



Use Patterns and User Preferences of On-Site River Recreationists

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Interest in improving the Chicago River corridor for recreation and other benefits has been growing in recent years. Deciding how best to respond to this interest requires an understanding of current recreational visitors' perceptions and uses of the corridor. Toward this end, we interviewed 582 visitors engaged in a wide spectrum of activities at a range of sites throughout the Chicago River corridor. In addition to collecting data on recreational activities, our survey asked people about other characteristics of their use of the river, perceptions of the river corridor, and the river's importance in their enjoyment of recreation activities. Survey questions included both closed-ended and open-ended response formats. Survey sites were grouped into five areas: Skokie Lagoons, North Branch/North Shore Channel (NSC), Loop, Palos, and Cal-Sag areas.

Clear river corridor use patterns emerged. Most activity took place alone or in small groups. Many respondents visited frequently—half reported visiting the area at least weekly. Most drove to the site, except in the Loop where most walked. Visit length varied considerably, but overall, visits of an hour or less were most common.

The respondents to the on-site survey reported 50 different activities. These fell into eight major activity groups: biking, sitting and relaxing, fishing, walking/hiking, boating, having lunch, "other passive" activities (like people watching and nature observation) and "other active" activities (like baseball and frisbee). Some of these activities, like fishing and boating, are traditionally thought of as river recreation activities. In other activities, like relaxing and biking, the river may play an indirect, but still important, role. Activities varied considerably by area, and were somewhat dependent on the facilities available. The Skokie Lagoons area had the greatest variety of activities; the North Branch/NSC area had a combination of active sports and various passive uses like bringing children out to play; in the Loop area, the primary activity was taking a lunch break; in the Palos area biking dominated; and most respondents in the Cal-Sag area were power boaters.

The river was very important to most recreationists, particularly where access—either physical access or visual—was greatest. Increased river access was called for by some of the people we interviewed, particularly respondents in the Loop and power boaters, and the current access was appreciated by even more. The many attributes respondents mentioned—scenic beauty (including both skyline and natural scenery),

solitude, and appreciation of natural areas—may be provided in many ways, particularly in areas that lack open space. And, for many respondents, the recreation site where they were interviewed seemed to be an end in itself, and they obtained benefits without "going anywhere" along the river from the recreation site. These two things—the reported importance of scenic beauty, solitude and natural areas in a variety of settings, and that a variety of access points were well used and enjoyed—indicate that all new access need not be highly developed marinas, large parks, or complex trail systems (though these are valued by respondents). Access at street dead-ends, strategically placed benches, and other modest access can also provide these benefits.

Water quality was the predominant issue for respondents. Many of the people we spoke with seemed to feel that the river was quite polluted and a seemingly high number of respondents felt that direct industrial and other dumping was still a significant problem. Some were aware of the recent improvements in water quality, but it seemed that public perception of water quality was low overall. Such findings indicate the need for more public outreach about recent water quality improvements. Some of the recent improvements are less noticeable to the naked eye (and nose) and may need greater explanation to the public. Examples in this category include the changes in aquatic habitat from eliminating chlorine in the waste water treatment process. At the same time, the public's desire for a cleaner river should not be glossed over.

Facilities were also an important issue, ranking second to water quality in importance. Many different aspects of facilities were mentioned by respondents—some praised, others criticized. Respondents liked the bike trails at the Skokie Lagoons and Palos area, Loop visitors liked the benches and river walk there, and Cal-Sag respondents liked the boat ramps in their area. Changes to better accommodate certain activities were mentioned most, particularly stocking fish; increasing path maintenance; improving water fountain and toilet facilities; and increasing tables, grills, and the like. Major new development did not seem to be as important to these respondents as increased maintenance of existing facilities.

Scenic qualities and natural areas were important, and many respondents wanted natural areas improved (which may lead to improved scenic qualities as well). This was particularly true in the Loop where current recreation users called for more green areas. Restoring natural areas or providing more trees and formal landscaping were the nature-related changes suggested most often.

Crime and safety were not reported as major problems by the people we interviewed, except in the North Branch/NSC area, where many respondents requested additional attention to these issues. One possible approach to these concerns could be thinning vegetation in some areas to increase both visual access to the river and perceived safety. Other user conflicts identified by respondents focused on boaters, anglers, and the use of trails and other facilities. Boaters and anglers were specifically interested in stricter law enforcement for their fellow recreationists (e.g., enforcing no-wake zones).

The Chicago River corridor is an important recreational resource enjoyed by the Chicago area residents we interviewed. Respondents reported a wide range of activities and felt that the river was important to their enjoyment of these activities. Scenic beauty and the current facilities are important to, and appreciated by, current recreational visitors. Water quality concerns are prevalent and urgent to these visitors. Managers have opportunities to enhance the enjoyment of the river for current recreationists, and perhaps to open new possibilities for future recreationists.

PART 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

PURPOSES AND OBJECTIVES

The Chicago River corridor is used for recreation by many Chicago area residents. People enjoy the varied recreational opportunities the river provides, whether they live near the river or travel several miles to reach it. Some enjoy water-based activities like boating, others appreciate the opportunity to discover turtles with their children, while others find a lunch-time respite from the office on riverside plazas.

In recent years, two factors have led to calls for further enhancement of recreation opportunities along the river. First and foremost are the water quality improvements that have been made and the promising prospects for continued improvement. Second, increased direct use of the river for boating, canoeing, and fishing has been reported, and riverside bike trails are popular. Current recreation visitors' uses and perceptions of—and their concerns about—current river recreation opportunities can inform and help guide possible recreation improvements. This study was initiated to help develop an understanding of these perceptions, uses, and concerns.

The objectives of this study were to identify:

1. The range of activities people engage in along the river corridor.
2. River corridor use characteristics including access to the area, length of visits, distance traveled to the site, and frequency of use.
3. Users' perceptions of the river corridor and its importance to enjoyment of recreation activities.

STUDY METHODS

An on-site user survey provides information for the analysis of current users' activities, attitudes, and perceptions of the river corridor as well as the universe of current users (e.g., nearby residents to out-of-state visitors). Because our objective was to identify the full range of activities people were engaged in along the river corridor, we took a broad view of recreation and the settings in which it takes place (e.g., a lunch break along the river downtown as well as the more traditional fishing and baseball).

SAMPLING

A purposive sampling design was used to get adequate representation of individuals from different use and demographic subgroups as well as from a range of areas along the river. This design facilitates discovery of the current range of river corridor uses, can help delineate the population of current users (e.g. activities engaged in and local vs. regional use), and allows for comparison among user subgroups and areas (e.g., activity groups or gender).

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT AND PRETEST

A 24-item survey was developed by scientists at the USDA Forest Service North Central Research Station (NCRS) in conjunction with the ChicagoRivers partners (Appendix 3.1). The survey was field tested on 35 respondents. Minor revisions simplified both question wording and recording of the answers. The questionnaire included open-ended questions to capture the wide range of activities, user perceptions and attribute preferences, and closed-ended questions to measure attitudes about specific river-recreation related issues. Questions focused on three major areas: **river use characteristics** (activities, transportation to the site, distance traveled to the site and the time this took, visit length); **perceptions of the river** (the importance of the river, potential problems in the corridor, liked and disliked attributes, perceptions of recent improvements, and suggested changes for rivers in the Chicago area); and **demographics** (age, racial/ethnic background, income, residence).

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

All interviews were conducted on-site and face-to-face, with the interviewer writing respondents' answers to open-ended questions verbatim. The interviews were conducted by a trained research assistant from the NCRS, with some assistance from Northeastern Illinois University students. Survey respondents were selected carefully, controlling for interviewer bias as much as possible, and ensuring that a representative sample of the recreation visitors were interviewed. A minimum number of interviews was established for each site, and a sampling interval was determined based upon the intensity of use at a given site. For instance, where there were few recreationists, each solo visitor or a member of each group was interviewed. In places with, or at times of, higher use, a predefined selection protocol was used (e.g., to interview the second person from the right in every other recreation group).