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U-CAN Urban Canoe Adventures

PROJECT GOAL

Train urban youth as river guides to conduct tours of Chicago Area Rivers increasing citizen awareness of river-related values and concerns



U-CAN trainees acquire a variety of skills through “hands-on” instruction such as this canoe technique class at the Lincoln Park lagoons. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

About the Project

An important component of successful community-based river improvements is a citizenry aware of the many challenges facing urban rivers and capable of envisioning future

changes. Unfortunately, most urban sections of Chicago Area Rivers are inaccessible and often visually hidden. Fences and buildings block physical access, while the rivers’ notoriety frequently has been a psychological barrier. Such barriers prohibit meaningful connections

“U-CAN was designed to meet specific needs. More people wanted to go on our canoe trips than we were able to accommodate. Canoeing is a great way to introduce people to the river and issues affecting it. And it gets people close to the river; past the fences and other barriers encountered.”

– Chris Cercone, former Membership and Volunteer Coordinator for Friends of the Chicago River

PROJECT RESULTS

- ▶ Recruited urban youth as river guide trainees and adult volunteers as trainers, guides and mentors.
- ▶ Conducted training in canoe skills, water safety, first aid, river ecology, and natural history.
- ▶ Graduated seventeen river guides for the 1997 season.
- ▶ Doubled the number of guided canoe trips sponsored by the Friends of the Chicago River.
- ▶ Educated residents and visitors on river enhancement and stewardship activities.

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RTCA CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

Conservation works today at the local level. Citizens in thousands of grassroots groups are protecting places that are important to them: nearby rivers, open space for the community, and trails linking town and country. The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) supports this grassroots movement as an important part of the National Park Service mission to protect America's natural and cultural resources. The Service increasingly is being called on to support the conservation efforts of state and local governments and citizens' organizations.

RTCA becomes involved when formally asked by the landowners, local officials, and citizens who share the desire to protect—or to improve—their communities. All projects are founded on cost sharing, cooperation, and community initiative. In these partnerships, the Service's role is to help achieve goals set collectively by the partners.



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“The U-CAN program is an important investment in the future; introducing a diverse group of young adults to area rivers, while informing them of environmental career opportunities.”

– Cathy Hudzik, former Public Ally and current U-CAN Coordinator for Friends of the Chicago River

with Area Rivers, significantly reducing awareness of resource needs. Sensing a general lack of knowledge about Area Rivers, the Chicago-Rivers Demonstration Project initiated a series of public perception surveys. These surveys found Chicago area residents—even those living within a few blocks of the river—were unaware of recent improvements, most notably water quality. Another study concluded that urban sections of area rivers exhibited more severely degraded environments and substantially less public access than similar sections located in outlying suburbs.

In an effort to increase public awareness and support, the Friends of the Chicago River have sought meaningful ways to connect people with *their* rivers. This effort has been particularly difficult for inner-city neighborhoods where residents have historically been isolated from parks and open space. An innovative and highly successful approach for improving such connections has been the U-CAN program (Urban Canoe Adventures) established by the Friends. Through this initiative, urban youth of diverse backgrounds undergo an intensive 4 month river guide training curriculum ranging from canoeing skills to natural history. Upon successful completion, participants conduct educational tours along many stretches of Chicago Area Rivers. U-CAN guides also participate in various river-related events such as river rescue days and Earth Day activities.

The U-CAN program is administered by the Friends of the Chicago River with staffing assistance from the Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program that develops young people as community leaders dedicated to solving the nation’s social problems. With 3 years of experience, the U-CAN program now involves three principal components consisting of trainee recruitment, trainings and workshops provided by partners, and a series of canoe trips led by the youth guides and adult volunteers.

U-CAN has successfully expanded the number of people introduced to Area Rivers, provided meaningful skills development and summer employment for urban youth, and increased public participation in river improvement activities. As the program continues to mature, U-CAN is anticipated to become self-sustaining through guide fees from local organizations and visitors to the Chicago area. Future program initiatives will involve stronger roles for partners such as area youth centers and high schools.

“I have learned so many things that everybody should know. U-CAN has encouraged me to appreciate the closeness of the City to the river. I hope to instill my excitement in the people I guide.”

– Jason Sheparis,
U-CAN River Guide



Seasoned U-CAN river guides participated in a 1997 Earth Day event on the South Branch of the Chicago River with Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt (center) and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley (right). Courtesy of Canal Corridor Association.

LIST OF PARTNERS

- American Canoe Association, American Red Cross, Cook County Forest Preserve District, Illinois RiverWatch Network, Shedd Aquarium and University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Services conducted training sessions.
- Boys and Girls Club of Chicago (Lathrop Homes Unit), Boy Scouts of America, Chicago Housing Authority “Green Summit”, Chicago Youth Centers Fellowship House, Lincoln Park High School, Princeton in Chicago Schools, Schurz High School and USDA AmeriCorps assisted with trainee recruitment activities.
- The Chicago Academy of Sciences, The Nature Conservancy and other local organizations and businesses provided mentors.
- Friends of the Chicago River developed the program and continues to administer and fund activities.
- Lincoln Park Boat Club and New City YMCA provided training facilities.
- National Park Service through the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project provided technical Assistance.
- Public Allies Chicago provided program staff and conducted leadership training.
- University of Illinois at Chicago, through Executive MBA Program, conducted marketing demand analysis for canoe tours.
- Urban Resources Partnership in Chicago provided technical assistance through partner organizations.

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