

# NATURE'S VALUE IN THE OHIO RIVER BASIN

## IMPACT SUMMARY



**130.5  
MILLION  
ACRES**

in the Ohio River Basin  
across

**14 STATES**



**69 MILLION  
ACRES**

of natural ecosystems



**\$50 BILLION  
PER YEAR**

in ecosystem services  
benefits, and

**\$1.17**

**TRILLION**

over 30 years in benefits

## Protecting and restoring natural ecosystems of the Ohio River Basin is essential for long-term resilience and economic success.

The Ohio River Basin (ORB) encompasses portions of 14 states and is home to over 30 million people. It contains over 250,000 miles of streams and rivers, including the Wabash, Allegheny, Monongahela, and Tennessee Rivers. The 981-mile-long Ohio River, the third-longest river in the U.S., provides drinking water for 5 million people. The Ohio River is a working river, moving roughly 200 million tons of barge cargo through 140 river terminals every year.

The Ohio River Basin is heavily polluted but is not designated as a federally protected water system. There are over 200,000 miles of streams in the Ohio River Basin assessed for water quality by the states. Of the assessed streams, about 140,000 stream miles are listed as water quality impaired. The main cause is human activity e.g. farm runoff and wastewater from industrial processes, such as steel production which is laden with mercury. Harmful algal blooms impact the Ohio River at certain times of the year and more persistently in the lakes and reservoirs of the basin. Water quality-related health risks prevent recreation and fishing and 60 aquatic invasive species threaten native species and ecosystems.

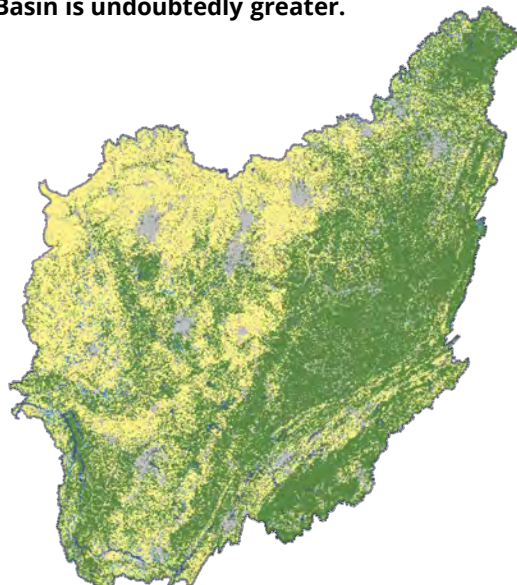
The Ohio River Basin Alliance is a unified voice of a broad coalition of stakeholders and states that recommends strategies and advocates for water resource priorities of the Ohio River Basin. The goal is to build sustainable, healthy ecosystems and river communities with vibrant economies dependent on our 'world class' water resources.

The well-being of every community grows from nature. Healthy ecosystems—forests, wetlands, grasslands, rivers, and lakes—produce streams of benefits to people, known as ecosystem services. These include clean and accessible water, clean air, food, recreational opportunities, and other vital goods and services.

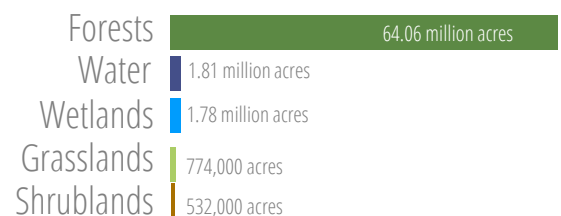
Natural ecosystems also protect us from disasters: wetlands capture and store water during rain events, reducing the damage caused by flooding; trees in urban areas cool communities during heat waves.

Our communities receive these services for free, and so nature's benefits are often ignored in decision-making. Over the past several decades, economists have developed a variety of ways to estimate "non-market" value.

**Natural ecosystems in the ORB produce at least \$50 billion in benefits on an annual basis, and \$1.17 trillion in benefits over 30 years at a 2% discount rate.** This is a conservative estimate based on a model that estimates a high-level value for a limited set of ecosystem services. **The true value of the Ohio River Basin is undoubtedly greater.**



**Fig 1. Percent of Natural Lands in Ohio River Basin**



### Other Land Cover Types Pictured

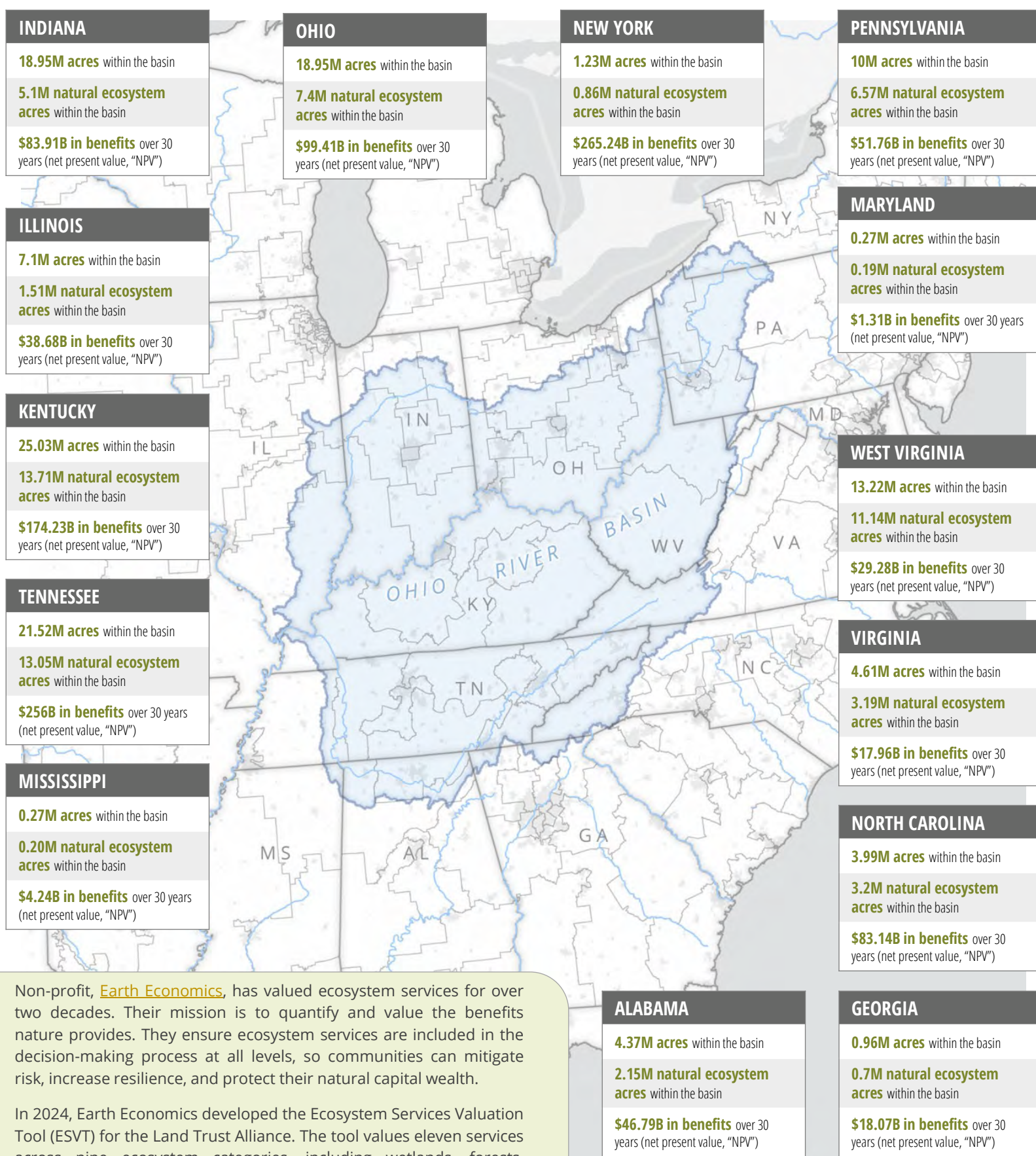
Developed or Barren Land

Crops, Pasture, or Hay

SOURCES: MRLC, USGS, US Census  
Bureau, Natural Earth, esri  
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**EARTH  
ECONOMICS**





Non-profit, [Earth Economics](#), has valued ecosystem services for over two decades. Their mission is to quantify and value the benefits nature provides. They ensure ecosystem services are included in the decision-making process at all levels, so communities can mitigate risk, increase resilience, and protect their natural capital wealth.

In 2024, Earth Economics developed the Ecosystem Services Valuation Tool (ESVT) for the Land Trust Alliance. The tool values eleven services across nine ecosystem categories, including wetlands, forests, grasslands, shrublands, rivers, and lakes.

SOURCES: US Census Bureau, Natural Earth, esri  
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130  
MILES