

Ten Communities: Profiles in Environmental Progress

Across America, countless communities have environmental success stories to tell. Some have cleaned their skies of soot and smog, or turned contaminated industrial sites into thriving economic centers. Others have rallied to save precious open space, or revive rivers long forsaken. Here are the stories of 10 communities around the country working to better the environment:



Los Angeles, California



The 1990s have been good to the environment of Los Angeles.

For one thing, the city's smoggy skies are clearing. Over the last decade, severe emergency smog alerts have been totally eliminated. And in 1999, peak ozone concentrations dropped low enough that L.A. was able to relinquish its title as the smog capital of America.

In a move to protect water quality and curb stormwater runoff — which carries huge loads of toxins and bacteria into coastal waters — the city worked with the Clinton-Gore Administration regional water authorities to set new design standards for the construction and renovation of buildings. The new standards aim to capture as much as 80 percent of storm precipitation and significantly reduce the flow of polluted runoff into coastal waters.

Until recently, the groundwater of the San Fernando Valley — an important source of drinking water for the L.A. metropolitan area — was infected by industrial pollutants. A clean-up is now underway. Treatment of two groundwater basins was completed in 1999, and similar initiatives have begun in the nearby San Gabriel Valley.

Los Angeles is also making major progress in cleaning up and reclaiming a host of Superfund and brownfield sites. In 1998, the Administration designated Los Angeles as only one of 16 Brownfields Showcase Communities nationwide. Brownfields reclamation projects are now underway throughout the region. And confidence is growing that the old industrial core of the city will once again serve as productive land.

Denver, Colorado



Nothing better testifies to Denver's remarkable environmental progress than the restoration of the Clear Creek and South Platte River watersheds.

The 400-square-mile Clear Creek watershed extends from the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains east to Denver. Today, it is popular for kayaking, rafting, fishing and wildlife watching. The creek also serves as a drinking water source for more than a quarter million people in greater Denver.

It wasn't always so. In the 1980s, the creek was a liquid garbage bin. Years of intensive hard-rock mining had left the watershed littered with mine wastes, acid water, and contaminants such as zinc and cadmium. The impact on fish and other aquatic life was severe, the impact on drinking water disastrous.

Under priorities set by the Clinton-Gore administration, Superfund dollars were provided to intensify cleanup activities. Community-based efforts shifted into high gear. A major milestone was reached in 1998 with the construction of a water treatment plant that prevents 1,500 pounds of heavy metals from entering the creek each day. The drinking water from Clear Creek is now clean and safe. And aquatic life is on the rebound.

The story at South Platte River, which runs through Denver from headwaters high in the Rockies, is similar. Once regularly described as a "dumping ground," the South Platte is today a treasure. A broad coalition of public and private groups succeeded in restoring more than two miles of the river's channel, improving the river's flow as well as its wildlife habitats, and creating 14 acres of new park land along the river's banks.

Denver also has achieved impressive improvements in air quality. In 1976, Denver violated EPA's health-based carbon monoxide standard 367 times. In 1996 and every year since, the number of violations has been zero.

Tampa Bay, Florida



During the 1960s and '70s, Tampa Bay confronted a devastating decline in water quality. Wastewater and industrial plants were discharging large amounts of harmful pollutants and nitrogen into the Bay. Bottom sediment was a lifeless muck, and organisms essential to a healthy ecosystem were dying.

Today, thousands of acres of sea grass on the Bay floor, vital to its overall health, have been recovered. Fifteen hundred acres of marsh and mangrove habitats have been restored, including 250 acres of tidal marshes that are critically important for fish. And a new tracking system, made possible by grants from the Clinton-Gore Administration and contributions from private industry, is working to substantially reduce risks from oil or hazardous chemical spills from ship groundings and collisions. In short, the Bay is on its way back.

Tampa's air also is improving. Harmful levels of lead, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide have been significantly reduced. Recently, the Administration reached an unprecedented enforcement agreement with Tampa Electric Company that will result in as much as a billion dollars in air-quality improvements.

As the result of the Administration's Brownfields initiative and expanding partnerships with local and state agencies, the Clearwater area, once a thriving Tampa-vicinity business sector, is on its way to renewal. The area had suffered from business disinvestment and environmental decline. Recently, a computer software company relocated to the area, bringing with it hundreds of new jobs. And, on a site once contaminated by petroleum and chemicals, the foundation for a new urban business campus is rising.

Tampa Bay and Clearwater are fast becoming cleaner, healthier, and more inviting to companies that can help energize their economies.

Boston, Massachusetts



In 1988, Boston Harbor was justifiably called "the dirtiest harbor in America." Millions of gallons of raw sewage poured into it daily. Wildlife had largely vanished. Beaches often were closed to swimming.

Today, Boston Harbor has been restored to a clean, vital part of the city. A new state-of-the-art treatment plant on Deer Island is reducing sewage and toxic pollution into the harbor. Pollutants found in fish have dropped as much as 90 percent. Seals and porpoises can be seen from downtown wharfs. Beaches have reopened. Most importantly, the city has re-embraced the Harbor — with concerts on the waterfront, harbor swims, sightseeing cruises and increased property values along the coast.

Even more dramatic progress is evident in the Charles River. One of the most heavily used urban rivers in the world, the Charles was so polluted in the 1980s that contact with the water was often cause for a trip to the emergency room for infectious disease treatment.

In 1995, the Clinton-Gore Administration set the ambitious goal of restoring the river so it would be safe for swimming and fishing by Earth Day 2005. The strategy focused on creating a broad coalition of state and local governments, non-profit organizations, businesses, and educational institutions. All projections are that the 2005 Earth Day goal will be met.

In Roxbury and other disadvantaged neighborhoods like Dorchester and East Boston, the Administration is taking steps to protect children from environmental threats. The Lead-Safe Yards project, for instance, tests soil for lead contamination. Programs that educate the public and enable citizens to play a role in environmental policy have helped neighborhoods find solutions to problems like lead poisoning and asthma epidemics. Boston's environment today is improved and heading in the right direction.

New Jersey Coastal Communities



New Jersey's coastal waters are a valuable resource—not just for fun but for the thousands of jobs they sustain in thriving tourism and fishing industries. Last year, tourists spent an estimated \$3.7 billion in New Jersey's coastal communities.

However, these coastal waters are fragile, as New Jersey communities have learned the hard way. During the summer of 1988, there were 855 ocean and bay beach closings in New Jersey due to floating debris and unhealthy levels of bacteria. Since that time, the Clinton-Gore Administration, working in concert with the state of New Jersey, has taken aggressive action. The resulting improvements have been enormous — and enormously beneficial to New Jersey's economy.

New Jersey's coastal communities have launched numerous local initiatives to improve wastewater treatment plants and to address the problem of overflows from sewers. New Jersey was the site for Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Streets/Clean Beaches Campaign, which called public attention to the link between litter on the streets and debris on beaches.

EPA continues to monitor the New Jersey coastline during the summer months, gathering water quality information and surveying the waters for debris and red tides. This monitoring information enables the state to provide real-time public health information about the state's beaches and to take appropriate action to clean up beach waters when needed.

With these programs, New Jersey beaches have come a long way. In 1998, there were no beach closings along the Jersey shore due to floating debris.

Tulsa, Oklahoma



After facing major air pollution challenges, Tulsa has emerged as a national leader in the battle for clean air. In 1995, Tulsa became the first city to sign Flexible Attainment Region agreement with the federal

government. Under that agreement, Tulsa committed to voluntary, up-front air-pollution reductions and to additional control measures beyond those strictly required. Since the signing, Tulsa-area emissions have never exceeded the existing smog standard.

In December 1999, the Clinton-Gore Administration awarded Tulsa a \$500,000 Environment Monitoring grant to fund the city's air and water quality information system. This system will serve the public's right to know by providing important, timely environmental information to the citizens of the Tulsa metropolitan area.

Tulsa's Brownfields program has enjoyed stunning success in revitalizing the Oklahoma Steel Castings and Flint Steel site. This once-blighted site will, upon restoration, serve as home to a new industrial park. Success is the direct result of collaboration — a strong working partnership among the industrial authority, the site's current owner, and the Tulsa community.

Tulsa has also taken control of one of the greatest sources of water pollution — storm water runoff. Tulsa is proud to be among the first cities in the Southwest to receive a municipal storm water permit that will ensure greater control of water pollution and cleaner water for all citizens.

Cleveland, Ohio



Like other communities in the Midwest "rust belt," Cleveland is undergoing dramatic demographic and economic changes. These challenges have also proven a major opportunity to improve its environment.

Perhaps the best known example is the revival of the Cuyahoga River, which flows through the heart of Cleveland and into Lake Erie. In June 1969, the Cuyahoga caught fire when a stray spark ignited oil and debris that had

accumulated on its surface. The blaze was a pivotal event leading to the rise of the environmental movement and passage of the Clean Water Act. Since 1972, millions have been invested to upgrade and expand sewage treatment facilities, and hundreds of permits limiting pollution to the river have been issued. These measures have resulted in a dramatic decrease in the levels of pollutants found in the Cuyahoga.

The city also has worked to revitalize the heart of Cleveland's downtown. In the early 1970s, downtown Cleveland was a virtual ghost town at night. The area next to the riverfront at Lake Erie, known as the "Flats," was a dilapidated warehouse district. Today, this area is one of the top tourist draws in Ohio, attracting seven million visitors each year. The harbor is no longer choked with debris and waste. Instead, it is bustling with pleasure boats docked alongside restaurants and shops. In addition, the shore of Lake Erie now boasts a magnificent new science museum and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Providence, Rhode Island



Rhode Island is a state defined and dominated by water. The Narragansett Bay forms the backbone and center of the state. Thus, for the city of Providence, one of the greatest and most promising environmental successes is the rebirth of the Bay and other local waters.

One measure of the progress made in cleaning waterways and reconnecting Providence to the beauty of its heritage is the condition of the Providence River. In the 1970s, this river flowing through downtown Providence was riddled with pollution. The process of cleaning up the river spurred a new focus on redevelopment. Today, the open riverfront is the city's prime attraction, drawing visitors from around the state and throughout New England.

Working together, the Clinton-Gore Administration and its public and private partners have made dramatic progress on other environmental challenges confronting the city. But lead poisoning remains a major concern. A city-wide task force on lead poisoning prevention is now tackling this problem. The Administration has helped Providence garner the resources necessary to perform lead abatement at day-care centers throughout Rhode Island. In addition, the Administration has provided a \$4 million grant to perform lead remediation in low-income housing.

Work is also moving forward to address dioxin contamination in the Woonasquatucket River, upstream in the city of North Providence. Quick action by EPA after the dioxin's discovery last year resulted in immediate isolation of the most contaminated sediments. The contaminated area was promptly declared a federal Superfund site, and cleanup has begun.

Chattanooga, Tennessee



From the 1930s to the 1960s, Chattanooga was a thriving industrial city, fueled by foundries, tanneries, brick kilns, and textile mills. The city was known as the “Dynamo of Dixie.” This prosperity, however, came with a price: smokestack emissions turned the atmosphere a hazy orange, often forcing people to drive with their headlights on even on “sunny” days. By the late 1970s, as Chattanooga’s industrial base collapsed, remnants of slag heaps and abandoned coke furnaces could be found along the banks of the Tennessee River.

Chattanooga today has turned things around. Air quality has shown dramatic improvement. Old, abandoned toxic-waste sites are also being cleaned up and returned to productive use.

In the early 1990s, residents of a low-income area in south Chattanooga petitioned the Administration to evaluate numerous abandoned hazardous-waste areas in their neighborhood. The Administration funded a health study, provided several environmental assistance grants, and aided in the creation of a Superfund Jobs Training program. Today, the site is on its way to full restoration.

In 1999, the Administration awarded Chattanooga a \$200,000 Brownfields grant to help revitalize the 2.7-square-mile Alton Park area, a former manufacturing hub. Now, as the clean-up nears completion, there is new hope for economic revival. The city is working with community groups and state agencies to again make the area a source of local pride and economic opportunity.

Salt Lake City, Utah



The Clinton-Gore Administration’s Brownfields initiative— which helps return idle, contaminated lands to productive use—is helping make life in and around Salt Lake City cleaner, safer, and more pleasant.

A prime example: The rescue of the 650-acre Gateway District from the ravages of time and contamination. The District, a former industrial center bordering the central business district, had become little more than a graveyard for industrial sites. Salt Lake City created a powerful coalition that tackled the challenge of cleaning up, redeveloping, and revitalizing the area.

Other parts of Utah also are experiencing remarkable successes in cleaning up the environment. In 1998, clean-up work began on the largest open-pit mine in the United States. This project in Copperton, Utah, has already led to the removal of more than 25 million tons of mining wastes.

The restoration of the Jordan River corridor along the Wasatch Front is now nearing completion. Activities included stream and wetland restoration, cleanups along the river corridor, drinking water and groundwater protection activities, and trail construction. Today, the Jordan River stands as a model for urban river restoration.

At the center of Utah’s preservation and restoration activities is Envision Utah — a public/private partnership aiming to create a “preferred-growth” scenario that protects Utah’s environment, economy, and quality of life for future generations. The partnership is generating important data on demographic, economic, and environmental conditions along the Wasatch Front. To date, 70 public meetings have been held and over 17,000 families have responded to region-wide surveys. This engagement of Utah’s citizens was a critical factor in passage of the state’s Quality Growth Act of 1999.