C H A P T E R 1

Introduction to People and the River

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BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Although we need to better understand the physical and biological environment of the Chicago and Calumet River corridors, in a region populated by more than 7 million people the ultimate success of the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project will largely depend on how well we understand the social environment. Since long before the birth of Chicago, people have had strong ties to the Chicago and Calumet River systems, and these continue today. To understand them, the USDA Forest Service was asked to study how user and interest groups currently perceive and use the river corridor, and how they would like to see it improved for recreation and other values. We defined our overall research objectives as follows:

1. To identify and characterize the major constituent groups, settings, and recreational opportunities in the corridor.
2. To identify patterns of recreational use; perceptions of issues; and preferences for recreational activities, settings, and experiences.
3. To examine commonalities and differences in uses and perceptions of different areas along the river corridor.
4. To make recommendations for enhancing the river for recreation and related values and for improving river corridor planning and management based upon research findings.

FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH

As we developed a research plan to address these objectives, the scale and diversity of the corridor made it especially important to identify the key aspects about people and the river. These are discussed below through an analysis of groups, settings, and issues.

CONSTITUENT GROUPS

In a metropolitan area as large as Chicago, the range of Chicago River corridor user and interest groups is wide. In developing a plan for research, we worked with project staff of the National Park Service and Friends of the Chicago River to identify the major constituent groups that affect or are affected by management of the river corridor. We identified seven important constituent groups of two major types. The first group type included *those who use lands* (or could use them but currently do not) for recreation and related values. These groups reflect the current and potential *demand* for recreation and open space opportunities and include:

1. Residents of nearby neighborhoods and community areas
2. On-site recreational users
3. The "general public" of metropolitan Chicago

The second group type included *those who manage lands* along the river, or directly or indirectly provide opportunities for recreation. These groups reflect the current and potential *supply* of recreation and open space opportunities and include:

4. Public land managers
5. Non-profit recreation and environmental interest groups
6. Private commercial recreation providers
7. Commercial and industrial land and water interests

Little was known about how these groups currently perceived and used the corridor, or how they might react to future policies and plans for recreation and open space improvement. Nor was much available on a national scale, for most river recreation studies have taken place in wildland settings, providing little guidance to efforts in Chicago or other urban areas (Dwyer and Schroeder, 1982).

CORRIDOR SETTINGS

The 156-mile-long corridor of the Chicago River flows through the heart of Chicago's metropolitan area, linking pleasant suburban communities and lush forest preserves with a vibrant, growing downtown and a spectrum of urban residential, commercial, and industrial land uses. A series of photographs illustrating the diverse character of Chicago's waterways are located in a group of plates between pages 4 and 5. To study a corridor of this length and diversity, we had to devise a landscape sampling strategy that would help us understand the corridor as an overall system yet provide information of sufficient detail to guide planning and management efforts at the local level. For the ChicagoRivers assessment, the corridor was divided into 10 sections or "reaches," corresponding roughly to the different branches of the waterway. These reaches are listed below, and Figure 1.1 shows their location within the Chicago metropolitan region.

1. West Fork of the North Branch of the Chicago River
2. Middle Fork of the North Branch of the Chicago River (sub-reaches 2A & 2B)

STUDY REACHES[1]

Designation Number	Waterway ("common" name)	Length (nautical miles)
1	West Fork of the North Branch of the ChicagoRiver ("West Fork")	14
2A/B	Middle Fork of the North Branch of the Chicago River ("North Branch" or "Middle Fork")	24
3	Skokie River ("East Fork")	17
4	North Shore Channel ("Channel")	17.6
5A/B	North Branch of the Chicago River ("North Branch")	17.2
6	Chicago River ("Main Branch" or "Main Stem")	1.4
7	South Branch of the Chicago River ("South Branch") and South Fork of the South Branch of the Chicago River ("Bubbly Creek")	3.9
8	Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal ("San-Ship" or "Canal")	8.2
9A/B	Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal ("San-Ship" or "Canal")	22.5
10A/B/C	Calumet River, Little Calumet River ("Little Calumet") and Calumet-Sag Channel ("Cal-Sag"), collectively known as the Calumet Waterway System	29.8

[1]The waterways included in the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project were divided into ten reaches (sections) to facilitate resource assessment and to establish common waterway sections for reporting study findings. For those investigations which required more specific study area delineation, subreaches were established and identified by a letter.

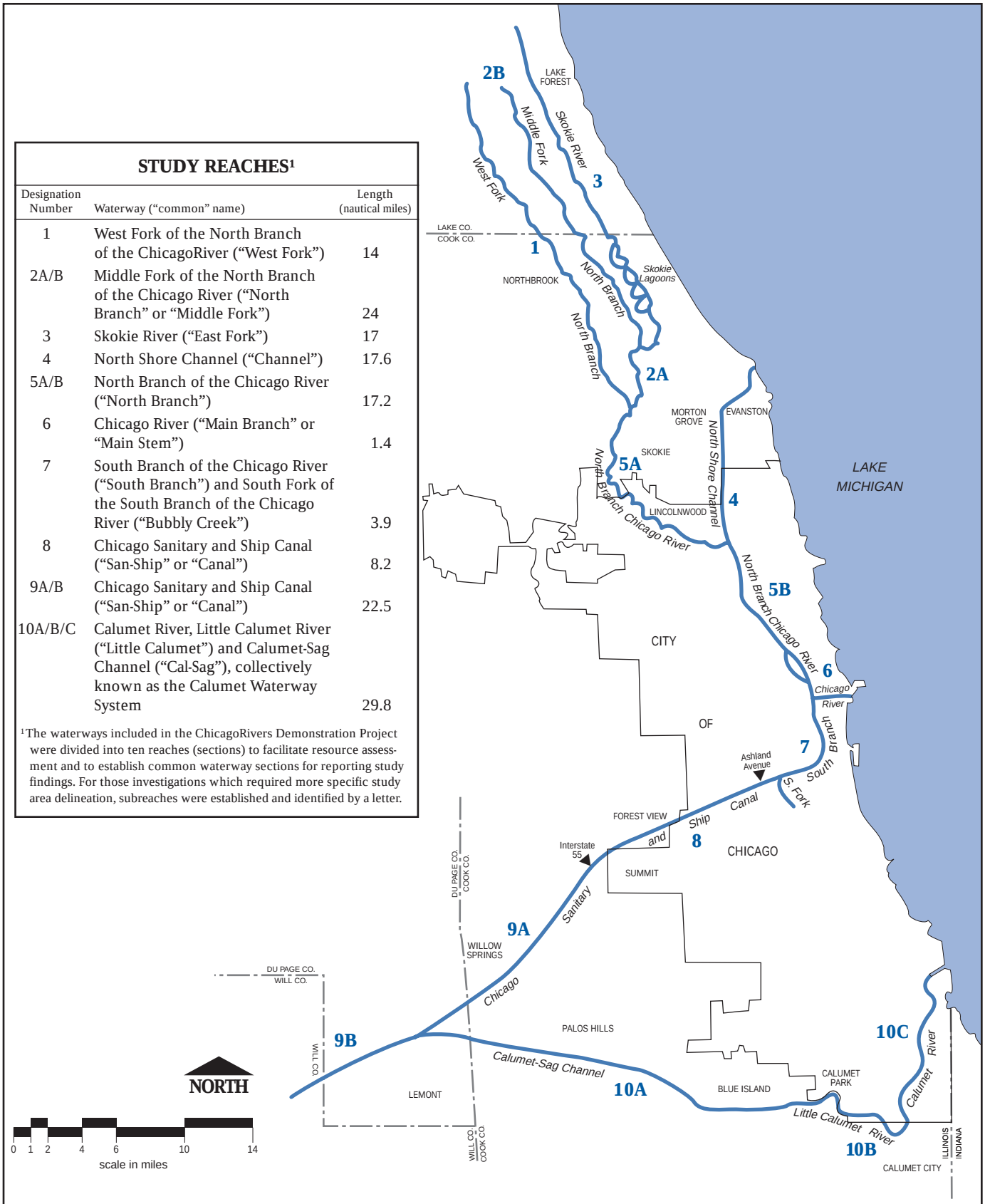

FIGURE 1.1
Map of study reaches

3. East Fork of the North Branch of the Chicago River or Skokie River and Lagoons
4. North Shore Channel
5. North Branch of the Chicago River (sub-reaches 5A & 5B)
6. Main Stem of the Chicago River
7. South Branch of the Chicago River
8. Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal between South Bridge and Interstate Highway I-55
9. Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal between Interstate Highway I-55 and Lockport (sub-reaches 9A & 9B)
10. Cal-Sag Channel, including portions of the Little Calumet and Calumet Rivers (sub-reaches 10A, 10B, & 10C)

Although these reaches are useful for understanding many environmental resource issues and problems, in some cases they may not always be the best way to understand people's perceptions and uses of the corridor. For example, the Skokie Lagoons is a unique area within Reach 3, and information from those who use or live next to this area may not relate to people's perceptions and uses of the rest of the Skokie River. For these reasons, the studies in this technical report used reaches as an underlying division for corridor sampling purposes, but in some studies neighborhoods or sites were the main defining units of the landscape due to the nature of the group studied.

ISSUES

The diversity of constituent groups and river settings signaled to us that people's perceptions and uses of the corridor might also be diverse. In the case of the Chicago River, it was likely that people's perceptions and uses could differ as a function of the area or reach along the corridor; might depend on their awareness, knowledge, or familiarity with the resource; and might encompass a wide range of issues from water quality, to safety, to aesthetics. People's perspectives on river corridor issues could also be affected by the constituent group to which they belonged. For example, a public land manager responsible for safeguarding recreational users might have a different perspective on safety than a recreationist with preferences for hiking or canoeing in natural surroundings.

With these considerations in mind, we devised a core set of questions that could be asked of key constituent groups. For particular groups, these questions could be rephrased or additional questions could be asked. The core questions covered the following topics:

1. Knowledge, awareness, and significance of the resource.
2. Use of the resource: activities, physical and social patterns of use.
3. Preferences for river settings: likes and dislikes, favorite places and favorite place attributes.
4. Perceptions of social and physical problems: water quality, aesthetics, recreation and facility maintenance, safety, and access.
5. Perceptions of resource change.
6. Suggestions for improving the river for recreation and other values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

To address this complex interrelationship of settings, groups, and issues, we needed a research strategy that would provide comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of people's perceptions and uses, and a useful base of information for planning and management. Out of discussions with ChicagoRivers partners, we designed a series of interrelated studies using methods appropriate to the settings, groups, and issues under investigation. These principal studies included:

1. **Focus Groups with Nearby Neighborhood Residents (Chapter 2, pages 5-48):** We brought together groups of residents who lived on or very close to the river, from diverse reaches and neighborhoods throughout the corridor. The principal objectives of this study were to identify residents' awareness, perceptions, and uses of the river corridor in their neighborhood, and to solicit their ideas and opinions about improving the corridor for recreation and related resource values. Investigators used a variety of structured and open-ended focus group techniques to elicit perceptions on issues, probe these issues in-depth, and to encourage open discussion of ideas and solutions. Nearly 100 adults and teens participated in the study, in 11 focus groups. Nine focus groups were held at key residential locations throughout the corridor. To provide a basis for comparison and contrast with nearby neighborhood residents, two additional groups were held with residents from the greater metropolitan area who did not live near the river.
2. **On-site Survey of Recreational Users (Chapter 3, pages 49-78):** We interviewed park and open space users in diverse activities and settings along the corridor. The principal objectives of this study were to identify the full range of activities that take place in and near the river, and to understand how different places along the river corridor provide different activities, settings, and experiences. Nearly 600 recreationists were interviewed at important sites along 6 of the corridor's reaches.
3. **Face-to-Face Interviews with Resource Experts (Chapter 4, pages 79-159):** We conducted in-depth personal interviews with a cross section of people who influence the recreational use of the corridor. The purpose of these interviews was to understand what types of recreation opportunities take place along the corridor, and how these activities relate to physical and social characteristics of the resource. The major groups from which participants were selected included public land managers, non-profit recreation and environmental interest groups,

private commercial recreation providers, and commercial and industrial land and water interests. In all, we conducted 38 formal and informal interviews with 55 people, representing 33 agencies, organizations, and companies.

4. **Landscape Suitability Analysis for "Recreation Habitats" (Chapter 5, pages 161-172):** We collaborated with Charles Nilon of the School of Natural Resources at the University of Missouri to study how metropolitan demographics and land use variations combine to affect existing and potential recreation opportunities along the river corridor. Computer-based Geographic Information System (GIS) models were used to define and map the potential suitability of corridor areas for recreational use and neighborhood access.

5. **Telephone Survey of Corridor Residents (ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project publication entitled "Resident Use and Perception of the Chicago and Calumet Rivers"):** We collaborated with David Wallin of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who conducted a telephone survey of metropolitan Chicago residents who lived near the corridor. The purpose of the study was to capture a large-scale, statistically representative sample of residents that could provide quantitative information on river awareness, perceptions, uses, and ideas for improvement for every river reach. The sample included some information on non-users, but was focused mainly on those who had used the river in the previous 12 months. Two hundred of the 1,221 adult river users in the sample were riparian residents; of the rest, about half lived within 2 miles of the river corridor and half lived 3 or more miles away from the corridor.

In addition to these Park Service-funded efforts, the Forest Service also helped fund and direct three support studies that provided further information on particular groups who use or live near the Chicago River:

6. **Focus Group Study of Chicagoans' Open Space Needs (Chapter 6, pages 173-176):** We collaborated in the design of a study to understand the open space needs of City of Chicago residents. The study was directed by Kathleen Dickhut of Openlands Project, and conducted by the Metropolitan Chicago Information Center by Steve Diller and Dan Stolze. It was done to provide information for planning and project development under CitySpace, a joint venture of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development, the Chicago Park District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Two focus groups were held in each of seven community areas included in the sample (one of teens, the other of adults). Four of the seven areas were adjacent to the Chicago River corridor, and information from these eight focus groups provided additional insights into people's perceptions and uses of the South Branch, North Branch, and Calumet River reaches.

7. **Face-to-Face Personal Interviews with Chinatown Adults and Adolescents/Group Interviews with Chinatown Children (Chapter 7, pages 177-179):** We cooperated with Tingwei Zhang of the Department of Urban Planning and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago on a study that focused on the open space needs of residents within Chicago's Chinatown community. Chinatown, an ethnically homogeneous neighborhood of Chinese Americans located near the South Branch of the Chicago River, ranks among the lowest of neighborhoods in the city in terms of available park acreage. More than 200 residents ages 13 and older were interviewed face-to-face in homes, shops, and community organization buildings around the Chinatown area. Among the questions, respondents were asked about their ideas for development of a proposed new 12-acre park by the Chicago Park District along the South Branch in Chinatown. A second sample of 39 children ages 5-12 were asked to draw pictures of their "ideal park" setting along the river and to discuss what they included in their ideal setting.

8. **Mail Survey of Chicago River Canoeists, Kayakers, and Rowers (Chapter 8, pages 181-182):** We helped supervise and fund a master's thesis project by Joan O'Shaughnessy, under the direction of William Howenstine of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, which looked at the use patterns and perceptions of people who had recently paddled the Chicago River. More than 130 canoeists, kayakers, and rowers from club and organization mailing lists responded to the mail survey. This study provided valuable information on an important user group that is represented in only small numbers in the other surveys described above.

LITERATURE CITED

Dwyer, John F., and Schroeder, Herbert W. (1982). Urban river recreation: new challenges and opportunities. *Naturalist,* 43(2): 6-11.