



WILL SARDINSKY

RESTORING A RIVER REVIVED A TOWN: HELPER CITY HEALS

For 150 years, the Price River in Utah has been heavily used and heavily manipulated. Running through Helper City – an old rail and mining town named for the 19th-century “helper” locomotives that pulled trains and freight up the town’s steep hill – the Price has been adjusted, blocked and dammed up many times to accommodate decades of industrial activity.

// It’s a river that has worked hard for a really long time,” says Trout Unlimited’s Utah State Director Jordan Nielson.

The result of all these efforts to control the river was that the waterway became a twisted shadow of its former self by the 21st century

– muddy, cracked and filled with sediment. In particular, six diversions – including a 12-foot concrete dam – had blocked the river and diverted its flow but were no longer in use. For Helper City, which was navigating a transition to an economy built around tourism and recreation, it was a serious challenge.

"These diversions were just collecting trash," says Nielson. "They were unmaintained and dangerous. People couldn't use the river. It was a bad spot for a small town like Helper City."

In partnership with the town and several other organizations, including RiverRestoration, Trout Unlimited went to work. They removed the old diversions, replacing them with nature-based options like rock crossings to stabilize the river and planted native plants to hold the

banks together. The partnership also performed fish surveys that found that fish had been piling up below the diversions – a clear indication they hadn't been able to go upstream for food and spawning. To address that, Trout Unlimited also made the areas passable to fish in order to expand their access to river habitats. The final phase of the initiative – removing the 12-foot concrete dam – was completed in 2022, on time and well under budget.

"That last phase in particular was a fun one to complete," says Nielson. "When you're out there with a track hoe and a jackhammer and you're chipping away at a dam to allow the river to flow again, that's a pretty satisfying thing – and fun to do."

Today, the Price River is a centerpiece of Helper City. It's teeming with fish, including priority species like the Colorado cutthroat trout and bluehead sucker. The banks are a favorite spot for anglers and community members who can enjoy the river's bounty. Meanwhile, residents of the city frequently use the river for swimming, floating and tubing. Every year, the city hosts an arts festival, and floating down the river has become a central part of the event.

Once again, the Price River flows through the center of Helper City, boosting the town's outdoor recreation economy and making the community a destination. It's been a source of pride for all involved. To recognize the city's efforts, Trout Unlimited presented Helper City with their first Community Action Towards Conservation and Habitat award – or CATCH.

ONCE AGAIN, THE PRICE RIVER FLOWS THROUGH THE CENTER OF HELPER CITY, BOOSTING THE TOWN'S OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY AND MAKING THE COMMUNITY A DESTINATION.





REVIVING THE RIVER HAS ENERGIZED THE TOWN, TURNING PAST CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES.

"The biggest positive is how the community is interacting with the river," says Nielson.

The experience has been a reminder of how transformative this kind of project can be – and the town is looking to build on the progress they've already made possible. Now that the in-river structures have been removed, Helper City and Trout Unlimited are looking to the banks of the river, and considering ways to make them more amenable to native vegetation and water flow. With many old and outmoded infrastructure projects currently preventing nearby homes from sinking into the waterway, Trout Unlimited is

exploring ways to replace these outdated infrastructure elements with more effective barriers and systems that will stand the test of time.

"There's still a lot of work to do in the town of Helper City," says Nielson. "We're not done – not even close."

That eye towards the future is driving Helper City to new and exciting places. Reviving the river has energized the town, turning past challenges into opportunities. The progress is clear. The momentum is real. As Helper City looks ahead with renewed ambition, there's every reason to believe the best is yet to come.