Gorge, from Owámniyomni (St. Anthony Falls) to Bdote (the confluence area of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers).

Beyond the ecological, recreational and cultural benefits of river restoration, investing in dam removal today could help the region realize long-term economic returns. Studies of other river communities suggest the Twin Cities could realize about $1.5 billion in today's dollars over the next 50 years—the same time period the Army Corps of Engineers will use for its cost-benefit analysis of removing or retaining the locks and dams. Now is the time to consider which investments we want to make so that our Mississippi River and national park in the Twin Cities benefit future generations.

This rendering envisions what the Mississippi River corridor could look like if Lock and Dam 1 were removed and the river restored.

Learn more about the recreation and economic benefits study: the technical report can be downloaded at npca.org/missriver.

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