



Use of the Chicago River by Canoeists, Kayakers, and Rowers¹

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INTRODUCTION

Boating is becoming popular in some areas of the corridor, but many planners and interest groups feel the Chicago River can provide even more close-to-home boating opportunities for metropolitan Chicagoans. There is a particular interest in "human powered" boating opportunities in the corridor, i.e., canoeing, kayaking, and rowing. To support the goals of the ChicagoRivers assessment, this study took an in-depth look into the recreational use of the Chicago River corridor by canoeists, kayakers, and rowers. The objectives of the research were to:

- 1) Identify the use patterns and user characteristics of Chicago River canoeists, kayakers, and rowers;
- 2) Examine their motivations, preferences, and perceptions of their sport and their experience of the river;
- 3) Solicit recommendations for improving the river for non-motorized boating.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Because of corridor's length and sparse use, it was decided that the most efficient way of contacting Chicago River canoeists, kayakers, and rowers was through paddling and rowing clubs and through organizations that had sponsored canoe trips on the river. This sampling strategy misses non-affiliated boaters but is believed to capture a significant share of the population who has used the river. Postcards were sent to members of the Prairie State Canoeists (canoe and kayak club) inquiring if they had paddled or rowed the river in the previous 3 years, and if so, if they would care to fill out a mailed questionnaire. Questionnaires were also mailed to all members of the Chicago River Aquatic Center (rowing club) and to individuals who had taken organized canoe trips on the river sponsored by the Friends of the Chicago River, the Chicago Shedd Aquarium, and the North Branch Restoration Project. Completed questionnaires were returned by 138 of the 194 people who replied to the original postcard, a response rate of 71 percent.

The mail survey included closed- and open-ended questions about use of the Chicago River, respondents' experience in boating, reasons for using the Chicago River, satisfaction and enjoyment of their most recent Chicago River trip, and suggestions for improving the river for non-motorized boating.

FINDINGS

USE PATTERNS

The respondent sample was nearly evenly divided between those who belonged to boating clubs and those who attended sponsored trips. About 1/3 of the sample were rowers, and the rest were mostly canoeists. Club members tended to use the Chicago River more frequently and over a greater number of years than those attending sponsored trips; more than 2/3 of rowers used the river weekly or daily. Group size was highly dependent on user type; those on sponsored trips used the river in groups of 6 or more persons and club members paddled or rowed in single boats.

More than 1/4 of the respondents lived within 5 miles of the section of the Chicago River they last paddled or rowed. The majority lived 6-20 miles from their boating location on the river, while few came from more than 20 miles away. In order of popularity, favorite stretches of the river were the North Branch, the South Branch, Skokie Lagoons, Main Fork, and the North Shore Channel. Rowers tended to favor the South and Main Branches where their boathouse was located, while canoeists and kayakers tended to favor the North Branch and Skokie Lagoons. Both rowers and paddlers tended to make round trips rather than one-way trips, with the slow current of the river facilitating upstream travel.

MOTIVATIONS AND PREFERENCES

Canoeists and kayakers differed from rowers and Prairie State Canoeists differed from organized canoe trip participants in their motivations for boating the Chicago River. Of 15 closed-ended responses, the 3 top-ranked motivations for each group are shown in Table 8.1.

TABLE 8.1
Top motivations for boating the Chicago River, by group

Sponsored Trip Participants	Prairie State Canoeists	Chicago River Aquatic Center
1. To be in nature	1. To see wildlife	1. To get physical exercise
2. To do something new	2. To be in nature	2. To row close to home
3. To have an adventure	3. To have privacy/solitude	3. To have privacy/solitude

Although both sponsored trip participants and Prairie State canoeists were motivated to seek nature experiences, motivations for doing something new and adventurous ranked high for sponsored trip participants but low for canoe club members. Likewise, both Prairie State Canoeists and Chicago River Aquatic Center rowers sought privacy and solitude in their Chicago River outings, yet their top-ranked motivations for seeing wildlife (for canoeists) and getting exercise (for rowers) ranked near the bottom of each others' lists.

Open-ended responses to questions about river preferences found environmental, cultural, social, and facilities/management issues both adding to and detracting from boaters' enjoyment of the Chicago River (Table 8.2). As is presumably true in more pristine nature settings, access to nature provided respondents the greatest pleasure on their Chicago River trips. Respondents' own words often conveyed the feeling of joy they appeared to experience in paddling or rowing a river running through the middle of an urban environment: "incredible beauty so close to home," "wonderful experience around every bend," "the sunrise when you are on the river is spectacular." Unique to an urban river setting, however, is the enjoyment that the river's cultural aspects provided respondents. Comments about city views, fascinating bridges, nearness to the industry along the banks—all the cultural components of trips on the Chicago River—was the second most frequently mentioned category by respondents for enhancing their river trips. In this regard, urban rivers potentially offer a range of opportunities not available on wildland rivers.

TABLE 8.2	
Top-ranked items adding to or detracting from boaters' enjoyment of the river	
Adding to	Subtracting from
1. Nature and outdoor experiences	1. Poor water quality and/or garbage
2. Cultural aspects	2. Motorized boats
3. Social aspects	3. Riverbank destruction
4. Sense of serenity or solitude	4. Obstructions, difficult portages
5. Sense of adventure or exploration	5. Lack and difficulty of access
6. Water conditions/ weather	6. People on the banks
7. Other	7. Lack of bathrooms and rest, emergency stops
8. Educational aspects	8. Weather
9. Accessibility	9. Lack of canoeing experience
	10. Other

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The respondents' top recommendation for improving the recreational use of the Chicago River for boating was improving water quality and cleaning up garbage. Their other primary recommendations included providing more and easier places for entering and leaving the water, adding river facilities and rest stops, and resolving issues about powerboats and barges. Recommendations less often mentioned included providing access information, education, and publicity about the river and its facilities; removing major obstacles such as dams and providing portages; and maintaining and restoring nature.

Results of the study strongly support use of the Chicago River for non-motorized recreational boating. Respondents were highly satisfied with their river trips and were generally pleased with the many natural and cultural attributes the Chicago River offers, although they cited some significant problems that detracted from their enjoyment. Better marketing and improved river management can expand current use of the river to a larger, more diverse group of people and make the river more amenable to non-motorized use.

NOTES

1. This research was funded in part by the North Central Forest Experiment Station of the USDA Forest Service. For full details on the research project see O'Shaughnessy, J.M. (1994). *Traveling the Waters of the Chicago River: An Urban Recreation Resource for Canoeists, Kayakers, and Rowers*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL.
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