



Free Flowing

For 30 years, activists talked about removing the Brecksville Dam in Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Now it's gone.

On the afternoon of May 21, the arm of an excavator slowly reached down from the east bank of the Cuyahoga River in Cuyahoga Valley National Park and plunged into the water. A handful of spectators who had imagined this day for years — in some cases, decades — stood above the river, social distancing, and started shouting and cheering.

Underwater, a jackhammer began driving into the concrete. And with that, the Cuyahoga was one step closer to flowing as it did 200 years ago, before this section of the river was dammed.

“It was a historic moment,” said Pamela Barnes, the park’s public information officer. “Someone joked that we should have a bottle of champagne.”

As it turned out, boring a hole into the Brecksville Dam was not simple. After three hours, bystanders began trickling away, and several days passed before water finally began pouring through. “That dam was not going down without a fight,” Barnes said.

Completed in 1952 to provide water to the American Steel and Wire Company, the Brecksville Dam stood 8 feet tall and stretched 163 feet across the Cuyahoga, a 100-mile U-shaped river in northeast Ohio that flows into Lake Erie. Also known as the Canal Diversion Dam, the structure created a pool that submerged a previously constructed wooden dam dating to 1827; both were demolished by the end of June.

The razing is part of a growing



THE RAZING OF the Brecksville Dam, in progress in this photo, was complete by the end of June.

trend: Communities around the country are working with nonprofit organizations and state and federal agencies to take down outdated and unsafe dams. Restoring rivers’ natural flow can significantly benefit water quality, wildlife habitat and ecosystem health. Dam removal also improves public safety and is particularly beneficial for recreational boaters. According to American Rivers, an advocacy group that tracks U.S. dam removals, nearly 1,500 dams have been removed in the past three decades. In 2019 alone, a record 26 states removed 90 dams, including 20 in Southern California’s Cleveland National Forest and a century-old dam in Lexington, Virginia, where a teenager drowned in 2006.

“We’ve talked about removing the Brecksville Dam for more than 30 years,” said Bill Zawiski, water quality supervisor with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. While other parts of the river met the agency’s water quality standards in recent years, the water in the dam pools did not. (The pools were like a “dead spot” for fish, with increased sedimentation and decreased oxygen,

Barnes explained.) The hope is that with the structures removed, the river will quickly revert to its pre-dam days in terms of temperature fluctuation and flow. The river bottom also should see a transformation, with silt levels dropping and rocks reappearing. Scientists expect that the river’s insect and fish habitats will be completely restored over the next couple of years.

Zawiski said the Brecksville Dam removal, funded jointly through the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and local and state agencies, was an important step toward the ultimate goal of delisting the river from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Great Lakes Areas of Concern. That list now includes 27 environmentally degraded areas that are the focus of major cleanup and restoration efforts.

The Cuyahoga was once a poster child for industrial pollution. In places, the river was so filled with trash and toxins that it could not support animal life, and it caught fire at least 13 times because it was coated with flammable pollutants. Public concern about the

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river brought attention to pollution in other U.S. waters and helped pave the way for the Clean Water Act, the creation of the EPA and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, a commitment between the U.S. and Canada to restore and protect Great Lakes waters. Last year, locals marked the 50th anniversary of the last fire with a series of celebratory events.

Today, the Cuyahoga supports a robust and diverse fish population and great blue heron nesting colonies and is home to river otters, beavers and bald eagles. Kayak tours, regattas, riverside restaurants and new residential developments (all outside the park) attest to the river's ongoing recovery. The healthier watershed has benefited many of the 20 communities along the river, but not equally: Notably, some of the Cleveland and Akron neighborhoods with a higher percentage of minority residents haven't seen the same quality-of-life improvements, said Lisa Petit, the park's deputy superintendent. These inconsistencies have caught the attention of park staff, who are hoping to expand community outreach and improve river access going forward.

The next cleanup steps include removing another, larger dam on a section of the river upstream from the park and restoring riparian habitat within the park. "It's like the river is in detention," Zawiski said. "When it's off the list, it'll be out of detention and can go back to school. That's when the river will return to a functional state."

The removal of the dam comes at a time of transition at the park. For decades, staff paid little attention to the river, said Andrea Irland, an outdoor recreation planner with the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service. "It ran through the middle of the park, and it's what the park was named for, but staff didn't encourage recreation in any way, shape or form," she said.

Petit said ignoring the river meant staff didn't have to worry about hazards

or liabilities. "It was a fear factor," she said. "It seemed too big, too much to deal with. So we just didn't."

That is now changing. In 2016, the park, which manages 26 miles of the Cuyahoga between Akron and Cleveland, developed a strategic action plan and made focusing on the Cuyahoga a priority. Engaging with paddlers is a central part of that. The number of recreational boaters has exploded in recent years, and last October, the river was designated a state of Ohio water trail, with 24 public access points along nearly 90 miles of the river and whitewater that's suitable for beginners and experts alike. The park now supports a team of river patrol volunteers who educate the public on the inherent dangers of kayaking on a river that can more than double in size — and see dangerous levels of bacteria from combined sewage overflows — after a big rainstorm.

The kayakers who have been paddling the Cuyahoga for years are thrilled about the long-awaited dam

removal. The days of awkwardly portaging around the dam are gone, as is the perilous hydraulic churn under the dam, which would pin down giant logs and spin them around for weeks. (Occasionally, daredevil paddlers would ask park staff if they could kayak over the dam; the answer, emphatically, was "no.")

Ryan Ainger, a park ranger and paddling instructor who grew up 2 miles from the dam, was giddy with excitement in the days before its removal began. "This is a project I've been following since high school," he said. "I can't even talk about it without smiling." He envisions long paddles — traveling the 37 miles between the southernmost part of the park and Cleveland, for instance. "It will be a safer paddle and will connect ecosystems that haven't been connected," he said. "The Cuyahoga will start going back to a free-flowing river, which is what it should be."

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KAYAKERS WHO HAVE been paddling the Cuyahoga for years are thrilled about the dam removal, which will allow them to take long, uninterrupted trips down the river that weren't possible before.

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