



In Wisconsin's Green Bay, Walleye Swim Healthy Again

A 30-year effort to clean up the Lower Fox River by a coalition of local officials, business owners, educators, environmentalists, and outdoor enthusiasts is bearing fruit.

[JENNY WISNIEWSKI](#)

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As spring limped slowly into Green Bay, Wisconsin, Bruce Deadman pulled two walleye from Lake Michigan's Green Bay. Pulling off such a feat was unheard of a decade ago, says Deadman. The walleye were simply not around, and even if fishermen were lucky enough to snag one, they would have been restricted from eating it due to high levels of toxic polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs in the fish.



With the cleanup nearly complete, Green Bay now has one best walleye fisheries in the world. Photo by [Jim Bauer](#).

But all that has changed. By 2019, PCB levels in Green Bay walleye had dropped 68 percent, and on this day in early May, as the thermometer hovers just above freezing, Deadman can catch fish. And he isn't alone. Dozens of boat trailers line the parking lot of the boat landing. The fishermen are all trolling for walleye.

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Creating the conditions for this to happen has been a 30-year-plus effort involving the ongoing cooperation of a multitude of groups: the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Menominee and Oneida tribes among them. But at the center of this effort is the Clean Bay Backers — with its diverse roster of local government officials, business owners, educators, nonprofit leaders, and outdoor enthusiasts, including Deadman.

The Clean Bay Backers, not to be confused with the famous football team, the Green Bay Packers, have been integral to the deep cleaning that has been going on since 1987. That was the year that Green Bay and the Fox River was designated one of 43 Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOC) by the International Joint Commission of Canada and the United States.

Shaped like the backside of a left hand, Wisconsin sits west of Lake Michigan. The lake's Green Bay is encompassed by the hand's index finger and thumb. About 40 miles southwest of the Bay lies Lake Winnebago, the two connected by the Lower Fox River. Approximately 270,000 people live in communities along the Lower Fox.



Fox River in downtown Green Bay. Paper production is a large economic driver in Wisconsin, and the Fox River Valley is ground zero for the industry. From the 1950s to 1979, when the EPA finally banned its use, the paper mills here had released some 125 tons of carcinogenic PCBs into the river. Photo by [Ken Lund](#).

While Wisconsin may be better known for its production of cheese, the state also boasts the highest concentration of pulp and paper mills in the world, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency. Paper production is a large economic driver in the state, and the Fox River Valley is ground zero for the industry. In the 1950s, many

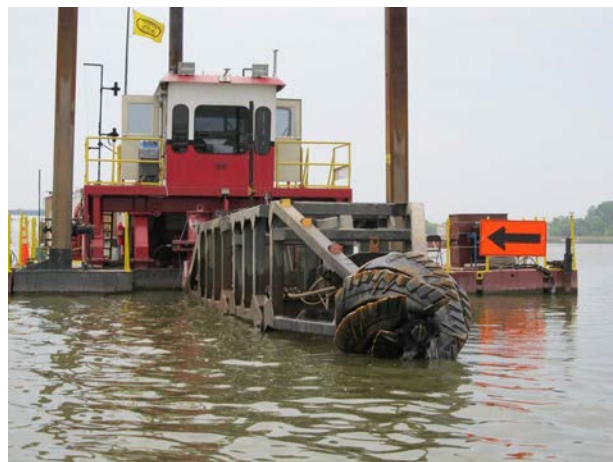
but environmental damage had already been done. In just a few decades, the mills had released 125 tons of carcinogenic PCBs into the Lower Fox River, according to the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute.

It was during this period that Deadman's family moved to the Green Bay area. His parents bought a property on the bay, built a cottage, and began their young lives. Deadman grew up playing on the water, boating, water skiing, fishing. Later, he developed a love of duck hunting. When his mother grew older, Deadman replaced the cottage with a home where she lived until her passing. Now Deadman continues to live on the bayfront property. He attributes his activism as a Clean Bay Backer to this personal attachment to the water and land.

Over time, Deadman witnessed the deterioration of the waterways he had played in as a boy. According to the University of Wisconsin's Sea Grant Institute, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, much of the original Lower Fox River contaminants had already entered Green Bay. On average each year, 600 additional pounds was moving from the river to the bay.

"We have increased awareness among municipalities and citizens in general as to the value of the river and the bay as a natural resource, as a recreational resource, as an economic driver for the community, and realize the importance of maintaining and improving not just the water quality but the quality of habitat," Deadman says.

The Clean Bay Backers has evolved its strategy over the years. In the 1990s, the group focused on youth education. Then, in 2009, they redirected their education effort towards decision makers. They began an annual tour called "Bringing Back the Bay," hosting public officials and local leaders on explorations of storage ponds, habitat restoration sites, and farms conducting environmental initiatives. Their goal is to highlight the work that has been accomplished in the past as a way of ensuring that it will continue in the future. When legislators in Madison, Wisconsin and Washington, DC are considering important environmental policies that impact the Fox River Valley, Deadman says, the Clean Bay Backers want the decision makers to already have a visual of what has been accomplished and context for what is still needed.



The massive cleanup project involves dredging 13 miles of the Lower Fox River, in combination with some capping and sand covering. Photo courtesy of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.



Bruce Deadman catches walleye. An outdoors enthusiast, Deadman attributes his activism as a Clean Bay Backer to his personal attachment to the Green Bay. Photo provided by Deadman.

For Clean Bay Backers, there's a lot at stake. "An ecological gem" is how Julia Nordyk describes the Lower Fox River and Green Bay. Nordyk is the water quality and coastal communities specialist for the Sea Grant Institute and a member of the Clean Bay Backers. She points out the importance of the subaquatic habitats for fish and the coastal wetlands as migratory stopovers for birds.

Brian Glenzinski, regional biologist with Ducks Unlimited, cites the large number of

Scientists are still collecting data linking recent restoration projects with increased bird populations. But they are already noticing conservation successes. Perhaps the biggest one has been the return of the piping plover. This small, sand-colored bird with a white belly and orange legs holds a spot on the endangered species list. Following the restoration of a group of barrier islands called the Cat Island Chain, piping plovers have returned, nesting in the lower Green Bay for the first time in 75 years, according to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

In 2015, the “Bringing Back the Bay” tour included a stop at the Cat Island Chain. While touting the restoration work, group leaders also spoke of the need to improve and maintain water quality in order to protect all species in the area, present and future.

The PCB cleanup is a big step forward in this effort. The project officially began in 2009, and the ensuing 11-year journey would prove an arduous one.

In 2010, the United States and Wisconsin Departments of Justice filed a lawsuit against several paper companies and municipalities that produced, recycled, or discharged PCBs into the Lower Fox River. The suit required that defendants pay not only for the cleanup, but also for habitat restoration and future oversight. Nine years later, in March 2019, a federal judge approved a final settlement in the lawsuit. The upshot? The polluters are picking up the tab for the \$1.2 billion project.

Mind-bendingly colossal in scope, the project involves dredging 13 miles of the Lower Fox River, in combination with some capping and sand covering. The dredging process begins with a hydraulic dredging float. Driven by a human being, it holds the equipment to suck the PCB-laden sand from the river bottom, suctioning it through a miles-long hose to the 220,000-square foot PCB sediment processing facility built for the project. As an added benefit, phosphorus and metals, including mercury, are also removed.

Once at the processing facility, sand (which PCBs don't stick to) is separated from the water and sediment with a high-speed cyclone system. The sand, now clean, can then be reused for projects like state highway construction. Next, an air compression system squeezes out the water from the sediment. The water is then treated and returned in pristine condition to the river while the sediment is pressed into cakes and trucked to secure landfills. Since 2009, more than 150,000 truckloads of treated sediment have been transported to a landfill, enough to fill Green Bay's Lambeau Field seven times over. The EPA calls it the largest PCB cleanup project in the world.

While the PCB dredging project is just one of many projects for which the Clean Bay Backers advocate, it's a big one, Nordyk says. “And it's almost done, so this is a really exciting time because it's been decades and decades,” she adds.

“The project serves as a model for other large river cleanup projects around the country for technical solutions, legal precedents, and successful collaboration between corporations and government,” says Beth Olson, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources's project manager for the PCB cleanup. “It is a cornerstone for restoring the health of the Lower Fox River and Green Bay ecosystem.”

Just like a Wisconsin spring that finally arrives, a clean Fox River has been worth the wait. The project concluded in July 2020, and the Clean Bay Backers will celebrate with a virtual “Bringing Back the Bay” event scheduled for September 29. The group will continue to work on remaining challenges in the bay, from algae blooms to invasive species. But for now, they will proudly showcase the cleanup.

“It has shown that there is more to Green Bay than a football team which is very near and dear to us,” says Deadman. “There is a lot more going on here than just that.”

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