

A jewel in the wetlands of the U.S.': Niagara River earns world recognition



The International Railroad Bridge crosses the Niagara River connecting the City of Buffalo to Fort Erie, Ont. by rail, Friday, Aug. 23, 2019. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

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The Niagara River, long appreciated on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border, will soon receive global recognition as an environmental treasure. Next week, the U.S. side of the river will be designated a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty for protection of exemplary wetland systems around the world. The Niagara River will become the 40th Ramsar site in the U.S., joining Everglades National Park in Florida, Chesapeake Bay Estuary in Virginia and San Francisco Bay among others.

"It's an honor," said Jajeen Rose, deputy executive director of the Western New York Land Conservancy. "It says, 'For us, the Niagara River is one of the most important natural places in the entire world.'" There are more than [2,300 sites on the worldwide Ramsar list, which](#) includes lakes, rivers and waterfalls. Ramsar is the Iranian city where an international convention on wetlands protection was signed in 1971. The nomination succeeded because of the river's heavy concentration of diverse species of birds, fish and plants in addition to the world-famous waterfalls.

Each nation chooses its own Ramsar sites. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service makes the American choices. "I feel that Niagara truly is a jewel in the wetlands of the United States," said Cade M. London, the agency's policy adviser for international affairs. "I cannot imagine a site more splendid and grand than the Niagara River. It really is special." "The entire point of what we've been trying to do is to change people's perception of the Niagara River," Rose said. "We're a Rust Belt community, but at the same time we have this incredible natural wonder in our backyard."



The lower Niagara River winds north toward Lake Ontario. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

No added regulations

A Ramsar listing doesn't provide any funding nor add any environmental regulations beyond what the host country already imposes. "It doesn't come with any municipal requirements, and therefore, local governments are not afraid of it," said Lynda Schneekloth, an emeritus professor of architecture and planning at the University at Buffalo, who worked on the Ramsar project for years. The environmental regulations over the past half-century by the federal and state governments help explain why the Niagara River qualified for the designation.

Ramsar sites have to meet at least one of nine criteria. The Niagara River meets eight of the nine, and all of them pertain to biological diversity, Rose said. "We've got huge congregations of waterfowl and gulls, we've got endangered, protected species, lots of indigenous native fish," Rose said.

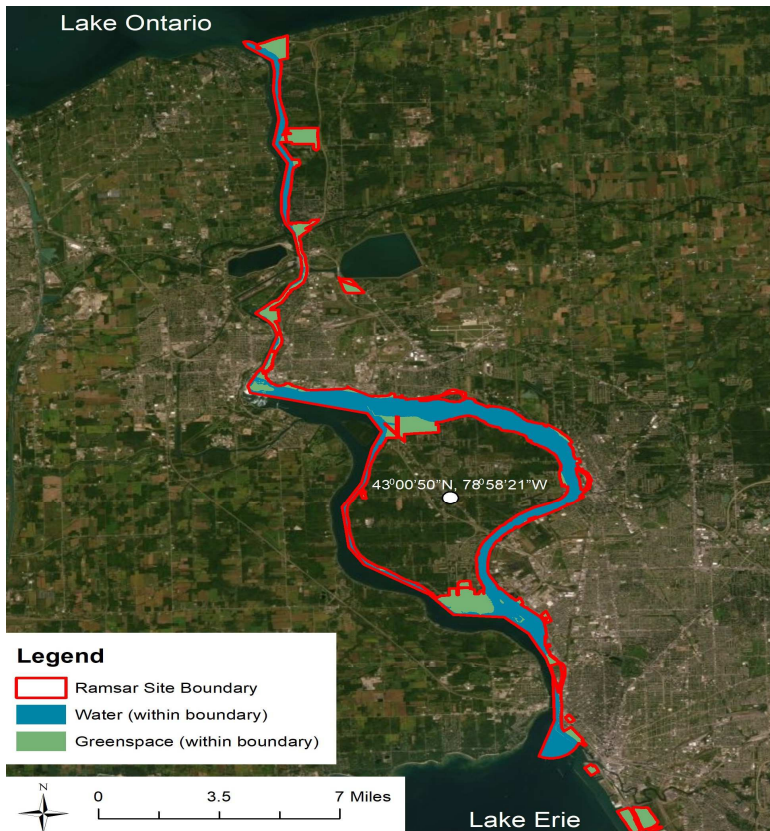
The Niagara River "supports at least 338 species of birds, 100 species of fish, 31 species of mammals, 11 species of reptiles, 13 species of amphibians, 12 species of mussels, and 231 species of plants," according to its application for the designation.

Another criterion: The site must support at least 20,000 waterbirds. A 2014 Canadian report estimated 120,000 at the river on a single day.

It might have been harder to meet the criteria if not for decades of cleanup efforts. "In a lot of ways, this is a celebration of the rebound of the river," Rose said. "Fifty years ago, 100 years ago, the river was much more polluted and contaminated. It's not perfect by any means now, but it's much better, much healthier than it has been in generations." "I think that's actually one of the reasons we qualify for the designation," Schneekloth said.

Earning a spot on the list

Work on adding the river to the Ramsar list began as far back as 2001 among local activists, who actually had something else in mind at first. "We had been looking at an international peace park for the cross-border Niagara region," recalled Mitchell, a retired American employee of the former Canadian consulate in Buffalo.



The map showing the boundaries of the Ramsar designation area along the Niagara River. (Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The peace park notion never came to fruition. "People didn't like it because there were some regulations that came with it in terms of how you could manage it," Schneekloth recalled. But the years of research led some of the activists involved to think of Ramsar. "It was right at the moment where, with the bicentennial commemorations of the War of 1812, we were looking for legacy projects," Mitchell said. "It was an idea that started to form right at that time."

The first exploratory meeting on a Ramsar designation for the river was held in 2013 at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. Canadians are working on a Ramsar designation for their side of the river. Mitchell credited Schneekloth for driving the project forward. "She raised this whole possibility," Mitchell said.

Starting in 2013, University at Buffalo law school professor Kim D. Connolly coached [12 semesters' worth of law students through work](#) on the Ramsar application package, which was submitted in February. Connolly said the Law School's Environmental Advocacy Clinic, which she directs, served as legal counsel to the local Ramsar steering committee. "The students under the supervision of Professor Connolly were really the lawyers here," said Ryan McPherson, UB's chief sustainability officer. "They were the ones who prepped it, did all the research, really did the grunt work."

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified this as the most complex (Ramsar) submission that the United States has ever had," Connolly said. A large [poster that detailed the years of law students' work](#) on the project won an academic award at UB in 2018.

In the U.S., every property owner in a wetland must agree with a Ramsar designation. In the case of the Niagara River, which is not privately owned, government approval was considered sufficient. More than 20 municipalities bordering on the river from Buffalo to Youngstown were asked to support the application.



Strawberry Island in the Niagara River, Friday, Aug. 23, 2019. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

A tourist draw

Local tourism promoters have been trying to make the case for years that the American side of Niagara Falls is the "greener" side. A Ramsar designation is a boost, said Andrea Czopp, vice president of operations at Destination Niagara USA, Niagara Falls' tourism promotion agency. "We've done a lot with the brand at Niagara Falls USA over the last couple of years to really set ourselves apart from the Canadian side as being the more natural side, the more active outdoor adventure side," Czopp said.

A 2017 study by the Ramsar Convention Secretariat, based in Switzerland, found that 73% of Ramsar sites worldwide have developed tourism or recreation services. "We're expanding the opportunities for ecotourism as well as the awareness of the really extraordinary environmental asset that we have throughout the Great Lakes as well as in our neck of the woods, where we have two lakes, a river and a mighty waterfall," Mitchell said.

"There are a lot of people that do seek out these Ramsar sites because it is such a prestigious designation, basically recognizing that we have a rare and unique habitat for biological diversity," Czopp said. "Birders especially seek out Ramsar sites as travel destinations, and birding is already a large part of what we do as far as our outdoor marketing and promotion efforts."

The Ramsar designation will be mentioned in future tourist publications and online. "This is going to be a good opportunity for us to stand out as a place that isn't just water falling over a cliff, but a significantly diverse wildlife habitat," Czopp said.