

The Bottom Line

- Real Midwest dam removals/30% reduction **do not automatically kill tourism**
- **But when you remove a primary lake attraction without replacing it, the estimate of a large, lasting drop is supported by real-world patterns**

👉 The concern is **on the realistic end**, not exaggerated

👉 The key variable now is **whether the park reinvests or not** – there has already been significant indication over the years, of **NO** reinvestment.

Let's Talk Numbers

Out of 250,000 visitors annually, rough illustrative ranges would be:

- **Major draw lost** → ~75,000 to 150,000 fewer visitors
- Moderate importance → ~25,000 to 75,000 fewer
- Minor role → under ~25,000 fewer
- If lake is **major feature** (your case)
→ **30%–60% decline**, even in large parks

Real outcomes depend on things like:

- Whether alternative attractions exist (trails, events, wildlife viewing)
- How unique the lake was compared to nearby parks
- **How well the park replaces it (new facilities or features)**

What That Loss Actually Affects

This isn't just "park revenue"—it spreads out:

Inside the park

- Camping fees
- Boat rentals (gone entirely with lake)
- concessions

Nearby economy (big impact)

- Gas stations
- Restaurants
- Bait/tackle shops
- Small local stores

👉 In small communities, this is often where the **largest impact is felt**

Property and “Town Identity” Effects (slow but real)

This is often underestimated.

When a park loses its signature feature:

What happens in similar communities:

- The town becomes less of a “destination”
- Property demand tied to recreation can soften slightly
- Fewer second-home or weekend-cabin style buyers

In Versailles specifically:

- The park is one of the major regional draws
- The town’s identity is partially tied to it

Case Studies

What Midwest Evidence Suggests for OUR Case

From cases like:

- Corydon (IN)
- Buck Creek (OH)
- Cuyahoga River (OH)

We see a pattern:

Pattern:

- If the water feature is **minor** → little to no visitor loss
- **If the water feature is primary → noticeable decline unless replaced**

👉 Short-term (first few years):

- **45%–65% drop**
- ~125,000 to 180,000 fewer visitors (out of 275k)

👉 Long-term (if maintenance stays poor):

- Likely **stays down 40%–60%**
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The Most Important Takeaway (from real cases)

The biggest driver is NOT:

✗ “wildlife disappears”

It is:

✓ **“Did the park replace the experience people came for?”**

1) When the lake is central → people expect major loss

- Not small decline
 - Not neutral impact
 - But **clear concern about losing visitors**
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2) There is usually NO immediate replacement

- Unlike big river projects, small parks:
 - don’t gain rafting industries
 - don’t become national destinations

👉 So losses are **not easily offset**

3) Perception matters as much as reality

Even before removal:

- People already assume:
 - “the park won’t be the same”
 - “less reason to go”

That alone can reduce visitation.

How Much Does Each Visitor Spend?

For Midwest state parks, typical per-visitor spending (blending day users + campers):

- **Low estimate:** \$20 per person
(day trip, minimal spending)
- **Moderate:** \$35–\$50 per person
(food, gas, small purchases, some fees)

- **Higher (with camping/overnight):** \$75–\$120+ (site fees, supplies, local restaurants)

👉 A realistic blended average:
~\$35–\$60 per visitor

Visitor loss (from earlier)

From your scenario:

- Loss: **110,000 to 180,000 visitors/year**
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Annual Economic Loss

Conservative estimate

- $110,000 \times \$35 = \text{\$3.85 million/year lost}$

Mid-range estimate

- $145,000 \times \$45 \approx \text{\$6.5 million/year lost}$

High-end estimate

- $180,000 \times \$60 = \text{\$10.8 million/year lost}$

History

What's actually happening...

At Versailles State Park:

- The lake exists because of a dam built in the 1950s on Laughery Creek
- That dam is now considered **aging and high-hazard** and has **sedimentation problems** (the lake has been filling in for decades)
- So changes (like lowering or modifying it) are typically about **safety + restoring the creek**, not just removing an attraction

Also important: the lake has already been shrinking in usefulness over time due to sediment buildup—by 1988, it had lost over a third of its volume, with no regular annual maintenance.

What the Indiana DNR Did in Metamora's Region

1) Water infrastructure stabilization (Brookville Lake system)

Nearby recreation is tied to Brookville Lake, managed by the DNR.

DNR role:

- Maintained dam safety and reservoir operations
- Managed flood control + water level stability
- Supported shoreline and erosion control projects

👉 Why it matters:

Stable water levels = stable tourism confidence for boating, fishing, and nearby towns.

2) Recreation area management

The DNR manages surrounding lands and recreation zones:

- Campgrounds
- Boat ramps
- Fishing access points
- Trails and picnic areas

Effect:

Instead of letting facilities degrade, DNR management:

- preserved baseline visitor experience
- kept the area “functional” even without major upgrades

👉 This prevents the “death spiral” of declining visitation.

Whitewater Canal State Historic Site support

Metamora's identity is strongly tied to the canal system:

Whitewater Canal State Historic Site

DNR involvement:

- Preservation of canal structures (locks, aqueducts)
- Maintenance of water flow in sections of the canal
- Historic interpretation and tourism programming

👉 This is important:

They didn't rebuild the economy with new attractions—they **protected the old one from collapsing**

4) Tourism Stabilization (indirect but critical)

The DNR doesn't run Metamora as a town, but its actions help:

- Marketing Indiana state recreation assets
- Maintaining consistent park visitation nearby
- Keeping Brookville Lake region active in state tourism systems

👉 Result:

Metamora benefits from **spillover traffic** rather than direct intervention.

What “rebuilding” Meant in Metamora

This is the key misconception to avoid:

The DNR did NOT rebuild Metamora like a redevelopment agency.

Instead, they:

- stabilized water recreation nearby
 - preserved historic infrastructure
 - prevented decline from getting worse
 - maintained baseline tourism flow
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Why Metamora Recovered (and why it matters for Versailles-type cases)

Metamora worked because it had:

1. A nearby major reservoir (Brookville Lake)

- Reliable fishing + boating base
- Regional draw independent of the town itself

2. A historic tourism anchor

- The canal system is unique in Indiana
- Not dependent on modern lake recreation alone

3. State-managed infrastructure stability

- No major loss of core water systems
- No collapse event requiring replacement attraction

The Indiana DNR helped Metamora mainly by:

- Maintaining nearby water recreation systems (Brookville Lake)
- Preserving historic canal infrastructure
- Preventing degradation of existing tourism assets
- Keeping visitor flow stable rather than rebuilding from scratch

👉 In simple terms:

They stabilized and preserved, not reinvented or replaced.

The Real Difference: “system value” vs “park value”

This is the core reason for different treatment.

| Factor | Brookville Lake | Versailles Lake |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Flood control | Yes (major) | No |
| Water supply role | Regional support | No |
| Size | Large reservoir | Small park lake |
| Economic reach | Multi-county | Local/regional |
| Recreation importance | High | Moderate |
| Maintenance priority | High priority system asset | Cost-benefit review |

“1980’s funded project” claim for lake dredging

There are three realistic explanations when stories like this appear:

Scenario 1 (most common)

Project was proposed + preliminary engineering funded

- study initiated
- sediment or feasibility work planned
- never advanced to construction funding

👉 This often gets remembered later as “funding was approved”

Scenario 2

Capital line item existed but was not obligated

- budget included placeholder funding
- later rescinded or reallocated before contracts

This creates the “money disappeared” perception

Scenario 3 (least likely)

Early contract work began but was canceled

- Engineers may have been consulted but no dredging occurred at scale
 - Cancellation not widely publicized
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