

# Three Rivers *Water Trail*

SW  
PA!



photo-courtesy of Friends of the Riverfront





*A view of downtown Pittsburgh's skyline from a kayak.*

*by Bob Frye*

Depending on which one of the rivers you choose to forge in your kayak or canoe, the Three Rivers Water Trail surrounding Pittsburgh offers opportunities to see American historical sites, vast natural beauty and outstanding fishing waters. The trail is comprised of portions of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio, plus a bit of the Youghiogheny rivers, covering a combined 75 miles. The trail has been around since the early 1990s and was awarded "National Recreation Trail" status by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 2010 for being "locally or regionally significant, open to the public for at least 10 years and practicing proper management and maintenance." Even so, it's still a bit of an unknown, even among some river users.

"We're definitely seeing more and more people understanding that the water trail is a wonderful amenity," said Katie Craig, Trail Development Coordinator for Pittsburgh's Friends of the Riverfront, the nonprofit organization that sponsors the water trail. "But, overall, I would say there is probably a pretty decent number of people who don't know it exists."

"That's something that we're really working on, increasing awareness," said Craig.

"The rivers draw crowds," said Courtney Mahronich Vita, Director of Trail Development and Government Relations for the Friends of the Riverfront. Allegheny County is a "water" county, with 73 municipalities located along one river or another, and there are 31 paddler-friendly launches among them where people can get on the water. Look for the red paddle-shaped signs.

But, that's taken some time to develop, given Pittsburgh's past relationship with its waterways. It was, often and for long periods of time, abusive, with pollution one constant.

"The one thing with Pittsburgh, historically, is that since it's been so industrial and so built up along our rivers, people used to think that, yeah, the river's back there, but it's dangerous. It's dirty; don't go back there," said Mahronich Vita. "Now, that perception is drastically shifting. In a lot of our communities, the water trail access points serve more than just boating. They've become really popular fishing destinations, and they're popular with people who just want to go down there and sit, maybe read a book, just enjoy the riverfront."

"We're seeing a generational shift to people looking at the rivers as community assets that they should enjoy."

There's been a noticeable increase in outfitters putting people on the water in the past 10 years.

And, there's plenty of potential for more use of the rivers and the water trail, especially in

communities that have traditionally been disconnected or underserved. The Friends of the Riverfront recently developed a 10-year plan for improvements, ranging from creating additional and more accessible launches to continuing to educate people about the cleanliness and safety of the rivers.

The plan also identifies existing strengths of the water trail upon which to build like its diversity of experiences and its historical significance.

“For example, paddlers can explore Allegheny Islands State Park. Organized groups can even get a permit to spend the night on the Allegheny River. It offers hiking and fishing and is just a nice place to stop,” said Craig. Paddlers can also float down the Monongahela River past Carrie Blast Furnaces, a National Historic Landmark, known for its extremely rare examples of pre-World War II iron-making technology, visible in the form of 92-foot-tall stacks with walls made of 2½-inch-thick steel plate. Or, paddlers can visit the “Point,” officially known as Point State Park, the area where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers meet to form the Ohio River. From here, paddlers can check out Pittsburgh’s skyline and even land long enough to explore the city on foot.

There are numerous locations to temporarily tie up a powerboat and venture ashore to explore the city and its sports stadiums.

The water trail also offers access to great fishing, another benefit of the rivers becoming cleaner over times.

“You can target anything from Walleyes and Sauger to muskies and Smallmouth Bass,” said Michael Depew, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission fisheries biologist, in the Somerset office, which has responsibility for the rivers. “And, of course, there are plenty of Channel Catfish and Flathead Catfish to catch as well.”

Smallmouth Bass numbers are best on the Allegheny River, but they’re good on the other rivers, too. The fish are a bit more concentrated around the locks and dams on the Monongahela River. All the bridges—Pittsburgh has 446 within its limits, more than any other city in the world—hold Smallmouth Bass.

“I’ve seen quite a few fish come off the bridges in Pittsburgh,” said Depew. “I know anglers who have sat on bridge piers and just pulled fish after fish off of them. Fish just seem to stack up around the woody and rocky debris.”

“But, you find them, too, on mooring structures, at creek mouths, on rock piles, along rocky banks or ones with boulders or concrete, all through downtown Pittsburgh.”

“All of the rivers are likewise good for Walleyes. Fish exceeding 10 pounds aren’t uncommon either,” said



*photo-courtesy of Friends of the Riverfront*

*The Three Rivers Water Trail offers vast opportunities for paddlers.*

Depew. The Walleyes grow fast on the abundant forage base made up of shad, small shiners and suckers.

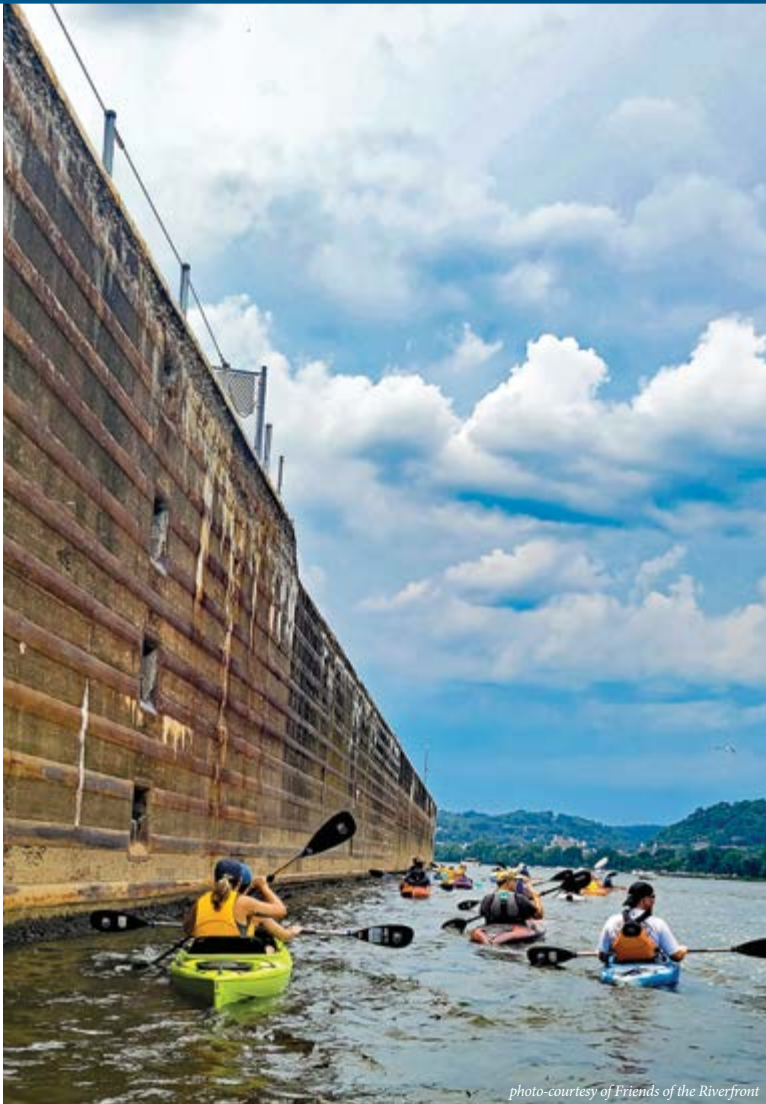
“Then, there are muskies to catch—up to 50 inches long, based on what biologists have seen in surveys—especially around the Allegheny’s islands and anywhere creeks enter the river, sometimes creating back channels,” said Depew. And, no talk of fishing Pittsburgh’s rivers would be complete without talking about catfish. The rivers hold loads of Channel Catfish and Flathead Catfish, some of which exceed 60 pounds.

Paddlers can get into those fish even within the city’s limits. The “Pittsburgh pool,” the area from

## Friends of the Riverfront:







*Paddlers need to know how to navigate the rivers. Friends of the Riverfront offer on-the-water events to educate people.*

Emsworth to the Point on the Ohio River, Braddock to the Point on the Monongahela River, and Highland Park to the Point on the Allegheny River, is more of a fishing hotspot than many pleasure boaters realize.

“There are quite a few nice fish there,” said Depew.

Getting to them, though—or to lots of other places on the water trail—can entail one of its more unique features.

The Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers have a big commercial element to them. It’s especially noticeable on the Ohio River, with the Monongahela River not too far behind. Industrial barge traffic is common. To keep the rivers navigable for it, the United States Army Corps of Engineers maintains a number of locks and dams on the rivers.

Paddlers need to know about them, which is why Friends of the Riverfront emphasizes putting educational signage, often with QR codes, at paddling launch points. Safety on the rivers is a huge point of emphasis, one reason the group also suggests paddlers

only take to the water between April and September. It’s too cold, and the water during fall and winter is often too high to explore when there are other much larger vessels in play.

“But, more than just knowing the locks exist, paddlers need to know how to navigate their way through them when the timing is right,” said Mahronich Vita. So, Friends of the Riverfront hosts on-the-water events each year—educating paddlers on the locks.

“We take people out to actually lock through,” said Mahronich Vita. “We teach them how to do it including how to call up to the lockmaster. They’re always some of our most popular and sold-out classes each summer.”

The Friends of the Riverfront holds other events as well. A one-day, sojourn-like event is in the plans for 2025, with possibly a longer, multi-day event in the future. Its water trail map offers suggested paddling trips, as well.

It’s about making people—even some locals—aware of a resource that was once polluted and dirty but now is a collective gem. The rivers, and the Three Rivers Water Trail, are a gateway to the region’s outdoors and history.

Even if it’s hiding in plain sight.

“Our water presents a diverse set of offerings for people, from the industrial vibe to some more natural highlights as well,” said Craig. “It really is the best of both worlds. People should come out and see that for themselves.”

## Three Rivers Heritage Trail

If you paddle the Three Rivers Water Trail, you may also want to pedal the Three Rivers Heritage Trail. It’s a 35-mile, nonlinear trail with segments on both banks of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers, offering access to neighborhoods, businesses and local attractions. Classed as a “National Recreation Trail” and a regional “Heritage Trail,” its 1.3 million annual visitors generate \$26.5 million in regional economic impact each year, according to a Friends of the Riverfront study.

For more information and a trail map, go to [friendsoftheriverfront.org](http://friendsoftheriverfront.org), “Trails” and “Three Rivers Heritage Trail.”