



# Resource Experts: Discussion of Issues Related to Key Recreation Opportunities

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## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We conducted this study to identify the types and range of outdoor recreation and open space opportunities available in the Chicago River corridor and to learn more about how these opportunities relate to the physical and social characteristics of the resource. We turned to four major types of resource experts for this information: public land managers, non-profit recreation and environmental interest groups, commercial recreation providers, and commercial and industrial interests. In all, we conducted 38 formal and informal interviews with 55 people, representing 33 agencies, organizations, and companies. Principal questions addressed the current and projected supply of recreation and open space opportunities, issues and concerns related to current use and potential increased use for various activities, and recommendations for improving opportunities in the corridor. To help answer these questions, we supplemented the interviews with information from more than 100 secondary sources.

### PROFILES OF RESOURCE EXPERTS

Three major sets of findings are presented. The first is a profile of the principal groups active in the corridor, focusing on the major public land holders, but also describing other important agencies, groups, and companies. Findings here show a long history of public agency activity in open space protection and recreation development in the corridor, an increasing concern for the ecological management of land holdings, and an optimistic outlook for increased open space acquisition and recreational access to lands. Diverse private not-for-profit groups also have an interest in the corridor, including conservation, recreation, historic preservation, and economic development concerns. These groups help plan for the corridor, provide recreation opportunities, and assist in land and water management on public lands. Partnerships between public agencies and not-for-profits are becoming increasingly important as agencies expand their management responsibilities with limited funding. The private sector's role in providing recreation opportunities has long been established in the corridor through marinas and other boating-oriented businesses. With recent improvements in water quality, this role has focused more directly on the river corridor rather than solely on Lake Michigan or other water bodies in the region. Three types of commercial and industrial interests

are also found along the river: 1) Real estate companies interested in developing vacant industrial properties for commercial and residential uses. In both downtown Chicago and in suburban reaches of the corridor, developers are generally aware of the public value of the river edge and willing to work with public agencies to provide public access and amenities. 2) Businesses that see their riverfront as more than a functional asset and are amenable to aesthetic and/or recreational improvement of their properties. This may include landscaping the shoreline and providing some type of access to their employees and/or the public. 3) Businesses that do not see their riverfront as more than a functional asset and are concerned that recreational use by employees or the public would be unsafe or undesirable because of possible theft, vandalism, and/or liability.

### CURRENT AND POTENTIAL RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

The second set of findings is a reach-by-reach description of the current and potential supply of recreation and open space opportunities. Information is provided in tabular and map form. Discussion highlights four major activity types: boating, fishing, trails, and natural and cultural resource-based recreation and education. Our findings show a wealth of opportunities now available in the corridor, with plans for future increases (Table 4.1).

### ISSUES RELATED TO RECREATION USES

The third set of findings presented here discuss the salient issues related to recreational use of the corridor for boating, fishing, trails, and natural and cultural resource-based recreation and education. We organized interview information and secondary data sources under the following topics: historical background, current uses, opportunities and constraints to use, prospects and implications of increased use, and recommendations by interviewees for improving recreation and open space opportunities. Findings show that although problems do exist and could increase as the corridor becomes more popular for recreation, resource experts were mostly enthusiastic about the potential of the Chicago River to supply quality recreation and open space opportunities for the metropolitan area. Major concerns and

**TABLE 4.1**  
**Summary of current and potential recreation and open space opportunities**

<b>REACH 1: WEST FORK OF THE NORTH BRANCH</b>	
• <b>Description:</b>	14 miles; narrow, shallow, and channelized; mostly residential land use with significant open and forested areas
• <b>Boating:</b>	Marginal; lower part navigable by canoe/kayak with adequate flow
• <b>Fishing:</b>	Little activity; bass and panfish but not a large fishery
• <b>Trails:</b>	Planned 12-mile Techny Trail with links to North Branch Bicycle Trail
• <b>Nature/Culture:</b>	70-acre Somme Prairie Nature Preserve and restoration site
• <b>Other:</b>	4 parks, 1 forest preserve picnic grove, 4 golf courses
<b>REACH 2: MIDDLE FORK OF THE NORTH BRANCH</b>	
• <b>Description:</b>	24 miles; upper stretch shallow/wetlands, channelized, mixed land use of residential, farm, and diverse open space ecosystems
• <b>Boating:</b>	Marginal except for lower 3+ miles for canoe and kayak
• <b>Fishing:</b>	Little activity but good potential in lower part for pike, bass, panfish
• <b>Trails:</b>	Developed trails, footpaths, and part of the North Branch Bicycle Trail; proposed link of Lake County forest preserve sites with nature trail
• <b>Nature/Culture:</b>	Middle Fork Savanna natural area, restoration sites in Cook and Lake County forest preserves
• <b>Other:</b>	2 municipal parks, 7 forest preserve picnic groves, 4 golf courses
<b>REACH 3: EAST FORK OF THE NORTH BRANCH (SKOKIE RIVER)</b>	
• <b>Description:</b>	17 miles; headwater wetlands/shallow-channelized upper reach; Skokie Lagoons includes 7 pools/190 acres of water; below, river is wider and navigable; land use is residential, forest preserve, and golf courses
• <b>Boating:</b>	Excellent and popular canoeing, boating (electric motors allowed), and sailing in Lagoons (7-mile round trip); canoe/kayak below Lagoons
• <b>Fishing:</b>	Recently restocked Skokie Lagoons popular for bass, catfish, walleye, and panfish; little fishing below Lagoons and marginal fishery above except for fishing ponds at Greenbelt Forest Preserve
• <b>Trails:</b>	5-mile multi-use trail at Lake County Greenbelt preserve; planned nature trails through Lake County conservancy sites; North Branch Bicycle Trail, hiking and horse trails through Cook County forest preserves
• <b>Nature/Culture:</b>	Several restoration sites in Lake & Cook County; Lagoons popular nature area
• <b>Other:</b>	4 municipal parks, 5 forest preserve picnic areas, 12 golf courses
<b>REACH 4: NORTH SHORE CHANNEL</b>	
• <b>Description:</b>	17.5 miles; straight, human-created channel, 8' deep, 150' wide; owned by Metropolitan Water Reclamation District—leased mostly as open space
• <b>Boating:</b>	Navigable by motorboat and canoe in its entirety; no outlet to Lake
• <b>Fishing:</b>	Little activity; fishery is limited but improving
• <b>Trails:</b>	7 miles of discontinuous bike trail segments with plans to link them
• <b>Nature/Culture:</b>	Ladd Arboretum/Evanston Ecology Center; birding increasingly popular
• <b>Other:</b>	Several community parks, mostly passive use; 1 golf course
<b>REACH 5: NORTH BRANCH</b>	
• <b>Description:</b>	17 miles; upper reach is winding, primarily natural forest preserves and parks; lower is channelized, deeper and wider, and industrialized
• <b>Boating:</b>	Upper reach navigable by canoe and kayak; lower reach by motorboat
• <b>Fishing:</b>	River Park dam popular for bullhead, carp; little activity otherwise
• <b>Trails:</b>	North Branch Bicycle Trail on upper reach; proposed linkage of trails in Chicago parks w/North Branch Riverwalk; partial Chicago Riverwalk
• <b>Nature/Culture:</b>	Numerous forest preserve restoration sites
• <b>Other:</b>	11 picnic groves, 12 public parks, several private parks, 3 golf courses

**TABLE 4.1 (Continued)**  
**Summary of current and potential recreation and open space opportunities**

<b>REACH 6: CHICAGO RIVER–MAIN STEM</b>	
<b>• Description:</b>	1.4 miles; wide, deep, mostly high-rise commercial and riverwalk uses
<b>• Boating:</b>	Popular motorboating, rowing club, excursion boats; some industrial use
<b>• Fishing:</b>	Increasingly popular; bass and seasonal runs
<b>• Trails:</b>	Chicago Riverwalk is partially completed and discontinuous
<b>• Nature/Culture:</b>	Many historic and contemporary cultural sites; seasonal bird migrations
<b>• Other:</b>	Riverside cafes, public parks and plazas, interim use golf course
<b>REACH 7: SOUTH BRANCH AND BUBBLY CREEK</b>	
<b>• Description:</b>	4 miles (+ Bubbly Creek 1 mile); wide, deep; commercial/industrial use
<b>• Boating:</b>	Popular motorboating, rowing, excursion boats in downtown area
<b>• Fishing:</b>	Limited; some fishing (bass, carp) in turning basin and Bubbly Creek
<b>• Trails:</b>	Chicago Riverwalk proposed connection to Chinatown, points south
<b>• Nature/Culture:</b>	Many historic buildings and bridges; some vacant industrial wildlands
<b>• Other:</b>	Planned 12-acre park in Chinatown
<b>REACHES 8 &amp; 9: CHICAGO SANITARY AND SHIP CANAL</b>	
<b>• Description:</b>	30 miles; straight channel for wastewater and transportation created by Metropolitan Water Reclamation District; industry and open space
<b>• Boating:</b>	Increasingly used for recreational motorboating, but heavy barge traffic
<b>• Fishing:</b>	Limited in channel; some good fishing in adjacent ponds and quarries
<b>• Trails:</b>	9 mile I&M Canal Bike Trail, 3 mile Lockport Historic Trail; planned 20 mile Centennial Trail with linkages to existing and planned trails running the length of the reach. Developed trail network in Palos forest preserve
<b>• Nature/Culture:</b>	Significant natural areas and restoration sites in Cook, Will, and Du Page Co. forest preserves; environmental education centers; historic canal towns Lemont and Lockport, Great Lakes-Mississippi portage site
<b>• Other:</b>	10 forest preserve picnic groves, 2 parks, 4 golf courses, tourism
<b>REACH 10: CALUMET RIVER, LITTLE CALUMET RIVER, AND CALUMET-SAG CHANNEL</b>	
<b>• Description:</b>	30 miles; wide and deep; channelized and partly human-created; largely industrial with some significant stretches of forest preserve and wetlands
<b>• Boating:</b>	Numerous marinas in eastern half; increasingly popular for recreation motorboating but heavy barge traffic
<b>• Fishing:</b>	Limited in channel, but increasing; good fishing in adjacent ponds
<b>• Trails:</b>	Presently limited except for Palos Forest Preserve network and Lake Katherine Nature Center; plans for trails running length of reach with links to existing/proposed systems
<b>• Nature/Culture:</b>	Several Palos area restoration sites and natural areas; exceptional wetlands, birding around Lake Calumet; nature centers
<b>• Other:</b>	8 forest preserve picnic groves, 6 parks, 3 golf courses

interviewee recommendations are summarized in Table 4.2 for the principal activities we covered.

The Chicago River corridor is at a turning point in recreational use and open space development; planning and management decisions made in the next few years will determine how use and development of these opportunities can be encouraged and merged with other corridor values.

This chapter identifies use, resources, concerns, and issues from across the corridor, and it documents perspectives from the past, present, and proposed future. Along with findings from the companion studies in the ChicagoRivers project, this information can help guide efforts to ensure a broad spectrum of recreation and open space opportunities in the corridor.

**TABLE 4.2**  
**Summary of interviewee concerns/recommendations for primary corridor activities**

**BOATING**

**Interviewee Concerns:**

- Poor access to most reaches
- Once on the river (especially downtown), there are few destinations for power boaters
- Vertical walls of waterway make it difficult for small craft operators to get out of river in emergency
- Conflicts between paddle boats and power boats
- Conflicts between recreational boats and commercial boats
- Concern about the continued livelihood of commercial carriers if their river use is restricted
- Lack of boating regulation and enforcement; intoxicated recreational boaters
- Potential increases in crowding, conflict, and safety problems as boating increases in popularity

**Interviewee Recommendations:**

- Develop canoe trails at appropriate locations along the waterway
- Encourage development of private marinas and public boat landings where needed
- Encourage development of boat-oriented commercial and amenity attractions
- Install ladders along the vertical river walls downtown for emergency use
- Create activities and facilities to draw boaters to little-used stretches of the corridor
- Expand and publicize boater safety training courses
- Expand the current staffing of waterway enforcement for boating
- Establish a river authority to coordinate planning and regulation of river boating use
- Expand boat tour programs to other reaches besides downtown

**FISHING**

**Interviewee Concerns:**

- Poor fishing access to river from public land
- Increasing closure of fishing access from private property
- Questions about the safety of fish consumption
- Need to sustain recreational fishery under increased fishing pressure
- Potential for increased use conflicts as fishing increases in popularity

**Interviewee Recommendations:**

- Incorporate fishing and other shore-oriented activities into new park development
- Develop new management and regulatory frameworks for evolving urban fisheries
- Identify and examine new opportunities for fishing
- Expand public fisheries management programs
- Expand work with volunteer groups to improve recreational fishing programs

**TRAILS**

**Interviewee Concerns:**

- Limited public access to the waterfront
- Current network of trails is fragmented
- High weekend use levels on North Branch Bicycle Trail
- New trail development may not be popular with adjacent neighbors
- Inappropriate/high use levels could harm the natural environment near the trails

**Interviewee Recommendations:**

- Aim for a continuous, linked network of trails
- Aim for diversity in the trail system
- Aim for an appropriate level of trail development
- Phase in new trail development in conjunction with urban redevelopment projects
- Develop coordinated signage for trails

**RESOURCE-BASED RECREATION AND EDUCATION**

**Interviewee Concerns:**

- Poorly planned corridor development could impact cultural-natural environmental quality
- Inappropriate and high levels of use of natural areas by trail riders (e.g., equestrians, mountain bicyclists) could harm restoration projects or rare plant communities
- High levels of use of natural areas by nature enthusiasts might also degrade the environment

**Interviewee Recommendations:**

- Enhance existing river properties for natural and wildlife benefits
- Expand existing programs and facilities oriented toward natural and cultural resource education
- Expand volunteer stewardship activities in the corridor and increase attention to the river proper, e.g., shoreline vegetation restoration and in-stream cleanup and monitoring