

There are, in fact, fish in the Hudson River

November 3 2022, by Helena Kilburn



Credit: Helena Kilburn

People tend to laugh when I tell them that my job after college was catching fish out of the Hudson River. As someone who lacks the particular brand of outdoorsy-ness fitting to this job, it seems like an

unlikely position for me, but what is more unlikely to people is that there are fish in the Hudson. Many assume that the river is incapable of supporting life. That the river itself is dead.

My first year in New York starting in September 2020 was permeated with the narrative, popular at the time, that "New York is dead." To those outside the city, it was unimaginable that the culture could ever recover from the impact of COVID.

In the early days of the pandemic, with the empty streets and closed businesses, I can see how this might have rung true. But by the time I moved in, this narrative came more from the leagues of New York residents leaving the city, if they had the means to do so. This crowd seemed to have large voices, and their proclamation that New York was over had settled into the minds of those who had no personal experience to the contrary.

My friends and I would walk through Washington Square Park and note the irony in this narrative. It was hard to take seriously as skateboarders zipped around us, groups of friends chatted on blankets, and the usual din of musicians filled the air.

It was during this time that I began my job as an environmental educator at Hudson River Park, where catching fish was part of my role. It was my first job in my field since I had graduated college the summer before—which I did from the living room of my childhood home, since I had left my [college campus](#) to live with my parents in March of 2020.

I distinctly remember driving to my parents' house in Massachusetts from my college in Tennessee and crying when I saw the skyline of New York, worried that my dream of moving to the city, the only place I have ever really felt comfortable, would never come true.

Four months later, I moved into an apartment on Bleecker Street with my two best friends. Still mid-pandemic, we created a social pod, got takeout drinks, and I landed my job at Hudson River Park.

The Hudson River, which the Lenape people called the Muhheakantuck, has an ominous reputation. New Yorkers and visitors alike think of it primarily as dirty to the point of being hazardous, and the dumping ground for bodies in mob movies.

This reputation is not without foundation. With industrialization, this historical trade route fell victim to excessive waste and chemical dumping. If you Google the Hudson River, one of the first suggested results is "is the Hudson River the dirtiest river."

However, one of the other suggested results is "is the Hudson River clean enough to swim in," to which the answer is, on most days, [yes](#).

With the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, the river began to turn around. Large-scale dumping drew to a close, the tides worked to cycle the water, and there has been an increasing focus on rebuilding the river's oyster communities as these mollusks filter the water; each one removes the river's contaminants at a rate of 50 gallons per day.

Individually, these animals would not make much impact, but as their population has recovered to number in the millions, these communities have contributed enormously to making the Hudson a hospitable ecosystem to creatures such as 10-foot-long sturgeon, eels, and even seahorses.

Many of the [fish populations](#) are abundant and some are healthy enough to be caught and eaten by the city's residents with guidance from the New York State Department of Health. With time, tides, and oysters, the river has recovered to remarkable health.

As for New York, there has been undeniable and tragic loss in our dear city. But just like the river has its tides, New York had its social distancing protocols, and just like the river has its oyster communities, New Yorkers came together, got their vaccines, and worked to help their city recover.

During this tumultuous time, I got to move to my favorite place and work at a park in the heart of the city. Since the work was outside where masks were not required, I got to see the amazement on students' faces when they learned [how much life](#) is in a river they had lived next to their entire lives. And, best of all, I got to watch New York come back to life while I stood beside the Hudson River.

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