

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.

TABLE 3.3
Activities reported by respondents¹

| | | |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| Major Activity Categories | Just passing through, commuting (8) | Picking up trash/recycling (1) |
| <i>Sitting, relaxing, resting (95)</i> | Talking, socializing, get together (8) | Playing an instrument (1) |
| <i>Bicycling (93)</i> | Play cards or board games/crafts (7) | Taking in fresh air (1) |
| <i>Fishing (71)</i> | Shopping (7) | Other Active Activities (90) |
| <i>Lunch hour/eating (69)</i> | Watch/meet people, “girl watching” (7) | Roller-blading (27) |
| <i>Walking, hiking (58)</i> | Studying (5) | Play baseball/softball (17) |
| <i>Boating (power) (54)</i> | Unorganized partying, drinking (5) | Jogging, running (11) |
| Other Passive Activities (276) | Waiting for someone (5) | Canoeing, kayak (10) |
| Watching park, general sightseeing (32) | Watch sports (5) | Frisbee (6) |
| Picnicking, barbecuing (27) | Photography (4) | Play volleyball (6) |
| Reading/writing (27) | Smoking (4) | Play basketball (3) |
| Sunbathing (27) | Bird, animal watching (3) | Play football (2) |
| Taking children out to play (22) | Participate in organized festival/event (3) | Play soccer (2) |
| Taking dog out to walk or play (22) | Dating, kissing, affection (2) | Waterskiing (2) |
| “Vacationing,” “hanging out” (15) | Boat tours (1) | Play other sports (1) |
| Working on car/boat (13) | Horseshoes (1) | Play tennis (1) |
| Working (paid—often reading) (11) | Leading a river tour (1) | Tubing (1) |
| | Listening to music (1) | Windsurfing (1) |

¹806 responses were given. Up to five responses were coded per interview, all are reported here. Frequencies are given in parentheses. Activity groups used for comparison are in italics.

- Half of the respondents were Chicago residents. In the North Branch/NSC area, virtually all visitors were Chicago residents. The Palos Area visitors were predominantly suburban residents. In other areas, there were varying degrees of mix between Chicago and suburban residents.
- There were more men than women in the sample (62% male, 38% female).

RIVER USE CHARACTERISTICS

We asked river users about what activities they engaged in during their visit, how long they planned to stay on site, how often they visit, how they got there, and what size their group was (survey questions 1-6 and 15-17). Highlights of those results follow.

ACTIVITIES

Respondents reported engaging in 50 different activities (Table 3.3). The six most commonly mentioned activities were: walking/hiking, biking, motor boating, fishing, sitting and relaxing, and eating lunch. The remaining array of activities were grouped into “other passive” activities and “other active” activities. The “other passive” activities ranged from taking in fresh air to dog training, from trumpet practice to photography. The “other active” group included sports, canoeing, and other more vigorous activities. Activity highlights include:

- “Other passive” activities was the largest category, both in number of responses and number of activities mentioned. This suggests that river areas are used for many different kinds of activities—some structured, others unstructured. The most common passive activities were watching the park/sightseeing, picnicking, reading or writing, sunbathing, taking the kids or the dog out to play, and

“hanging out.” Some of these activities appear to be independent of the river; in others the river may be an integral part of the experience (for instance, watching the river flow by might have been important to someone who said they were “hanging out”). That so many different activities are engaged in along the river suggests that the river is a place that facilitates creativity and individual expression.

- Activities varied considerably by site; characteristics of the river and its corridor and available facilities affected this to some extent. The Skokie Lagoons had a mix of active and passive use; fishing and biking were important activities. “Other passive” activities were prominent at the North Branch/NSC area. Major activities in the Loop were eating lunch and relaxing. The Palos area had many cyclists and roller-bladers. Boating was the main activity in the Cal-Sag area. Table 3.4 summarizes the activity groups by area.

TABLE 3.4
Activity groups, by area¹

| | Total | Skokie Lagoons | N. Branch and NSC | Loop Area | Palos Area | Cal-Sag Area |
|---------------|-----------|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Activity | | % reporting ² | | | | |
| Other Passive | 28 | 16 | 47 | 31 | 0 | 32 |
| Bike | 14 | 26 | 6 | 1 | 64 | 0 |
| Sit/relax | 13 | 4 | 13 | 29 | 0 | 4 |
| Fish | 11 | 29 | 10 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Other active | 10 | 10 | 13 | 2 | 22 | 1 |
| Walk/hike | 9 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 2 | 0 |
| Motor boat | 8 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 57 |
| Eat lunch | 7 | 4 | 0 | 21 | 0 | 1 |

¹Based on first response to activity questions.
²Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

TRANSPORTATION, VISIT LENGTH AND FREQUENCY, AND GROUP SIZE

Respondents varied greatly in their transportation to the site, their visit length, group size, and frequency of visiting the river. Respondents traveled to the area by a variety of means, stayed anywhere from a few minutes to several days, recreated alone or in groups as large as 200, and had come for the first time or nearly every day. Use pattern highlights include:

- Most of the recreation took place in small groups or individually. Groups of more than six people were reported by only 8% of respondents. Recreating alone was the predominant pattern in the Loop, but larger groups were most common in the North Branch/NSC area. Groups of two to six people were more common in the other areas. Children were more likely to be a part of the group in the North Branch/NSC and Cal-Sag areas.
- Most respondents drove to the area—including cyclists. The Loop was the only area where walking was the most common means of transportation to the area.
- Most visitors either lived or worked nearby (within one mile) *or* traveled over four and a half miles to the area. Visitors from nearby walked, drove, and biked to the area. Nearby use was most common in the North Branch/NSC area and in the Loop. The Skokie Lagoons, Palos, and Cal-Sag areas had more regional use.
- Half of the respondents were frequent visitors, coming to the area at least weekly. Daily visits were most common in the North Branch/NSC and Loop (the two areas with heavier local use).
- Visit length varied considerably by area and activity; visits of one hour or less were most common overall. Visits of less than an hour were the rule in the Loop. The longest visits were reported in the Cal-Sag area, where 15% planned overnight stays on their boats.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE RIVER

Respondents were asked three questions about their perceptions of the stretch of river where they were interviewed, and two questions about rivers in the Chicago area in general. Two open-ended questions were asked about what they liked and disliked about the site where they were interviewed (survey questions 8 and 9). Respondents were also asked closed-ended questions about the importance of the river to their enjoyment of their recreational activities that day, and about their perceptions of potential problems such as water quality interfering with their use and enjoyment of the river (survey questions 7 and 10). Questions about rivers in the Chicago area in general were used to assess what they thought most needed changing to improve the rivers for recreation, and whether they felt river recreational quality had improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse in the past few years (survey questions 13 and 14). Highlights from the sample include:

- The majority of the respondents—65%—indicated that the river in their area was “very important” to their enjoyment

of their recreation activity. It was particularly important to respondents in the Skokie Lagoons, Loop, and Cal-Sag areas.

- The qualities of the river mentioned most often as “likes” were scenic beauty, facilities (like parking, picnic areas, plazas, rest rooms), solitude/quiet, peacefulness, and other nature-related features (like landscaping). The importance of attributes varied by area: scenic qualities were more important in the Skokie Lagoons, Loop, and Palos areas; facilities were more important in the Loop and Cal-Sag areas; and opportunities for solitude were more important in the North Branch/NSC area.
- When asked what they did not like about the river, many respondents (32%) said “nothing.” Those that did express a dislike cited water pollution, poor facilities, user conflicts, and trash. Water pollution was mentioned the most in the Skokie Lagoons and Cal-Sag areas. Poor facilities were mentioned as a problem in all areas, but was *less* often mentioned in the Loop. User conflicts were more commonly reported in the North Branch/NSC and Cal-Sag areas.
- Water quality and garbage dumping were the most-cited problems that might interfere with the use and enjoyment of the site; they were mentioned by over half of the entire sample. Water quality was rated more of a problem in the southern areas (Cal-Sag and Palos). Dumping was rated a problem by at least half of the respondents in all areas.
- Respondents wanted a cleaner river. When asked what changes were needed to improve Chicago area rivers, 37% said clean up the water, and 9% said clean up the trash and the corridor. Activity- and facility-related improvements were also mentioned frequently.

PART III ISSUES OF MANAGERIAL INTEREST

Results of this survey can help managers deal with many issues about public use of the Chicago River Corridor. These general issues include:

- How important is the Chicago River to current recreation users? What is the nature of this importance, and what effect might this have on management?
- What is the public’s meaning of “clean?” Will they know a clean Chicago River when they see it? What emphasis should managers place on education and on remediation?
- How much access is desirable? What *kinds* of access—physical, visual, both? What problems might arise from, or be reduced by, increased access?
- How important are opportunities to experience nature and scenic beauty to current recreational users?
- What developments do current users most want to see? What level of development should be aimed for—large or small scale, riverside trails or pocket parks?
- Do people feel safe recreating along the river? Are there important safety concerns that need to be addressed?