



# Nearby Neighborhood Residents' Images and Perceptions of the River

Paul H. Gobster

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study brought together groups of residents to discuss what they felt about the Chicago River in their neighborhood and how they would like to see it improved for recreation and other values. Residents were recruited at random for 11 focus groups, including 9 groups who lived close to the river in neighborhoods throughout the corridor and 2 groups from the metropolitan region at large who lived away from the river. Groups averaged 9 participants each, and 98 people in all participated in the study. Through a combination of structured survey questions and facilitated, open-ended discussion, the groups discussed such questions as: What are people's current levels of awareness and knowledge of the river? How do people use the river? What is the perceived quality of the river landscape? Have perceptions of the river changed? What types of development are preferred along the corridor? How can the river be improved for recreation and other values? Can recreation development activities proceed if the water is not clean? What specific recommendations can be made to improve particular river segments?

Responses to the structured survey questions and transcripts of the open-ended discussions were analyzed to examine commonalities and differences within and between focus groups on general issues (e.g., the current condition and maintenance of the river landscape) and to identify specific topics of importance (e.g., perceptions of fish consumption, knowledge about river aeration facilities). A computerized coding scheme developed for the transcripts allowed respondents' comments to be summarized and organized so that salient themes and issues could be identified.

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS AND USES OF THE RIVER

Participants' current perceptions and uses of the river can be summarized as follows:

**1. Nearby residents were generally aware of the river in their neighborhood, but knew little about the Chicago River as a system.** The different names, often colloquial ones, given to different reaches may obscure how individual reaches connect as a system. Knowledge of current and historic activities along the river was spotty and sometimes inaccurate, although one or two people in some groups were often extremely familiar with some aspect of the river due to their jobs, leisure interests, or because their homes were close to river improvement or

development projects. Those from the two metropolitan groups who lived away from the river tended to have the lowest levels of knowledge and awareness. What they knew about the river was often limited to the Main Branch and was based on infrequent trips downtown or recall of major news events such as the "Great Chicago Flood" of 1992 or the annual dyeing of the river green on St. Patrick's Day.

- 2. People's overall impressions of the river in their neighborhood varied greatly by where they lived.** Those living near the Main Branch, the Middle Fork, and the Skokie Lagoons generally had a high regard for the river in their neighborhood, while those along the North and South Branches and the Cal-Sag Channel generally had a low regard. Drawings and written statements revealed many reasons for participants' quantitative ratings of their overall feelings. Those who felt positively about the river mentioned things about history, wildlife, and aesthetics, while those who felt negatively focused on pollution, misuse, and neglect of the resource. Whether people's overall impressions were positive or negative, the vividness and emotional charge of their descriptions conveyed a high concern about the present and future states of the resource.
- 3. Nearby residents used the river corridor in diverse ways.** Most residents who lived near the river used and appreciated it at some level, even for just an open view and change of scenery as they drove over it. Direct use of the corridor often hinged on the availability of open space and facilities. Where such opportunities exist, many neighbors used the corridor for linear recreation such as walking and bicycling or for location-specific activities such as picnicking or relaxation. Visual appreciation of the corridor was an important type of indirect use for those who lived right by the river, even if they rarely went out to use it directly. Water-based recreation was a popular but infrequent activity of nearby residents. Although only a small proportion of nearby residents owned and used boats on the river near their home, several had taken river tour boats on the downtown reaches and said that being on the river is a unique experience open to all.
- 4. The river's natural, aesthetic, and functional characteristics were important to nearby residents.** When nearby residents talked about the characteristics of the river landscape that were important to them, they often focused on the vegetation and wildlife present. These features were the major attraction in the less developed

reaches of the corridor, but nature was also important to residents in highly urbanized settings, where green trees, grass, and wild brush moderated the expanses of buildings and concrete paving. Natural features provided important aesthetic benefits to nearby residents, including beauty, solitude, and a needed contrast with the urban development surrounding the corridor. People looked to the river for more than natural beauty, however, and recognized the significance of its architectural and engineering achievements and the utilitarian roles it plays for industry, commerce, flood control, and sanitation.

- 5. Water quality condition and maintenance was the chief concern.** A high proportion of focus group participants felt there were serious water pollution problems on the reach near where they lived, although their explanations of how the river was polluted varied considerably from one end of the corridor to the other. Along the northernmost reaches of the corridor, people were concerned mainly about turbidity and natural debris in the water, while those further south were concerned about offensive odors, dumping, industry and barge discharges, and toxic waste. Some residents saw the presence of fish in their reaches as an indicator that water quality was improving, though not to the point where the fish could be eaten. Although most residents cited problems with the current condition of the water, a smaller percentage in each reach were aware of the various efforts to maintain and improve water quality, including dredging, aeration, garbage pickup, and the “Deep Tunnel” stormwater storage project.
- 6. Safety and access were among the other important concerns of nearby residents.** Two other issues cited by nearby residents, safety and access, have important implications for river corridor planning and management. Each of these issues has many dimensions as voiced by nearby residents. For safety, residents were concerned both with physical safety, particularly with children falling in the water and the consequences of body contact, and with personal safety and the threat of violence from gangs and others who congregate at spots along the river. For access, residents were concerned about such issues as the convenience, amount, and type of access to the river, and public versus private rights to use the waterway.
- 7. Nearby residents perceived positive changes occurring along the river.** Despite some serious problems with the condition and maintenance of the corridor, many nearby residents had seen positive changes in recent years and were hopeful about further improvements. Water quality changes most often mentioned are those improvements that can be directly perceived: increased water clarity, and reductions in debris and odors. Residents saw open space and facility developments for recreation as additional signs of positive change that will enhance their recreational use and the desirability of living near the river.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE RIVER

Participants’ ideas about the future potential of the river for recreation and other purposes are summarized below, along with the implications these findings have for planning and management:

- 1. Clean water is the key factor that will decide the future of the river for recreation and other purposes.** Although participants in many of the focus groups recognized that substantial improvements in water quality had already been made, further efforts are still needed if the rivers in their neighborhoods are to be used more fully for recreation and other purposes. Good water quality is important for direct, water-based activities such as boating and fishing. It is also important for indirect, land-based activities, but people are willing to accept less-than-pristine conditions as long the odors and debris are not offensive. To address water quality concerns, agencies and municipalities could increase active cleanup efforts and step up regulation and monitoring programs. Based on the willingness of some participants to work on grassroots efforts to help improve water quality, volunteer groups could be mobilized for litter and debris removal, water quality monitoring, and other activities.
- 2. The natural environment should be enhanced throughout the river corridor.** Vegetation and wildlife were important to participants’ enjoyment and use of the river in both urban and suburban settings. Along more remote stretches of the corridor, enhancing the natural environment might mean keeping vegetation more natural or restoring it to its natural integrity. Restoration in some cases might include reducing current wildlife population levels, such as the deer herd at the Skokie Lagoons. Along more highly used stretches of park and forest preserve, vegetation might be managed to balance needs for wildlife, aesthetics, recreational use, and personal safety. This balance might be achieved by creating more “manicured” areas with trees, grass, and flowers and by planting or thinning vegetation to increase sight lines and openness. Along the most urbanized sections of the river, more trees and grass could be planted to soften the edge between the river and the built environment that surrounds it, to make the shore more aesthetically pleasing and conducive to use by recreationists and wildlife.
- 3. Maintenance of the landscape and existing facilities, and the development of new facilities, are key ingredients to greater use of the river for recreation.** Many participants cited “good maintenance” as an important condition of their ideal setting for recreation, and they despaired about the poor current condition and lack of maintenance of the river edge in their neighborhood. Along with maintaining the water quality and vegetation, this concern translates to keeping the river landscape reasonably free of litter and debris, and keeping built facilities in good condition and free of graffiti and vandalism. Trails

were chief among the suggestions for new recreation facility development in the corridor; increased park and open space was a priority along some reaches (e.g., South Branch, Cal-Sag) where such areas are currently sparse.

- 4. Increased safety and access are also needed before more people will perceive and use the river as a recreational resource.** Current problems with safety were cited as impediments to wider use in nearly every focus group. Suggestions for increasing safety varied according to the specific safety concerns. Solutions ranged from heavier vegetation, fencing, and railings to keep children from falling into the river; to better lighting, less vegetation, and more patrols to ward off crime. In a similar sense, various strategies might improve access to the river, from clearing weeds and other vegetation to enhance views of the river to purchasing land and developing facilities to promote close, convenient physical access.
- 5. The diversity of the corridor is both a strength and a challenge that must be acknowledged in future development efforts.** The natural and social diversity existing within the corridor prevents any generic approaches to development. By recognizing this diversity, corridor planners and managers might more successfully work within the constraints and opportunities it allows. Those participants who talked about the corridor as a whole mentioned the need to balance recreational development with industrial, commercial, and residential land uses. In the case of recreational development, this balance requires a sensitivity to the “context” of development and the degree of naturalness or level of development that is appropriate to the urban or suburban setting. This information may help planners and managers understand local problems and priorities and in turn help their constituencies understand the corridor as a diverse but interconnected system.
- 6. Outreach efforts can promote local awareness, interest, and action in river improvement activities.** A final point gleaned from discussions about the future potential of the river dealt with how river improvement efforts are communicated to the public. Participants who were informed about river cleanup projects tended to have a much more positive outlook on the river than those who were not aware of these projects. In fact, for several of the attendees who knew little about the river, participation in the focus group exercises and discussions helped improve their perceptions of the river. These findings show the critical need for, and power of, better public communications by agencies, municipalities, and advocacy groups. From the many experiences recounted by participants, it is clear that awareness can build interest and concern, and in some cases, even lead to individual and grassroots community action in river improvement projects. Many of the participants who used the river in their neighborhood showed a high concern for it and a willingness to take at least partial responsibility for ensuring its protection and improvement.

## BY-REACH SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Participants’ current perceptions and uses of the river in their neighborhood, as well as their recommendations for future improvements, are summarized in Table 2.1 for each focus group.

## PART I INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Research on urban corridor recreation opportunities has shown that most who visit a local trail or greenway tend to come from nearby residential neighborhoods, often less than a mile away (Young and Flowers, 1982; Furuseth and Altman, 1991; Moore et al., 1992). Nearby residents are often the most frequent users of trails and greenways, and their support can affect the ultimate success of a greenway as a recreation resource (Gobster, 1995). Most importantly, those who live near park and open spaces often have an intimate knowledge of these resources, their assets and shortcomings. For these reasons, the project investigators felt it important to find out more about how nearby residents perceive and use the Chicago River.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To include a sample of participants that reflects the geographic, age, gender, economic, and ethnic diversity of residents who live near the Chicago River corridor and in the surrounding metropolitan region.
2. To examine residents’ awareness, perceptions, and uses of the river corridor, its sites and reaches, and to solicit their ideas and opinions on improving the corridor for recreation and other resource values.
3. To suggest how study findings might be used to develop planning, design, and management strategies for the river corridor.

### STUDY METHODS

#### THE FOCUS GROUP AS A METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Focus group interviews were used to gather information on awareness, perception, and use from nearby and metropolitan residents. As a social science method, the focus group interview is being increasingly used to identify and explore people’s perceptions and behavior (Goldman and McDonald, 1987). Focus groups allow investigators to probe salient issues and uncover ideas and insights that may not surface through traditional mail and telephone surveys (Krueger, 1994). Although the qualitative nature of this method does