

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).

The face-to-face interviews took place throughout the river study area during May, June, and July of 1993. May, June, and July are believed to be the months when river corridor use is highest. For instance, approximately 60% of the annual bike trail use along the North Branch Bike Trail at the Skokie Lagoons occurs during these months. Interviewers were at each site on weekdays and weekends, during mornings and afternoons. Most sites were visited two or more times in each time period (e.g., weekday mornings).

Most recreationists (nearly 90%) who were approached agreed to participate in the survey. The primary reasons for refusal were lack of time and language barriers (primarily Spanish and Eastern European languages).

STUDY AREAS

Recreation sites in six of the the study reaches were chosen for the on-site survey (Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1). Four study reaches were not surveyed due to lack of access to areas near the river. The West and Middle Forks of the North Branch (Reaches 1 and 2) have a lot of public land along the river, but these areas are undeveloped and not easily accessible. The South Branch and the northern segment of the Sanitary and Ship Canal (Reaches 7 and 8) are highly industrialized areas with few recreational opportunities.

The survey sites were grouped into five areas for analysis (sites in Reaches 4 and 5 were grouped due to proximity). These are described below. We refer to *areas* in this report, not the river reaches used in other ChicagoRivers reports, because the sites selected were not intended to represent the entire river reach, but rather to capture the characteristics and sense of place of a smaller area in the corridor.

1. The Skokie Lagoons (Reach 3): The Lagoons are part of the Cook County Forest Preserves, located along the Skokie River north of Chicago. They are bounded by the Edens Expressway to the west, the Chicago Botanic Garden to the north, residential areas to the east, and a mixture of private golf courses, forest preserves, and residential areas to the south. Created as the largest WPA project in the country, the Lagoons are a popular recreation area for the Chicago metropolitan region. Survey sites included paved and unpaved trails, shore areas, and boat docks.

2. The North Branch/North Shore Channel (NSC) Area (Reaches 4 and 5): City parks and county forest preserves edge the river as it runs through residential and commercial areas on the north side of Chicago. For many residents, these open areas are a few minutes’ walk from their houses and apartments, and are as accessible as their back yards. Survey sites were either along the North Branch of the Chicago River or the North Shore Channel, and were between Lawrence and Peterson Aves. including the Chicago Park District’s Eugene Field and Legion Park, and LaBagh Woods, a Cook County Forest Preserve. Trails, developed facilities like ball areas, and unofficial river access areas were surveyed.

3. The Loop Area (Reach 6): The Chicago River flows through the heart of the city, by the popular Wrigley building plaza, the tour boat docks, and other open areas where people enjoy the river sights and sounds. Survey sites included Centennial Fountain; North Pier; and riverside cafes, restaurants, and plazas along the Chicago River between Lake Shore Dr. and Jackson Blvd.

4. The Palos Area (Reach 9): The Palos Forest Preserve is the largest open space in Cook County. Hiking and bicycle trails crisscross the preserve. The county’s only rock canyon can be found in Palos, as can areas of native vegetation being restored by volunteers and the Forest Preserve District. Sloughs, creeks, and portions of the Chicago River corridor offer water-based recreation. Residential, industrial, and commercial sites surround the Palos Forest Preserve. Portions of the I&M Canal bike trail that parallel the Sanitary and Ship Canal were surveyed (other recreation sites in this area were too far from the river corridor to include, and “user-made” riverside trails were not in use when interviewers were on-site).

5. The Cal-Sag Area (Reach 10): The Cal-Sag area has a mixture of industrial, commercial, and residential uses, with recreation and open spaces sprinkled throughout. Several smaller forest preserve sites are located in the area, as are private marinas, and large landfills that have served Chicago for decades. Survey sites include the Alsip boat landing, Beaubien Woods and Calumet Boating Center Cook County forest preserve areas, and private marinas near the O’Brien Locks.

TABLE 3.1
Survey areas

River reach	Survey site name	Number of people surveyed				
		Total (n)	Weekend am	Weekend pm	Weekday am	Weekday pm
3	Skokie Lagoons	148	12	77	29	30
4 & 5	North Branch/NSC	135	17	66	24	28
6	Loop area	165	18	45	47	55
9	Palos area	55	7	23	19	6
10	Cal-Sag area ¹	79	33	46	0	0

¹ The Cal-Sag Area was sampled on weekdays, but no recreationists were present.

At certain sites a particular type of activity predominated. For instance, the Palos area respondents were primarily bikers and the Cal-Sag area respondents were often power boaters. This reflects the nature of river access in these reaches: the I & M Canal bicycle trail in the Palos area and the marinas along the Cal-Sag channel were virtually the only recreation points near the waterways. The sample reflects these limitations. However, because interviewers were at each location morning and afternoon, on weekdays and weekends, and explored nearly all potential use areas, we are confident that the sample captures overall warm-weather use characteristics of these sites.



FIGURE 3.1
Map of study reaches with location of on-site surveys

CODING OF OPEN-ENDED SURVEY RESPONSES

Responses to open-ended questions such as “What things do you like best about this stretch of the river and the areas around it?” were coded using specific category codes developed to capture the full flavor of their original comment (survey questions 6, 8, 9, and 14, Appendix 3.1). For instance, “color/sound of water” was separate from “cool breeze/fresh air.” After data entry was complete, categories with few responses were grouped with other similar response categories: both “color/sound of water” and “cool breeze/fresh air” were grouped in “other nature-related” liked attributes.

We recorded multiple responses for each open-ended question. To analyze responses to open-ended questions by activity group (e.g., boaters), we assumed that the first activity reported was the respondents’ main activity (over two-thirds of the people we spoke with reported only one activity), and developed a set of variables based on this first activity. After an initial discussion of activities, we use these single-activity variables in this report.

ANALYSIS

Various statistical methods were used to determine any significant difference based on site, activity, or demographic groups (one-way tables, ANOVA, and cross tabulation with chi-square). We report the probability values in tables as appropriate; all differences discussed in this chapter are significant at the .05 level.

LIMITATIONS

Although the survey provides considerable valuable information for planning future recreation improvements of the river, there are several important limitations to keep in mind.

First, the survey does not, and was not designed to, provide information about the overall percentage of Chicago area residents who participate in various activities along the river. The sampling design does not allow for this kind of inference.

Second, responses to questions about rivers in the Chicago area (survey questions 13 and 14) seemed to focus on the river corridor at the interview site. For instance, responses to “What changes do you think most need to be done to make rivers in the Chicago area better for recreation?” included general comments like “clean it up” and specific suggestions like “we need a rest room here.” However, the responses are still useful, and provide many insights into respondents’ perceptions of changes in river quality, and changes they would like to see made to the entire Chicago River corridor.

Finally, special characteristics of winter use are not captured in this survey. Cross-country skiing and other winter activities were, of course, not reported. Site attributes that are liked and disliked and characteristics of recreationists may change with the season. To gather this information, this survey would need to be implemented in the other seasons.

PART II RESULTS OF THE OVERALL SAMPLE

A total of 582 surveys were completed; 344 (59%) on weekends and 238 (41%) on weekdays (Table 3.1). This section presents highlights of the overall sample. Tables in Appendices 3.2 and 3.3 provide detailed information on the responses of the overall sample by river use patterns, perceptions of the river, and demographics, as well as by area and activity groups.

DEMOGRAPHICS

We asked respondents about themselves—their age, place and length of residence, race, gender, and family income level (survey questions 18-24). The demographics of the respondents were similar to those in previous studies of forest preserve recreationists (Young and Flowers 1982). Still, these results characterize the sample only, not all users of the river corridor. Major characteristics of the sample are:

- The respondents were primarily white/European-American (78%). Black/African-American was the second largest racial/ethnic group (10%). The respondents at the North Branch/NSC area were most diverse, and the respondents at the Palos area were least diverse. A higher than overall percentage of the respondents were African-American in the Skokie Lagoons, Loop, and Cal-Sag areas; a higher percentage were Hispanic/Latino in the North Branch/NSC area; and a higher percentage were Asian-Americans/Pacific Islanders in the Skokie Lagoons and North Branch/NSC areas. Table 3.2 summarizes these groups by area.
- The largest age group of respondents were in their thirties (30%). Visitors 50 years or older made up 22% of the sample.

TABLE 3.2
Respondents from racial/ethnic groups, by area

Racial/ Ethnic Group ¹	Total	Skokie Lagoons	North Branch and NSC	Loop Area	Palos Area	Cal- Sag Area
		% reporting ²				
African- American/Black	10	13	6	11	0	15
Hispanic/Latino	6	3	14	3	7	1
Asian-American/ Pacific Islander	3	3	5	1	2	3
North American Indian	2	2	4	2	0	1
Euro-American/ white	78	78	70	81	89	80

¹Differences by race/ethnicity across sites were significant: $\chi^2 = 46.63$, 20 df, $p < .01$; ²Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.