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ORTHCENTER NEIGHBORS RIVERBANK



*“This is a complicated place...
The river is a place
so different from
the rest of the city.
It’s mysterious.
It’s got some kind
of feeling like
some natural place
survives here.”*

– Pete Leki,
river neighbor
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Neighbors Take Back Their River

This story is about power—the power of the river as a healing force in people’s lives; the power of conflicting viewpoints that obstruct action; and the power of a few dedicated individuals to overcome obstacles and accomplish something on an urban river. The power and value of an

urban river is not always tangible or easily measured. It's difficult to put a price on the value of a spot in an urban neighborhood where you can connect with the natural world after a long day at work. Or a place to show a city kid a bullfrog or beaver.

The obstacles to river restoration can be equally intangible and powerful. People's conflicting perceptions about this stretch of river presented as much of a challenge to restoration as the physical condition of its banks. As things progressed, a few inspired "doers" managed to bring together neighbors and school children to provide safe neighborhood access to the river, while stabilizing eroding river banks and restoring native vegetation along this stretch of the North Branch of the Chicago River.

The Northcenter neighborhood is located on the north side of



Aerial view of the Northcenter neighborhood (upper right) illustrates the residents' close proximity to the North Branch of the Chicago River. Photograph by Richard E. Carter, 1995.

Chicago. Overgrown vegetation shaded the river bank, and crowded out other plants with greater soil-holding capacity. Construction debris and household rubbish were regularly dumped at the site.

Many neighborhood residents envisioned that their stretch of river could be improved and shared with more people. Other residents felt river access invited illicit activity. Some neighbors built fences to limit river access, while others built a bench to encourage public use of the river.

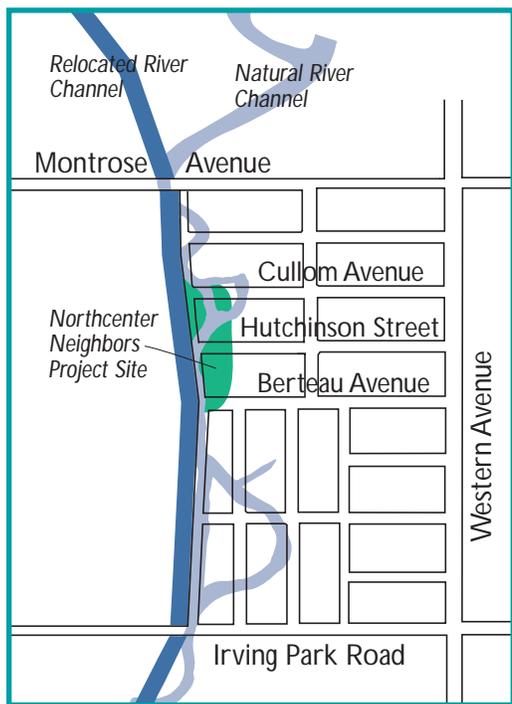
When a 30-foot section of river bank collapsed, creating a very steep and even more unstable river-edge, everyone agreed that such erosion benefited no one. A group of neighbors got advice from local ecologists and civic organizations and developed an informal plan to fix the bank and make the river more of a community asset.

Neighbors cut back overgrown vegetation and branches, allowing needed sunlight for soil-holding groundcover and built terraces from old branch-

es to further reduce soil erosion. They also planted vegetation native to the Chicago area, making a psychological link with local prairie restoration activities.

This bank stabilization has improved water quality. The enhanced bank habitat has helped increase the bird and duck populations. After clearing the dense vegetation and trash, the area is more open and the river can be seen quite easily. The riverbank is now treasured throughout the neighborhood while dumping and other undesirable uses are no longer tolerated.

Nearby Waters Elementary School has developed an environmental education program tied to the project, showing children the plants and animals native to their area, studying the ecology of urban river systems, and providing opportunities to learn through community service. The children have also written poems and short stories about their experiences.



Dramatic changes to the river at the turn-of-the-century accommodated later development of the Northcenter Neighborhood. Courtesy of Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.

WHAT WAS DONE

- Neighbors cleared trash and broke up dumped concrete.
- Overgrown vegetation and branches were cut to allow more sunlight.
- People built terraces from old branches to hold the soil in place and planted them with native vegetation.
- Other improvements include a half-mile trail next to the river and steps down to the water which provide access for walking, nature observation, and informal canoe access.
- The stabilization of the bank reduced erosion improving the river's water quality.
- The project received an **Award for Outstanding Educational Work from American Rivers**, a national non-profit organization promoting river conservation, clean water, and healthy watersheds.
- **PROJECT TIMING** — Although much time was spent organizing and resolving differences, the first project “success” was achieved 6 months after initial funding.



Terraces built in the steep riverbank reduced soil erosion and enabled the establishment of vegetation. Courtesy of Pete Leki.

“I would like to see a clean river, a river where everyone could enjoy the view of ducks swimming by, of couples, people passing by, and seeing once again the river, clean and healthy, for animals, especially fish, to live in.”

– From a poem entitled “Paradise Lost (ChicagoRiver)” by Aldi Irineo, Amundsen High School student in *SIPI: A Collection of River Stories*

WHO WAS INVOLVED

****Friends of the Chicago River** served as publicist, fiscal agent, and advisor. Contact: (312) 939-0490.

****Interested Neighbors** provided visions for the riverbank and the physical labor needed to make the vision a reality. Contact: Pete Leki (773) 463- 8968.

Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago provided work crews to cut trees and haul refuse. They also gave river tours to students and provided technical review of the work plan.

North Branch Prairie Project provided scientific advice for appropriate plants and methods to use.

National Park Service, through the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project, provided technical guidance and encouragement.

Waters Elementary School developed an environmental education program making use of the site for hands-on learning.

Local officials also participated in a process to negotiate an inter-agency agreement for long-term site management.

**** Call these participants for more detailed information about this project.**

PROJECT LESSONS

With the Northcenter Neighbors River Restoration Project, how things got done was as important as what got done:

TAKE CHARGE AND GET THINGS DONE

The dedication and inspiration of a few individuals got this project started with commitments for long-term maintenance. The key to project success, however, was the ability of the neighbors to effectively resolve their differences and develop an approach supported by everybody.

RIVER RESTORATION DOESN'T ALWAYS HAVE A BIG PRICE TAG

Although funding was critical, project partners made a little go a long way, borrowing tools and seeking donations of expertise and time to get things done.

MOTIVATIONS GO BEYOND THE MEASURABLE

While bank erosion may have been the catalyst that got this project going, it was an enduring vision of the river's edge as a special haven which motivated many participants. Don't discount the desire for a physical or even spiritual connection with nature as an inspiration for people's participation.

GOOD IDEAS CREATE MOMENTUM

This was an informal and creative project; people didn't always wait until all the details were in place. They forged ahead and, when they started to get things done, their progress and team spirit attracted

more support and involvement. Neighbors experienced in prairie restoration helped with advice and plants from their gardens; others brought refreshments to work days. The sight of neighborhood children joining with plantings and other activities went a long way toward demonstrating to skeptical adults that local youth could be an asset in their community, not a liability.

DIFFERING OPINIONS NEED TO BE HEARD

People in the Northcenter community had widely divergent ideas about the river-edge and how—or whether—it should be used. This project moved forward by acknowledging, then resolving, conflicting opinions. Community meetings with a facilitator helped tremendously.

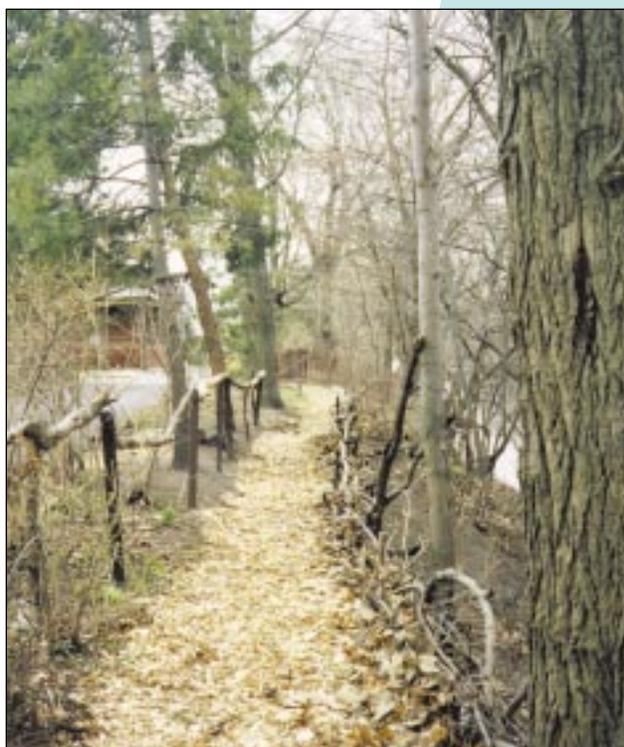
“It’s very nice and peaceful at the river. When you feel sad, angry, or maybe just lonely, you can go to the river to relax and think.”

– Lolita Aulet, Waters
Elementary School student

“You’re inviting break-ins and vandalism and whatever. There’s no reason for kids to be hanging out on this bank when there’s a park on the other side.”

– Bill Peklo, river neighbor

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An informal trail accommodates peaceful walks, views of the river and, most importantly, relief from the stress of urban living.
Courtesy of Pete Leki.

G

OMPERS PARK WETLANDS



“Through active involvement with park improvements, neighborhood residents contribute to a better, healthier environment while following the progress of their efforts each day.”

–Forrest Claypool,
Chicago
Park District

The Community that Built a Wetland

For this project, it took an entire “village” to restore a wetland. The dedication and involvement of community members and the effective collaboration of a variety of agency and organization partners restored a wetland in a city park along the North Branch of the Chicago River. The



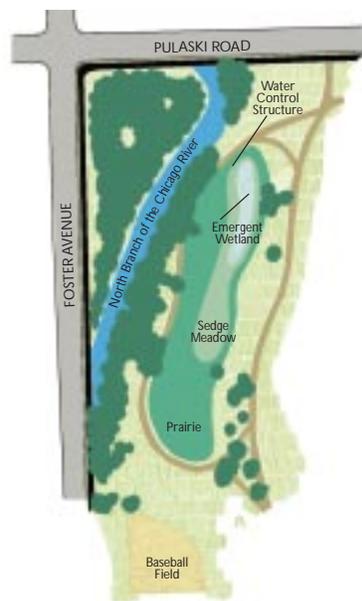
A Chicago arts educator worked with seven Amundsen High School students to complete this mural depicting the Gompers Park wetland, called "Dragonfly Slough" by the students. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

Gompers Park wetland provides a living demonstration of how wetlands work, while serving as a focal point for community involvement and environmental education.

Gompers Park is located in the City of Chicago, in a north side neighborhood. The two-acre area of the park selected for restoration was thought to have once been a small, marshy wetland within the Chicago River floodplain. What is known for certain about the site is that in the late 1930s a lagoon was built, creating a stream, which still flows to the river through the project site. In the 1960s, the marshy area was filled in and replanted as lawn. These changes limited the natural functions of the river. In addition, frequent flooding in the park limited use of the baseball field.

Local community groups such as the North Mayfair Improvement Association and the North Mayfair Garden Club had long wanted to restore the wetlands to Gompers Park, which is considered the scenic focal point of the community. In the late 1980s the North River Commission, Friends of the Chicago River, and numerous community organizations created the North Branch River Walk Plan, which, in

addition to proposing a continuous river walkway, identified several potential restoration areas, including a wetlands in Gompers Park. In 1994, the potential natural and recreational benefits of a wetland at Gompers Park were again highlighted, this time by several organizations involved in the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project. The strong community interest, feasibility of the restoration itself, and the interest of the Chicago Park District, owner and manager of the property, all combined to bring about the Gompers Park Wetlands Project.



Plan prepared to guide restoration activities (above) and aerial view of the Gompers Park wetland one year after project completion. Photograph by Richard E. Carter, 1996.

Volunteers planted native wetland and prairie vegetation to retain stormwater runoff. The wetland plants also naturally filter out pollutants and sediments carried by the runoff, improving water quality. The wetland now provides habitat for a variety of birds, turtles, frogs and fish.

A water level control structure was built to manage the amount of water flowing onto the site. The water level can be lowered to facilitate maintenance for plantings or sediment removal. Periodically, as the Chicago River rises, a bypass pipe allows river water to flow into the wetland. The combination of a water control structure and the improved ability of the area to hold moisture will help reduce impacts from downstream flooding.



WHAT WAS DONE

- The Chicago Park District worked with many partners to develop a site plan.
- Land and Water Resources, Inc. regraded the site, shaping the land contours so the area would hold an appropriate amount of water, exposing hydric (wet) soils suitable for wetland plants.
- Volunteers planted native wetland and prairie vegetation to capture and retain water.
- A water level control structure was built which manages the amount of water retained on the site. The water control structure in combination with improved moisture retention abilities of soil and vegetation helps reduce downstream flooding impacts and remove pollutants from stormwater runoff.
- Increased water storage capacity provided by the wetland has reduced flooding of the baseball field.
- Bulrushes, blazing star, and big bluestem now thrive where a muddy lawn previously existed. The restored site provides habitat for birds, turtles, frogs and fish.
- Gompers Park wetland also holds the interest of the community. Volunteers continue to be involved in stewardship. Educational activities at the site range from biology to art and music, including a four-panel mural created by Amundsen High School students. Area public school teachers have integrated the wetland into educational curricula.
- **PROJECT TIMING**—Planning, design, volunteer training, construction and initial planting took 24-30 months.



Dedicated neighborhood volunteers worked under extremely hot and dry weather conditions planting the wetland area. Courtesy of Chicago Park District.

WHO WAS INVOLVED

Amundsen and Roosevelt High Schools have incorporated Gompers Park into their school curriculum through planting, monitoring, and use of the site as an outdoors biology lab and art project.

Chicago Academy of Sciences, Field Museum, Museum of Science and Industry, Shedd Aquarium, and North Park Village Nature Center joined together to provide classroom education and field demonstrations for children and adults.

****Chicago Park District** provided overall project coordination, organized community activities, developed restoration plans, provided a major portion of the funding, supervised volunteers, and assisted with site re-vegetation. They are part of the education partnership and will provide long-term management of the site. Contact: Michaelene Brown (312) 747-0692.

Community Volunteers helped with planting, identifying plant species, and conduct guided tours of the wetland.

****Friends of the Chicago River** facilitated community interest and involvement in the project. Friends also organized and publicized volunteer activities, site dedication and volunteer appreciation events. Contact: (312) 939-0490.

****** Call these participants for more detailed information about this project.

National Park Service, through the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project, facilitated the selection of river corridor restoration activities in Chicago neighborhoods, including Gompers Park.

Natural Resource Conservation Service conducted soil and site analysis and assisted with plant selection and plantings. The Service also provided the engineering design, construction oversight, and permits for the water level control structure.

****North Mayfair Improvement Association** brought the site to the attention of agencies and organizations who later became key project partners. Along with the Gompers Park Advisory Council, they provided forums for community education and input. They also helped organize and publicize community volunteer efforts. Contact: North Mayfair Improvement Association: (773) 736-1051.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did hydrological analysis of river flows necessary for site design and obtaining permits.

****U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** helped develop the site design and management plan and assisted with volunteer training sessions, plantings, and educational activities. Contact: (847) 381-2253.

Urban Resources Partnership in Chicago provided technical assistance.



View of the wetland a few months after the initial planting. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

PROJECT LESSONS

CLEAR ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

This project was notable for the number of agencies involved, particularly the number contributing substantive work.

“Being up-front about everybody’s role in advance was critical,” observes Michaelene Brown, a naturalist with the Chicago Park District. Early planning, careful site selection, and getting key people and agencies involved early in the planning process was a keynote of this project.

WORK WITH THE LANDOWNER

This project is notable for the leadership of the Chicago Park District as the site landowner.

PLAN FOR BAD WEATHER AND OTHER DELAYS

This project was dogged by the weather—rainstorms that delayed construction and workdays, intense heat that sapped the strength (but not the good will) of volunteers. There may be practical limits to the number of rain days that can be scheduled, but schedule as many as possible. Always have a contingency...extra rain days, auxiliary sources of water for periods of drought and substitutes for people who do not show up.

COMMUNICATION IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Brown emphasized the importance of getting lots of community input and making sure to explain and educate volunteers and the public about the issues involved.

“It is crucial to bring the public along through the project,” Brown says. Outreach with local residents was a great success; people responded by

supporting and championing the project and by dedicated volunteering. Some neighbors downstream of the project expressed concern that the project might cause flooding downstream, showing the need for broader outreach.

GREAT VOLUNTEERS ARE MADE—NOT BORN

The community has a history of involvement and leadership. Agency partners built on this resource with training for volunteers. The partners also worked to make sure the volunteers were acknowledged for the importance of their work. The result was volunteers who were not only committed, but had the necessary expertise for the sometimes delicate tasks involved in planting and other restoration activities.

“If you can make it a good experience, you will have volunteers for life,” notes Jim McDonald, a North Mayfair Improvement Association leader and project volunteer.

Another strength of this project was the establishment of linkages with local schools and organizations that were able to provide groups of volunteers. The lesson here is that many networks with many organizations involve more people, ensuring continued future involvement.

NO SUBSTITUTE FOR COMMITMENT

Both agency staff and volunteers showed intense dedication to this project. “Unquestionably, what made the Gompers Park project a success was the amazing teamwork of all the partners and their level of personal commitment,” notes Brown. Volunteers were also exceptionally dedicated: “People were

undaunted by delays and really hot days....No one complained or gave up.”

LEAD TIME

One of the significant features of this project was its educational focus. Ed Klunk, principal of Amundsen High School, says of his school’s involvement with Gompers Park restoration activities: “This project give[s] students a better understanding of ecological concepts. All students need to know these basic concepts to understand environmental issues and make informed decisions.”

The project has already been host to several successful educational events including music workshops and a student mural project, both organized by Friends of the Chicago River. While participation in these events was good, due to existing relationships with local schools, organizers learned that many educational institutions need a year or more lead time in order to take advantage of such opportunities.

A PROJECT IS NEVER DONE

This wetland was designed to be interpreted at a community level. The physical restoration of the area was just a first step. On-going stewardship and educational activities are a major feature of this project. Volunteers and students will continue their involvement through weeding, additional plantings, periodic burnings to benefit native plant growth, and monitoring plant diversity, soils, water quality, and hydrology. As with the Northcenter Project, Gompers has increased community participation while individuals and organizations find new ways to use the area.

B

EAUBIEN WOODS-FLATFOOT LAKE

“Each year the kids grow. They come in with downcast eyes, weak handshakes, mumbling conversations. By the end of the summer, they look you in the eye, their handshake is firm and confident, and they can give a 20-minute presentation on Beaubien Woods ecology. And, I’ve not only seen these changes, I’ve been responsible for many of them. It feels awfully good.”

– Richard Wilborn,
Fishin’ Buddies!



The restoration project that changed lives... and landscapes

Today, Beaubien Woods is a place that thousands of people use every year, a place where families can enjoy the outdoors. A few years ago, however, it was a place very few people used. Overgrown with brush, it was a place remembered as a

site where people had been murdered. A few avid fishing enthusiasts went there, but they didn't go unarmed!

Beaubien Woods, which surrounds Flatfoot Lake, lies within an area managed by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County adjacent to the Little Calumet River on Chicago's South Side. It was originally covered by a series of ancient sand dunes, part of a vast area of low ridges and wet prairie on the flat plain adjacent to Lake Michigan. Settlement and industrial development dramatically changed the landscape.

Today Beaubien Woods is host to school field trips, summer conservation work crews, fishing parties, birders, and picnics. How did Beaubien Woods make this magical transformation? By hard work and an unlikely partnership. It was a coming together of two separate projects envisioned for the same place. Fishin' Buddies!, a youth mentoring group based in the African-American community, wanted a safe, clean place for kids to fish in the city.

The Forest Preserve District was interested in restoring native habitat, while local residents identified the deteriorated condition of Beaubien Woods in response to public perception surveys conducted for the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project. The District and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service worked together developing an action plan. Goals involved removing excessive vegetation, stocking Flatfoot Lake (created by the excavation of earth for road building) for fishing, and refurbishing recreational facilities.

Eventually the effort combined "lower-income blacks with middle-class professional blacks with the local government land caretaker, as well as regional and federal agencies," explains Bob Long, vice president of Fishin' Buddies! and a City of Chicago employee. "All these groups came together for the first time."

The results were dramatic both in terms of the lives of participants and improvements to the site. Kevin Lyles, a life-long Chicago native, recounts his experiences at Beaubien Woods. "My dad used to bring me here in the late 1960's. Then one day, we stopped going. We heard it was dangerous. A year-or-so ago I was driving by and saw several people. I stopped to look and couldn't believe how it had changed. I started bringing my children here to explore the same wetlands and forests my dad brought me to years ago."



Removing non-native vegetation improves wildlife habitat at Beaubien Woods, while inner-city youth of all ages learn about nature. Courtesy of Bob Long, Jr.

“Recreational activities are a definite possibility, but people need to feel comfortable and safe. Establishing a presence will draw people back.”

– William Granberry,
Forest Preserve District of
Cook County



Fishin' Buddies! "conservation kids" experience "hands-on" environmental education by assisting with natural resource inventories; here fish species, size and condition are recorded under the guidance of a Forest Preserve District fisheries biologist. Courtesy of Forest Preserve District of Cook County.



Fishin' Buddies! "conservation kids" complete picnic facilities using newly-acquired work skills while learning important "life skills" through interaction with a variety of natural resource professionals. Courtesy of Bob Long, Jr.

"Beaubien Woods went from a place that nobody used to at least 100 people a day going there from April to October."

—Bob Long, Jr.,
Fishin' Buddies!

WHAT WAS DONE

- Teamwork of the District, Fishin' Buddies!, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service dramatically transformed this two-acre site into a desirable recreational area. Beaubien Woods is now a place to use and enjoy.
- Project partners picked up garbage and cleared invasive brush and trees.
- Area youth worked at the project as part of an intensive eight-week work study program. They worked hard, earned a wage and learned about the complexities of restoring an urban ecosystem.
- Native seeds and plants were identified and collected.
- Debris in and around Flatfoot Lake was cleaned up, water quality was tested, and fish were stocked.
- A service road was constructed, picnic shelters built, facilities refurbished, and an accessible fishing pier installed.
- Recreational use of Beaubien Woods has risen significantly since the enhancements were completed.
- Partners have also used the site for environmental education with high school students. Projects included water testing, removal of non-native plant species, and learning about botany.
- Future plans call for an expanded environmental education program which will train older youth to teach younger kids through on-site activities. Fishin' Buddies! now focuses as much on conservation as fishing. The Conservation Kids program continues each summer and the group is even exploring the acquisition of land in the neighborhood to create an environmental "learning park."
- **PROJECT TIMING**—Area clean-up, vegetative improvement and installation of picnic and fishing facilities was completed in 24-30 months.

WHO WAS INVOLVED

Chicago Ornithological Society, Chicago State University, USDA Forest Service, Shedd Aquarium, and The Nature Conservancy provided educational assistance to the volunteers.

**** Fishin' Buddies! Youth Fishing Club** conducted community outreach and guided youth work crews. Contact: (773) 233-3250

**** Forest Preserve District of Cook County** is the landowner and maintains the site. They provided the removal of large debris as well as technical skills, permits, and contracts for new facilities. Environmental education and projects were implemented with students. Contact: (773) 233-3766

**** Call these participants for more detailed information about this project.**

Illinois Department of Natural Resources provided fishing information and stocked fish at Flatfoot Lake.

National Park Service, as part of the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project, provided survey results of recreational user and resident perceptions regarding current concerns and future desired conditions, as well as helping with on-going project progress.

**** U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Chicago Metro Wetlands Office** partnered with the District to create an action plan, worked with youth crews, and provided technical assistance and funds. Contact: (847) 381-2253

Urban Resources Partnership in Chicago provided technical assistance.



Once held in distant locations, Fishin' Buddies! now holds fishing events for inner-city youth at Beaubien Woods within the City of Chicago. Courtesy of Fishin' Buddies, Inc.

PROJECT LESSONS

REMEMBER THE NEXT GENERATION

Through the Beaubien Woods project, a paid summer jobs program called “Conservation Kids” was established, which put community teenagers in the thick of restoration work. The participating “kids” are guided by adult volunteers from Fishin’ Buddies!

“I’ve learned to identify trees, plants, and wildlife. Woodlands, wetlands, forest or parklands aren’t foreign environments to me anymore...just to know these things... it feels kind of...powerful. That’s a great feeling...to know things.”

– Ryan Franklin, 17, project participant.

Says Ben Tuggle of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: “I’m excited to see a program like this that benefits the environment and takes realistic steps toward diversifying the natural resources workforce. Reaching kids at a young age is critical for success.” Some of the kids involved in the project are now pursuing natural resource careers at the college level.

“Maybe it’s because I’m getting paid, but this has been the best summer of my life. As part of my job I was required to learn more science than I’ve learned in 10 years of school. I was busy everyday....My mom and dad say they’ve seen a change in my behavior in just two months on the job.”

– Tyree Major, 17, project participant.

COMBINED STRENGTHS

Combining different, but complementary goals, greatly strengthened this project. It reached a broader range of people; while partners brought many different skills to the table. The energy, perseverance, and ability to work with people of Fishin’ Buddies!, combined with the infrastructure and resources of the District and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, proved to be an effective combination.

BUILDING CAPACITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Fishin’ Buddies! grew tremendously as an organization. When Fishin’ Buddies! first started with its idea to improve Flatfoot Lake, John Kidd, Jr., the group’s president, says, “we were unaware of grants that were available to non-profit organizations, nor were we aware of all the legal ramifications involved.” Now Fishin’ Buddies! is getting grants on its own. The group’s mission has also grown to include conservation, as well as fishing. That’s sustainability!

Perhaps most importantly, a new relationship of trust has grown between the community and local agencies. This is all the more impressive in a city where communities have not always worked together.

“One of the most remarkable events I’ve ever experienced,” said Wink Hastings of the National Park Service, “was an annual awards ceremony of Fishin’ Buddies! Everybody, and I mean everybody, received recognition...a certificate, a recent photograph taken by Bob Long or a handshake and a sincere ‘thank you!’”

GET YOUR MESSAGE OUT

Says Long “I always stress public relations. Your project may be the greatest thing in the world, but it doesn’t exist unless you get the word out and get your story told!”

BE POLITE

Bob Long urges people to remember “that everybody needs a nice thing said to them.” Even in a situation where you are not getting the cooperation you want, he says, “it helps to remember you’re working with an individual—a human being...not an agency—person, with a family at home, a boss over the shoulder. Take it easy on that human being.”

Bob Long points to this attitude as one reason for the successful working rela-

tionship that developed between Fishin’ Buddies! and the Forest Preserve District.

BABY STEPS ADD UP

Project successes grew out of a careful progression of steps, starting small and moving to bigger, more ambitious objectives. This helped partners develop new skills and allow relationships to develop gradually.



A fully accessible fishing pier has been installed by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County at Flatfoot Lake adjacent to the picnic shelter. Courtesy of Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

TIES TO THE COMMUNITY

Several agency participants commented that more could have been done to involve local schools and other sectors of the community. Community involvement is critical to ensure that project benefits endure and that the community has a legitimate role in the site’s future. In addition, greater community input at the outset of the project would have helped.

For agencies, community involvement is not always a simple matter. Bob Long acknowledges that there can be community resistance to agencies perceived as coming from outside: “People ask ‘Who is this coming down and telling us what to do?’”

Long’s advice to agencies or non-local conservation organizations is: “Be persistent, but sensitive. Feel that you can be of assistance, but remember that people know this is their neighborhood.”



ILLINOIS & MICHIGAN CANAL ORIGINS PARK



“This site represents the birthplace of Chicago, where the Illinois & Michigan Canal originated. The I&M Canal made Chicago a major economic and trade center by linking the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River. No site can interpret this story better than Origins Park.”

– Gerald Adelman,
Canal Corridor
Association

Many Visions; One River

All of the projects in this handbook are about vision, but with the Canal Origins Park, what different people and organizations initially envisioned varied dramatically.



The Origins Site was the location of the control lock between the South Branch of the Chicago River (foreground) and the Illinois & Michigan Canal. Courtesy of Louis University Canal Collection.

If you visited the site a couple years ago, you would have seen nothing more than a gravel parking lot and an abandoned gas station. A place where heavy trucks rumbled past on Ashland Avenue, the lone sign of life was Anderson's Shrimp House. On a summer day, the odor from the river could be...pretty rich. Pushing through the dense wall of green to the edge of the steep riverbanks, you can see the gas bubbles breaking the water's surface. These bubbles, produced by decaying organic matter, are not only the source of the river's local name—Bubbly Creek—but are responsible for the river's notoriety—one of mythical proportion.

The 1-acre project site at the junction of the South Branch and the South Fork of the Chicago River, is in an industrial section of Bridgeport, a south side Chicago neighborhood. As unlikely as it may seem, people had various ideas ranging from an historic site to urban open space to a wildlife haven. The site had promise.

Those who braved the thicket found the fresh signs of beaver on an old cottonwood and herons at the water's edge. Others remembered the site's significance as the northern terminus of the I&M Canal, a water route connecting the Great Lakes and the Mississippi which fueled Chicago's settlement, trade and industry.



Fellowship House youth removed years of debris and litter from the site during an annual River Rescue Day event. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

The Canal Corridor Association has worked for years to promote long-term protection of the site and public interpretation of its historic importance. Chicago Youth Center's Fellowship House chose the site—known by local youth as “the Amazon”—for environmental enhancement activities. Through such experiences, Fellowship House staff have established an environmental program for interested youth—a “first” for the Chicago Youth Centers.



Aerial view of the I&M Canal Origins Park site (lower left) illustrates the industrial nature of the river, the need for public open space, and the challenge of interpreting historic events that occurred 150 years ago. Photograph by Richard E. Carter, 1996.

Site tours, conducted by the youth, have explained the area's rich history and recovering natural environment. A local contractor working with Fellowship House has completed extensive riverbank grading in preparation for the many facilities planned for the Canal Origins Park.

The two organizations found out about each others' efforts and are now working jointly to provide public open space for underserved neighborhoods; to enhance the historic, cultural, and natural resources; and address the broad range of interests associated with the site.

Most recently, the Chicago Park District, anticipating the site's transfer from the State of Illinois, has joined the collaboration to trans-

form these visions into design drawings and supervise construction. The collaboration has been further strengthened with the addition of neighborhood school teachers, several classes of grade school children and specialists in the interpretation of history using innovative methods including public art. What had originated as a one dimensional project is now a unique and highly creative collaboration to celebrate Chicago's bold past, address recent neglect and embrace the future.

Future activities will include planting native prairie and wetland plants to reduce surface run-off and catch pollutants; building walkways and benches; installing historic interpretative materials; constructing a non-motorized boat launch with State of Illinois funds; and developing educational programs for local school students and visitors to the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor.

WHAT WAS DONE

- The Fellowship House received a grant from the Urban Resources Partnership to involve center youth in cleaning up the site and restoring it.
- Participants have removed years of accumulated debris and invasive plants.
- The youth working on the site stabilized portions of the river bank by building terraces and planting grasses which reduced sediment and run-off. Lessening the steepness of the bank will also encourage recreational use.
- Partners have brought attention to the site through tours, educational programs and special events.
- dr/Balti Contracting Co., Inc., working with Fellowship House, has completed an extensive re-grading of the steep riverbank, successfully reducing erosion.
- The project site provided a place for local youth to learn about the environment and public open space for underserved neighborhoods.
- **PROJECT TIMING**—This is a lengthy project; site clean-up, construction of terraces and informal trails, and riverbank grading have taken 24-30 months; an additional 24-36 months are anticipated for completion of the park.



The Secretary of the Interior assists CYC Fellowship House youth with restoration activities at the Canal Origins site. Courtesy of Canal Corridor Association.

WHO WAS INVOLVED

**** Canal Corridor Association** continues to promote preservation and improvement of this landmark through educational information and public art. Contact: (312) 427-3688.

**** Chicago Park District** is acquiring the property from the State of Illinois, and will manage site development and programming. Contact: Barbara Wood (312) 747-2002

**** Chicago Youth Centers Fellowship House** is working on clearing the site, creating pathways to the river, stabilizing riverbanks, and planting of native species. Contact: (312) 326-2282.

Friends of the Chicago River provided river education, encouraged increased

river access, led clean-up and canoe days, and continues to advocate for an increased awareness of the site.

Illinois Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects conducted a design workshop for local residents and Fellowship House to discuss ideas for site restoration.

National Park Service facilitated the involvement of CYC Fellowship House and local residents, preparation of ecological restoration plans, and site improvement activities.

Urban Resources Partnership in Chicago coordinated participation in planning site improvements and park development. The Partnership also provided technical assistance.

**** Call these participants for more detailed information about this project.**



A local contractor, working with CYC Fellowship House, completed an extensive re-grading of the riverbank, successfully stabilizing the highly erodable soils. Courtesy of dr/Balti Contracting Co., Inc.

PROJECT LESSONS

RIVERS CARRY OUR HISTORY

As dramatically as Chicago Area Rivers have been changed, they still provide a tangible reminder of the city's many layers of history. Even where historic structures have been lost, the rivers remain as reminders of the legends and mythology of the city. The Origins site represents one of the few remaining features of the I&M Canal within the city, making it of special significance within the National Heritage Corridor.



Fellowship House staff worked closely with the Pilsen-based contractor conducting the site grading to facilitate future work to be completed by center youth and local grade school children. Courtesy of National Park Service.

THE CANAL WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY

While the site offers great potential, it is also complex in terms of issues, ownership and administration. If the site had not had all the challenges, it would probably have been developed for a business or industry. Both the Canal Corridor Association and Fellowship House exemplify the kind of persistence that is needed to succeed under such difficulties.

Even before completion, this site serves as a model. Friends of the Chicago River has been meeting with riverfront businesses interested in improving the river adjacent to their properties using the Origins site as an example.

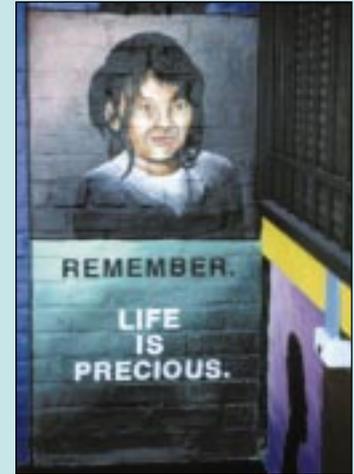
I BELIEVE!

The potential of this site was not immediately obvious to everyone who saw it. But this project has been driven by the belief of its partners

that the site had significance, and, with a strong commitment, the challenges could be overcome.

SHARE A VISION

This project highlights the importance of sharing the vision and significance of your project with others. Partners made their case to the media, agencies, residents and local leaders. Events that drew attention to the site and the work being done were key to this effort.



A building mural recently completed at Fellowship House serves as a reminder that quality of life is important to all. Courtesy of Chicago Youth Centers Fellowship House.

“This community is an industrial neighborhood where kids don’t have access to nature. The I&M Canal Origins Site is an exception...home to birds, beavers, and other wildlife...an opportunity to experience nature within an urban setting. Young people need places such as this to mature and to develop an appreciation for the environment.”

– Andrew Hart, Chicago Youth Centers Fellowship House

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RAIRIE WOLF SLOUGH WETLANDS AND PRAIRIE



“The scale of the project was occasionally mind-boggling. Fifty thousand plants, a muddy spring season, 700 volunteers, 42 acres, five agencies. Everybody pitched in to make it happen, one person at a time, one plant at a time.”

– David Ramsay,
Friends of the
Chicago River

Healing a Watershed— One Step at a Time

Don't try this one at home in your bath tub. At least do some planning before you start. Prairie Wolf Slough was realized only because of careful, cooperative planning on the part of many partners, a concerted fundraising strategy,



*Before volunteers could complete the planting, drain tiles were blocked to retain more water on the site and the limestone trail was completed.
Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.*

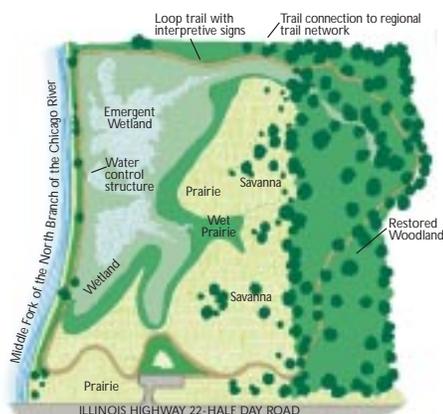
and attention to building relationships in the community. This kind of project is well suited to partners with a proven track record of working together on smaller projects and an organizational continuity to keep the whole thing going.

Prairie Wolf Slough demonstrates stormwater management, water quality, wildlife habitat, environmental education, and other community benefits of a wetland/prairie restoration along the rapidly urbanizing Middle Fork of the Chicago River. It also demonstrates what a strong, diverse partnership can accomplish. And it shows just how much 700 well-organized volunteers can do.

The 42-acre site is located in Lake County, Illinois, a growing suburb 35 miles north of downtown Chicago.

The Prairie Wolf Slough site lies largely in the Chicago River floodplain and is thought to have been a mixture of wetland, prairie, and savanna (open woods). Installation of drainage tiles by early settlers made the land suitable for farming but increased surface runoff to the river, aggravating flooding downstream.

It now contains 28 acres of restored wetland and wet prairie, as well as 14 acres of restored forest, including oak savanna. The restoration retains excess water, manages stormwater runoff, and reduces flooding. It also filters out pollutants carried by runoff from nearby commercial and residential developments before reaching the river. This helps to improve water quality, while addressing residents' concerns about debris and sediment in the water.



*Resource experts from several agencies prepared a plan for the site delineating areas to be planted as wetland, prairie and savannah.
Courtesy of Natural Resources Conservation Service.*



Aerial view of Prairie Wolf Slough one year after the initial planting illustrates the usefulness of a plan for guiding volunteer activities. Photograph by Richard E. Carter, 1996.

“Ecological restoration is becoming an increasingly common response to the land ailments created by 200 years of abuse. Not only does restored land provide important services like water storage, water purification, and soil stabilization, but it provides opportunities for people to encounter the rich biological diversity that is our natural heritage, reversing a cultural trend toward greater isolation from nature.”

– John D. Rogner, U.S.
Fish and Wildlife Service

WHAT WAS DONE

- The Prairie Wolf Slough site was selected—following an evaluation of many prospective sites—for a wetland as part of the Chicago-Rivers Demonstration Project to illustrate the many benefits associated with restoration activities.
- Friends of the Chicago River secured funding from the Urban Resources Partnership, Lake County Stormwater Management Commission and Lake County Forest Preserves.
- Drainage tiles were broken up, allowing the land to retain more water, reducing downstream flooding and damage. A water control structure was built to manage water levels appropriate for optimum growth.
- Volunteers cleared invasive species and planted native vegetation, attracting a diverse range of wildlife native to the area, while addressing people's desires for open space.
- A loop trail was built which connects to the existing county trails network. Wooden walkways were built in the savanna by the Lake County Forest Preserves' Youth Conservation Corps.
- Local educators and park districts developed environmental education programs using the site.
- A strong local volunteer network was established to assist with future site maintenance.
- Prairie Wolf Slough project has been recognized by several national organizations including American Rivers, Environmental Law Institute and U. S. Environmental Protection Agency.
- **PROJECT TIMING**—Site planning, volunteer training, planting and vegetative improvement took 36-40 months.

WHO WAS INVOLVED

**** Friends of the Chicago River** coordinated the overall project, raising funds, and organizing educational programs and community involvement, including volunteer recruitment and supervision. This project provided the opportunity to work with public land managers on a large site. Contact: (312) 939-0490.

**** Lake County Forest Preserves** is the landowner and will provide long-term site maintenance. The Forest Preserves assisted in the design and construction of the site, while handling federal, state, and local permits. They administered funds, worked with volunteers, and contributed to educational programming components. Contact: (847) 367-6640.

Lake County Stormwater Management Commission conducted a hydrology assessment, provided grants, and located the site utilities. They obtained necessary permits and supervised construction of the water control structure. The agency also assisted with the wetland design.

Lake County Youth Conservation Corps, part of the Lake County Forest Preserves, has participated each summer in site restoration, including building walkways, clearing brush, and planting efforts.

**** Call these participants for more detailed information about this project.**

National Park Service facilitated the initiation of Prairie Wolf Slough to demonstrate the re-creation of wetlands and river enhancements.

Natural Resources Conservation Services provided soil and site surveys, design and engineering drawings, and topographical maps. They also assisted in coordination of USDA AmeriCorps volunteers and educational programming.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers directed funds from fines or compensation collected for filling or developing wetlands at other sites.

**** U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** located drain tiles; provided technical assistance for wetland design and development; and supervised volunteers planting vegetation. The Service also conducted seminars to train volunteers and teachers in an environmental education program using the site. Contact: (847) 381-2253.

Urban Resources Partnership in Chicago provided a forum to unite the initiative and ideas of local organizations with the technical programs and assistance of federal, state, and local governments.



Members of the Lake County Youth Conservation Corps installing a boardwalk along portions of the trail. Courtesy of Lake County Forest Preserves.

PROJECT LESSONS

WHAT'S IN A NAME

The project was named after John Kinzey Clark, called “Nanimoa” or “Prairie Wolf,” by Native American friends who pitched their wigwams on his property near the present project site. Nanimoa’s life bridged two cultures and two important periods of American history, from the American Revolution to the Civil War. A slough is another name for a swamp or a creek that passes through a marsh, reminding visitors and volunteers of the site’s past. A well-thought out name can help tell the story of an area, while fostering a sense of place through environmental and cultural connections.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

One reason this partnership worked so well is that a lot of thought and planning went into it before the first grant dollar was received or the first shovel went into the ground. All partners were involved in the development of an action plan; some partners concentrated on seeking input from the community, others inventoried site resources. There was plenty of work to go around—site design, community education and outreach, site preparation, planting, volunteer management, and site maintenance—to name just a few.

Far beyond accomplishing significant improvements, Prairie Wolf Slough built good working relationships among many partners. Several participants are now working together on a major watershed planning and improvement project.



Glenbrook North High School students monitor the health of area rivers in the vicinity of Prairie Wolf Slough while learning about the environment. Courtesy of Mike Piskel.

LEADERSHIP

Many people and organizations contributed to this project, requiring leadership and close coordination. Relationships among agencies and overseeing volunteer efforts depended on sensitive leadership with facilitation skills to effectively guide the dynamic and ever-changing structure. It was important to develop clear roles and responsibilities among project partners, while involving community leaders, volunteers, and the public in major project decisions. Said David Ramsay, Friends Project Coordinator, “In many ways the project involved breaking new ground in collaboration, volunteer leadership training, and community participation.”

MANY GOALS MEAN MORE PARTICIPATION

A principal aspect of the planning process was to address as many goals as possible. By the end of the design and planning stage, the project effectively addressed stormwater management, water quality, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities and environmental education, while ensuring strong support from agencies and surrounding communities.

VOLUNTEERS TO THE RESCUE

Volunteers come to projects for a variety of reasons—they want to make a difference in their community, they are looking for a way to help the environment, they may be seeking a spiritual connection with nature, or they might be part of a corporate volunteer committee. Volunteers stay with projects because they are trained and well treated and given appropriate responsibilities. Polly Greathouse, a project volunteer, provides just one example: “The tradition...of starting each workday in a ‘friendship’ circle created an excellent venue for overview, instruction for the day, questions and answers. We, as volunteers, felt well directed and fruitful.”

DON'T FORGET THE MONEY

While an enormous amount of time and resources were donated for this project, actual funds were critical for materials and staffing. One partner devoted significant time to raising funds for the project. For any project to succeed, especially large ones, funding is vital. Be sure you have the dollars needed or develop a marketing strategy to successfully attract the necessary funding. Fundraising should be guided by project goals and objectives—don’t turn your project design on its head to accommodate a funding source that is not a good “fit.”

THINK ECOSYSTEM

Prairie Wolf Slough represents a significant acreage of wetlands in the upper watershed of the Chicago River. The slough provides the educational and public awareness benefits of a smaller project, while contributing significantly to habitat enhancement and watershed protection. The project not only improves localized river conditions, but the health of downstream sections, as well.



Urban development, stormwater runoff and treated sewage discharged into area rivers increase the risk of flooding. Photograph by Richard E. Carter, 1996.

BUILD LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

Projects are not over when the plants are in the ground and the wood chips are on the trail. Long-term maintenance is critical to success. In this case, the landowner, the Lake County Forest Preserves, made a commitment to maintain the site with volunteer assistance. Additional volunteer trainings have identified new site stewards and established site management plans.

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RBAN CANOE ADVENTURES



*“To love the river
you must know
the river.”*

– Laurene von Klan,
Friends of the
Chicago River

U-CAN MISSION STATEMENT:

To develop the River as an ecological, economic and recreational resource for the City by training and employing inner-city young adults to lead River tours and to engage others in River improvement projects.

Reconnecting People with their River

Avital ingredient of any river improvement project is the desire, inspiration, and vision of people to change their river. Yet along many stretches of Chicago Area Rivers, people experience many barriers. Fences block physical access; while the rivers’ notorious history of degradation



The class of 1997! U-CAN guides celebrate their successful completion of the training program at Chicago's Grant Park. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

often acts as a psychological barrier. Public perception surveys conducted as a part of the Chicago Rivers Demonstration Project found that Chicagoans living a few blocks from the river were often unaware of improvements, notably water quality. Friends of the Chicago River, seeking ways to reconnect people

with the river, developed a program to train a diverse group of youth as river guides.

"U-CAN was designed to meet several needs," explains Chris Cercone, the Friends Membership and Volunteer Coordinator. "One was practical; more people wanted to go on our canoe trips than we were

able to accommodate. Canoeing is a great way to introduce people to the river and the issues affecting it. Paddling gets people close to the river and past the fences and other barriers that walkers and bicyclists encounter. U-CAN ...invest[s]...in the future, introducing a more diverse group of people to the river's potential and to... environmental careers."



U-CAN guides participate in several events each year. Here, the guides give a tour of the South Branch of the Chicago River starting at the Canal Origins Park. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

A group of partners designed the U-CAN program to meet these needs. Goals included increasing the capacity to show people the river, providing youth with training and summer employment, and highlighting river restoration efforts. U-CAN was piloted in 1995. Participants from that year had positive comments:

"I have learned so many things that everybody should know.... [U-CAN] has encouraged me to appreciate the closeness of the cityscape to the River...I hope to be able to instill [my] excitement onto the people I guide."

– Jason Sheparis, U-CAN Guide

"I [have] lived in low-income housing for years, so I haven't experienced a lot of things, but [U-CAN has] opened new doors."

– William Payne, U-CAN Guide

Since its beginning, the program has grown. In 1997, an extensive recruitment effort brought in a diverse group of trainees. Adult volunteers included both trainers and mentors in environmental fields. After rigorous training, the guides graduated to conduct 12 canoe events. One of the 1997 trainees, Adam Suchar, echoes the sentiments of his predecessors: "I know a million times more about the river now than I did before."

WHAT WAS DONE

- Partners recruited urban youth to become river guides, while adult volunteers were recruited to assist with training.
- Youth and adult volunteers received training in paddling, first aid, ecology and history. Seventeen guides graduated from the program in 1997.
- Friends of the Chicago River has been able to double the number of trips and canoe activities offered in a season.
- U-CAN trips highlight river restoration and stewardship activities, including the Illinois & Michigan Canal Origins Park and Chicago Rivers Rescue Day (an annual watershed-wide volunteer river clean-up).
- Youth guides who complete the training and conduct six canoe trips receive a stipend of \$500.
- **PROJECT TIMING** — U-CAN is now a continuous program, but initial start-up took 12-18 months.



U-CAN guides learn about the river's environment by collecting water samples from the North Branch of the Chicago River. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.



Adult volunteers teach local high school students and U-CAN guides how to test water samples for dissolved oxygen levels. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

WHO WAS INVOLVED

**** Friends of the Chicago River** developed the program and continues to coordinate on-going activities. Contact: (312) 939-0490.

American Red Cross, American Canoe Association, Illinois River-Watch Network, Forest Preserve District of Cook County and Shedd Aquarium assisted with training.

Boys and Girls Club of Chicago (Lathrop Unit), Princeton in Chicago Schools, CYC Fellowship House, USDA AmeriCorps, Lincoln Park High School, Schurz High School and Boy Scouts of America assisted with recruiting program participants.

Chicago Academy of Sciences, The Nature Conservancy, and the Shedd

Aquarium are just some of the organizations to offer mentors.

Lincoln Park Boat Club provided training and practice space.

National Park Service, through the **ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project**, assisted with project funding.

New City YMCA provided a location for many of the training activities

Public Allies provided program staff and leadership training.

University of Illinois at Chicago's Executive MBA Program provided a marketing survey on canoe trip demand.

Urban Resource Partnership in Chicago provided technical assistance through partner organizations.

**** Call these participants for more detailed information about this project.**

1997 U-CAN TRAINING CURRICULUM

Topic	Responsible Organization
River history, development balanced with environment	Friends of the Chicago River
Wildlife, plants	River Trails Nature Center
Water quality, river issues	Illinois Riverwatch Network
Aquatic Wildlife	Shedd Aquarium
Water Safety	NewCity YMCA
Paddling, rescue	American Canoe Association
Leadership workshops	Public Allies Chicago
Team building	University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service
Market research	University of Illinois-Executive MBA Program
First aid, CPR	American Red Cross

PROJECT LESSONS

RESTORATION IS JUST PART OF THE PICTURE

The health of urban rivers is highly dependent on how people regard and treat it. U-CAN focuses on people and their connection to the waterway, rather than physical changes to the river or its environment.

ADDRESS REALITIES

For an urban river like the Chicago, paddling is an excellent way to introduce people to the river and its environment. Because many of the banks are blocked by fences or are private property, the only easy way to see some sections of the river is to get out on it. Participants learn about issues of public access while getting a completely new view of the city.

Water quality is another issue that urban paddlers need to consider. The Chicago River is by no means pristine, so Friends is very careful about the safety issues associated with poor water quality. Trips are only run when conditions are safe, and participants are made aware of all possible risks. Once all necessary safety precautions have been taken, the trips can focus on the great strides that have been made in improving water quality and on the many species of wildlife that have come back to the river.

LEVERAGE INVOLVEMENT

Training the U-CAN guides involves the time and effort of a great many people, but “these seventeen kids enabled us to reach a whole lot of other people,” says Cathy Hudzik, the 1997 U-CAN Coordinator. And success is measured not just by the number of people the guides reach directly. “They’re still getting exposure to the river and its issues, and sharing their experiences with friends, teachers and family.”



U-CAN river guides participated in 1997 Earth Day event on the South Branch of the Chicago River with Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

With the help of U-CAN guides, Friends has also been able to institute canoe days, where people can rent canoes for short trips on the river. While these events require more staffing than the usual canoe trip, they are also more affordable for the public, particularly for school and youth groups, allowing the Friends to introduce more people to the river.

AIM FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Friends designed U-CAN to be self-sustaining, with revenue from trips supporting guide stipends and other costs. The cost of renting canoes is a major part of the program budget, and Friends’ long-term goal is to have its own fleet of U-CAN canoes.

USE EXISTING NETWORKS

U-CAN in its first few seasons has been extremely labor intensive for all involved. Recruitment was a big effort. Hudzik thinks the program in future years will make greater use of existing expertise with youth. “We are developing relationships with a few youth organizations and schools that will act as recruitment partners. These groups have a lot of experience working with young adults, and already have relationships with the youth that will be applying. They

will be a great help in finding interested young adults, and also in helping new trainees make it through the program.

INCREASE DIVERSITY

Hudzik notes, “If diversity is a goal, look not just at program participants, but at trainers and role models.” The U-CAN trainees themselves may help meet this need as the program develops. Some guides trained in earlier years have returned to participate in the program again, serving as role models to younger, newer guides.

“In addition to training sessions, the U-CAN recruits are mentored through the program by adult volunteers. These volunteers work with the U-CAN guides in a team on Friends’ canoe trips. They also provide exposure to career opportunities in environmental fields.”

– Cathy Hudzik,
Friends of the Chicago River