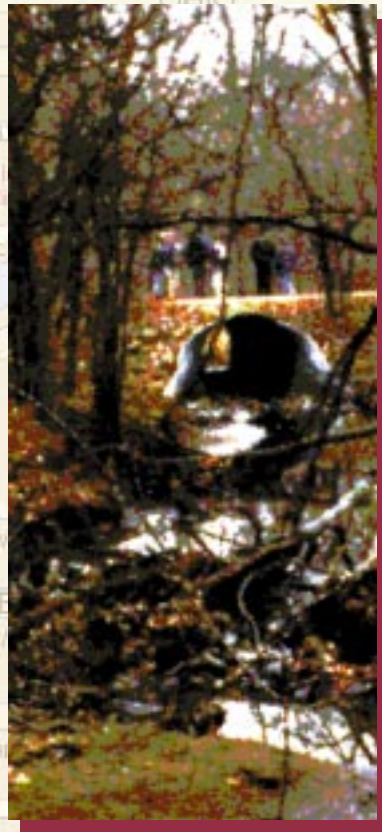


WHAT'S WORKING ON WORKING RIVERS:

A Handbook
for Improving
Urban Rivers



EXAMPLES
FROM
CHICAGO
AREA
RIVERS



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A Handbook for Improving Urban Rivers

EXAMPLES FROM CHICAGO AREA RIVERS

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*CHICAGO***Rivers** Demonstration Project

THE *CHICAGO Rivers* DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM

The Demonstration Program is a collaboration of public and private organizations enhancing Chicago Area Rivers through community-based activities, while serving as a national model for improving urban rivers. River enhancement projects—such as those described in this handbook—require the participation of all interests working toward common goals addressing environment, community needs, and sustainable growth. Through the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project, a series of community-based public perception surveys were completed to identify desires for future river uses and an assessment of important natural resources to select specific areas and guide restoration activities. These studies were instrumental in the initiation and design of the projects summarized in this handbook.

CHICAGO Rivers Partners

Friends of the Chicago River

Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

National Park Service, Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Chicago District

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Chicago Metro Wetlands Office

USDA Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station

This is a publication of the *CHICAGO Rivers* Demonstration Project, a collaborative effort directed by the Friends of the Chicago River and the National Park Service, Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program.



Friends of the Chicago River is the only non-profit organization dedicated solely to the protection and improvement of the Chicago River. The organization has become the single most influential voice for realizing the potential of the river's many resources. Since its inception in 1979, the Friends of the Chicago River has played a significant role in policy and planning for the promotion of public access and improvements to the river.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, RIVERS, TRAILS, AND CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Conservation works at the local level. Citizens in thousands of grassroots groups are protecting places that are important to them: nearby rivers, open space for the community, and trails linking town and country.

The Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program supports this grassroots movement as an important part of the National Park Service mission to protect America's natural and cultural resources. The National Park Service is increasingly being called upon to support the conservation efforts of landowners, community officials, and citizens who share the desire to protect or improve local resources.

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HAT'S IN THIS HANDBOOK

Preface

Lots of initiative and hard work with a little know-how is all that's needed to improve the river in your community. **5**

About Chicago Area Rivers

A brief history of Chicago's urban waterways and how community-based interest evolved into the restoration projects described in this handbook. **6**

Things To Consider Before Getting Your Own Feet Wet...

Practical advice to guide river improvement activities anywhere...on any river! **8**

Community Project Descriptions

Inspirational stories of community-driven river improvement activities. While the projects were all local in nature, the **Project Lessons** section of each description contains good advice to keep in mind for any river improvement project. Each project description also includes a section on **what was done** and **who was involved** with key contacts if you want to find out more about a specific project.

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Resource References

Look in this section if you are in the Chicago area and want to get involved in river improvement activities. There are also listings, particularly under publications, videos and educational materials, that will be of interest to anyone concerned with river activities...anywhere. **34**



Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

The river in your life may not be called the Chicago or “*Checagou*,” but chances are it has many “faces” like the Chicago, from natural ...to urban.



Photograph by Ron Schramm PHOTO.

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REFACE

Wherever you live, there's probably a river in your life. Eighty percent of land animals depend on rivers in some way, and humans are no exception. More and more people are connecting with rivers and streams and getting involved in improving and restoring them. This handbook tells the stories of several successful urban restoration projects on Chicago Area Rivers.

These stories about improvements to Chicago Area Rivers are presented to raise your interest and encourage people to get involved with their river. They show a few examples of what can be achieved on urban rivers. The projects described here used a variety of approaches and ranged considerably in size, focus, and complexity. But they all share an attention to respecting community needs—environmental, recreational, and economic—combined with a focus on improving the river's health. Most importantly, however, these examples demonstrate that even a small group of people armed with energy and initiative can have a positive effect.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

– Margaret Mead



Courtesy of Canal Corridor Association.

What's been done on Chicago Area Rivers is truly an inspiration. People's ability to improve these rivers shows what can be improved anywhere, even in a highly developed and complex urban setting like Chicago. A veteran staffer with the Friends of the Chicago River recently concluded: "People look at what's being accomplished on the Chicago River and say, 'Wow, if you can do that on your trashed river, think what we could do on ours.'"

There is no "right way" to do a river project. As you read the project summaries, you will notice that people's needs and desires for an area differ among projects as do the needs of the landscape. These projects are examples of what can be achieved, they are not formulas. The knowledge gained through the experiences of the many hundreds of people who

were actively involved in these projects are contained in the general section **Things to Consider Before Getting Your Feet Wet...** and the **Project Lessons** section of each project summary. Although the projects...and the experiences...specifically relate to Chicago Area Rivers, the insights and guidance offered in this handbook are valuable for any river.

The following organizations and individuals provided substantial support for one or more of the Chicago Area Rivers projects described in this handbook:

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| AC Delco | Illinois Department of Natural Resources | New City YMCA |
| Boy Scouts of America DuSable District | Illinois Environmental Protection Agency | North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation |
| Chicago Park District | Kennedy-King College | Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide |
| Chicago Youth Centers | Lake County Stormwater Management Commission | Susan Pritzker |
| Chicagoland Bank Anglers | Lake County Forest Preserve District | Public Allies Chicago |
| Forest Preserve District of Cook County | National Fish and Wildlife Foundation | REI |
| Friends of the Chicago River | National Park Service | U.S. Environmental Protection Agency |
| General Motors | | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service |
| Grace Bersted Foundation | | Urban Resources Partnership in Chicago |
| Illinois Steelheaders | | |

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BOUT CHICAGO AREA RIVERS

“As the Chicago River declined as a commercial thoroughfare, it has been forgotten. But it was the river that spawned the city, and it was the river that really gave life to the city.”

– Russell Lewis,
Historical Society

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Photograph by Ron Schramm PHOTO.

The city of Chicago owes its existence to Chicago Area Rivers. Native Americans and early explorers alike saw that this gentle stream which flowed into Lake Michigan could provide a vital transportation link to



Chicago Area Rivers have many characteristics. The upper reaches of the Middle Fork are natural providing habitat for wildlife and open space for recreational activities. Courtesy of National Park Service.

the Mississippi River. The potential for this trade route quickly attracted thousands of settlers to the Chicago area.

Within a few short decades, as the city grew, Chicagoans changed the rivers and surrounding wetlands rapidly and dramatically. Two separate river systems—the Chicago and the Calumet—were combined into what became a single 156-mile network of waterways. Floodplains and wet areas—important natural components of healthy rivers—were filled in to make more land available for development as real estate markets boomed. The rivers also served as sewers, not only for the increasing number of residents, but for new industries, such as slaughterhouses, stockyards, tanneries, and steel mills.

The establishment and success of the city grew out of its ability to alter its rivers to suit its needs. Like many urban rivers, however, Chicago Area Rivers paid an enormous price for over 150 years of settlement, industry, commerce, and urban growth.



A bench along Wacker Driver overlooking the Main Stem of the Chicago River provides an office worker with a few precious moments of relief from the City's many pressures. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service.

A New Vision For Area Rivers

Chicago Area Rivers have made a dramatic return to life. The rivers have improved because our vision for them has changed. Concern for the health of the nation's lakes and rivers in the 1970s led to the passage of the Clean Water Act. Locally, improved sewage treatment, resulting in cleaner water, prompted increased advocacy and interest for Chicago Area Rivers.

These changes led many residents to view the rivers as important resources...as an asset rather than a liability. These working rivers are now surprisingly lively places that support an ever-increasing variety of wildlife and recreational uses. The rivers' many roles range from storm-water management and commercial shipping to environmental corridors for migratory birds and places for people to play. Residents, interest

ONE PROJECT; MANY GOALS

No matter how it is initiated, a project should accomplish one or more restoration goals established for the river. As an example, the Illinois & Michigan Canal Origins Park (page 22)—a project to restore an important historic Chicago landmark and provide public open space for underserved neighborhoods—also addressed each of the river improvement goals established for Chicago Area Rivers. An extensive bank stabilization component regraded steep riverbanks, reducing erosion (*improve water quality*) and revegetated with native plants (*enhance natural habitat*). The developed park area will provide recreation opportunities and resolve safety issues caused by vacant lands, while a non-motorized boat launch area will increase public access to the river.



The city of "broad shoulders." The South Branch of the Chicago River remains a working river today—a navigable waterway for commerce and receptor for millions of gallons of treated sewage. Photograph by Richard E. Carter, 1995.

groups, and local governments alike have demonstrated strong support for healthy rivers.

The key to successful improvements is understanding how residents view their rivers and what they would like to see in the future. Growing public interest in the rivers led to a number of forums, surveys, and other activities confirming this vision for healthy urban rivers. The Chicago-Rivers Demonstration Project has been an important part of this process. It was the Demonstration Project that—directly or indirectly—led to the river activities described in this handbook. Through this evolving process, common restoration goals for future river improvements consistently emerged from citizens and resource experts alike.

RIVER IMPROVEMENT GOALS

- *Improve water quality*
- *Increase public access*
- *Enhance natural habitats*
- *Address and resolve safety issues*
- *Provide recreation opportunities*

Several Chicago initiatives—City-Space and the Chicago River Urban Design Guidelines, to name just two—are consistent with the river improvement goals. These initiatives advocate safe public access to area rivers and the establishment of open space for recreation opportunities.

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HINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE GETTING YOUR FEET WET...

What are the elements most river restoration experts agree are essential for successfully completing any project? Before you pull on hip-waders and grab a shovel, consider the following key points:

Make A Difference

What you do *will* make a difference...be positive! There are few, if any, places on Chicago Area Rivers that can be restored to a pre-settlement condition, but as the project summaries clearly demonstrate, much can be done to make the rivers healthier and a greater asset for people and communities. Even a tiny project will spark renewed involvement and interest.

Get To Know Your River

Before starting, get to know your river, or your stretch of it. Effective projects are based on an in-depth knowledge of your river. Who owns the lands along the river? Who regulates use of the river itself? What permits or approvals are needed before work begins? What type of trees, shrubs and grasses occur along and in the river? What wildlife use the area? Are there fish in the river? Who uses the area and what is it used for? Are the river-

banks eroding or are they properly vegetated?

Figuring out the unique possibilities and challenges facing your project does not have to be a complicated

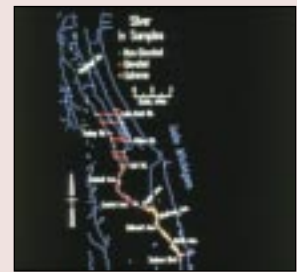
KNOW YOUR RIVER

A large or complex river system may require a comprehensive assessment of specific resources. All of the projects described in this handbook were influenced...identified, designed or guided...by detailed assessments completed through the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project (page 2). Specifics involved extensive public



A Chicago resident's perception of "the river in their neighborhood"—a crayon sketch completed in conjunction with the public perception surveys. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service.

perception surveys (what does the river mean to people? How is it used? Are there concerns about personal safety or resource degradation? How should the river be improved in the future?), existing recreational uses, condition of existing vegetation, public access to the river, existing wetlands or areas suitable for creating wetlands and publicly owned lands. This information was then used to establish river improvement goals (page 7), to select sites and design specific improvements.



Detailed river sediment sampling revealed a variety of contaminants, some of which may effect possible future river-based activities. Here, the presence of silver indicates turn-of-the-century plating and photographic industries on the North Branch of the Chicago River. Courtesy of Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.



A component of the Beaubien Woods-Flatfoot Lake project involved extensive fish surveys. Here, Forest Preserve District of Cook County biologists use a seine net to collect fish in Flatfoot Lake. Courtesy of Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

process. It can be as simple as taking a walk along the river with people who know the resources.

Be Inclusive

The importance of actively involving the community from the start cannot be emphasized too much. Listening to community members often brings more help to the effort, identifies concerns, avoids conflicts at critical points, and develops a constituency committed to long-term stewardship—**sustainability**.



Residents of two public housing river communities, assisted by Friends of the Chicago River staff and volunteers, discovered “their” river during a recent boat tour. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

The many people who can help are limited only by your imagination and willingness to include them. Be sure you don’t lose sight of the essentials though. Know who needs to be involved to ensure success.

Neighbors, local volunteers and youth organizations can help with workdays and plantings. Don’t forget local businesses. They may be able to offer in-kind services and other help. Are there educators, teachers, students, or parents who can connect river improvement activities with an environmental education program? Can a government agency provide technical expertise? Is there a river advocacy or other non-profit group that can help organize your effort?

Create A Vision

All these projects grew out of a common vision for a better river *and* a better community...be visionary. Whether it starts with the dream of an individual, a few people or a whole group, a project needs to have inspiration behind it. Successful projects often incorporate many objectives into a single, unified vision. This engages more people, leverages more support, and greatly enhances project results.

Try Something New

There’s no “right way” to improve urban rivers. If you don’t see a technique that addresses what you want to do, invent one. Learn as much as you can from other projects—and don’t be afraid to venture into new territory, whether it’s a new way to reduce stormwater runoff or involving a “non-traditional” partner. Although a new idea may not be successful, every project provides valuable experiences for the future.

Keep It Going

For a project to have lasting benefits, it is essential to incorporate long-term maintenance and stewardship in your project plans. Stewardship is vital to the success of individual projects and the overall health of urban rivers. Who will take care of the site and oversee activities in the future? Resident volunteers or local agency staff? Perhaps a new organization is needed. Land-owners are often more willing to participate in a project if another organization or group of volunteers is committed to long-term stewardship.

Volunteers

“How do we call for volunteers? We advertise. Because volunteers are more inclined to work in their neighborhood, we advertise in local newspapers free of charge. Get in touch with local civic organizations. Have them announce your project at meetings and in newsletters. Make personal contacts in local organizations and create a phone list.

“How do we keep them coming back? Treat your volunteers in the same way that you would want to be treated. Volunteers come for society and education besides your ecological reason. Project leaders should talk to every volunteer while work is in progress. Introduce them to each other. Keep sign in sheets. Use them for telephone ‘calling trees.’

“Educate your Volunteers. Train them to work the project. Always explain why things are done a certain way and get free government brochures for your volunteers.

“Volunteers work all week and their weekend time is precious. Have all your tools and supplies ready at start time. Do not expect 8 hours from them—you can get a lot done in 3 hours.

“We publish volunteers’ names in our newsletter “The North Mayfair Improver.” We want the volunteers to have pride in what they did and to know that their efforts are appreciated.”

– Anthony Watrobinski, North Mayfair Improvement Association



This building mural, completed by a local artist assisted by several interested youth, enhances a small park at the CYC Elliott Donnelley Youth Center, while celebrating the African-American culture of Chicago. Courtesy of Eileen M. Carlton.