

Brooke Rosen
PRL.214
Professor Rozelle
10/13/25

Hidden Gems and Iconic Sights: An Eco-Friendly Guide to the Finger Lakes

By Brooke Rosen

FINGER LAKES REGION, N.Y. – Each autumn, millions of visitors travel to the Finger Lakes, eager to witness the region full of hardwood forests and lakeside views, burst into vibrant color. From the classic bald eagle flying above the gorgeous blue waters, it comes as no surprise that the Finger Lakes are home to some of the most scenic views during the fall foliage. But as guests take in the picturesque landscape, park experts confront a different reality: rising temperatures, unpredictable storms, and invasive species putting native wildlife at risk. Beneath the beauty this season brings, staff across all parks are hard at work to ensure the Finger Lakes remain a living classroom open to all visitors nationwide. But how are these natural environments preserved in a time of everlasting effects of global warming? And what about these breathtaking views makes them so incomparable to the rest?

For 15 years, Josh Teeter, Environmental Educator for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation for the Finger Lakes Region, has had a front-row seat in examining the impact of a changing climate: “Every year’s a little different,” Teeter said when referring to the timing of fall foliage, “this year seems to be like a slow burn...last year it came on pretty fast.” Teeter, who received his master’s in Management of Parks from SUNY Cortland and has led numerous outdoor education lectures, reflected on an incident of heavy rain flooding that hit the Robert H. Treeman trail in 2013. However, Teeter elaborated on the water management strategies his team has put forth, including culverts and gorges to protect park infrastructure, and feels confident that the wind from the lakes will promote temperate climates for visitors.

Additionally, 90% of state parks are preserved in their natural state. Led by horticulturist Max McCune, Teeter mentioned the Finger Lakes' efforts to mitigate the impacts of invasive species resulting from climate change. In particular, Teeter noted numerous hemlock trees that attract hemlock woolly adelgids, an insect from Southern Japan, where females produce 1,200 to 1,500 eggs a year. "We're using chemicals and biocontrols because these hemlock trees are really good at growing in steep, shallow soils, which we have a lot of gorge walls." Teeter emphasized the importance of protecting hemlocks, as they play a crucial role in providing shade for the water and increasing oxygen levels, fostering healthier ecosystems.

Though hemlock trees aren't the only reason visitors time their trips around fall foliage. According to Teeter, what makes this season's foliage unlike that in any other location is the abundance of hardwood trees covering the landscape. These trees have "deciduous leaves. They all use chlorophyll and chloroplasts, but use different compounds to protect those chloroplasts, and then you see those yellows, those oranges, those reds." Such natural beauty has been strong enough to form communities in the Finger Lakes area, such as a group of annual visitors known as the "Leaf Peepers."

With spectacular parks, it can feel overwhelming knowing how best to use your time. Teeter recommends checking out the hidden gems of Harriet Hollister Recreation Area for the best hang-gliding and Newtown Battlefield Park. If accessibility is a concern, driving to Taughannock Falls offers a surreal overlook of a 215-foot waterfall in just a few minutes. Blanketed in the colors of the season, the sight attracts nearly two million visitors each year. Additionally, Teeter recalled installing two overlook viewers, which allow 80% of colorblind tourists to see the wonders of color through their Enchroma lenses.

Whether you're driving or hiking, do so in an eco-friendly way. Download the Park Explorer app to learn more about the parks and access your live location on the map. Hikers should also bring snacks, wear proper footwear that can stay dry, and pick up their trash along the way. Additionally, hikers should

recognize their limits and make the most of their experiences by gradually stepping outside their comfort zone.

“I think people should be caretakers of the Earth,” Teeter said in a final takeaway.

This season, look forward to another fantastic year of bright colors and enjoy the breeze of a beautiful fall day while doing your part to maintain its beauty for years to come.