Wild Nature, Teacher Engagement, and Student Inspiration

Next year the Chicago River Schools Network (CRSN) turns 20. Its lofty goals, to help teachers integrate the Chicago River into their classrooms in ways that challenge their students academically and influence students’ attitudes about science and nature, are intended to set students on a path of environmental stewardship for the river and for the planet.

These goals have outcomes that are far-reaching and difficult to measure. It is easy to count that over 35,000 students have visited the Chicago River with the CRSN since 2001. Yet that doesn’t really capture the impact of having a class out at the river and how it can effect students long-term. It’s the difference between saying “crayfish are an important part of the river ecosystem” and being able to stick your hands in the mud, flip a rock over, and hold one in your palm.

The benefits of learning in the outdoors are numerous. Childhood experiences in nature have been shown to influence how people view nature as adults. Studies show people who engage in activities in “wild nature” are more likely as adults to express pro-environmental attitudes and engage in pro-environmental behaviors. The CRSN provides this opportunity.

CRSN teachers tell us they see great value in CRSN participation, and many have been in the program for a long time. One example is Pete Leki who has taught at Waters Elementary School for 20 years. Leki considers the study of nature and the Chicago River to be “integral to [his] school’s identity.” Indeed, all Waters students complete a K to 8th grade ecology strand that includes conservation, Mighty Acorns, gardening, Lake Michigan and Chicago River studies. When Leki’s students study the river, they not only test water quality - they follow it up with civic engagement and environmental advocacy back in the classroom. The river is integrated into the entire curriculum.


Former CRSN Student Studies Ocean Acidification

Lauren Frisch is a confident young woman. She currently works at the Ocean Acidification Research Center in Fairbanks, Alaska, to gain a better understanding of ocean acidification due to climate change.

But before that, Frisch attended Chicago City Day School and took field trips to the Chicago River. She later attended the Latin School of Chicago and, during her senior year, interned with Friends. As an intern, she helped lead corporate River Action Days to restore the river. It was one of her first experiences instructing others, and it influenced her decision to study the environment in college.

Frisch received a B.A. from Colgate University and an M.S. from the Bard Center for Environmental Policy. She is on the cusp of a brilliant career in the environment. Reflecting on her education, “Environmental concepts are best learned at an early age,” says Frisch. “If you learn it as a child, as you would a foreign language, it becomes a part of the way you think for the rest of your life.”
The Quiet Magic of Winter

Not everyone thinks of the Chicago River as a recreational destination in winter, but a snowy hike along the river at a park or forest preserve has a quiet magic all its own.

I often hike at LaBagh Woods along the North Branch, a forest preserve widely known as a birding hotspot during the spring and fall migrations. And, while there are still a host of birds there when it is cold, including juncos, kinglets, and woodpeckers, the snow reveals a richer story and the telltale signs that wildlife is everywhere.

The most common signs I come across are the easy-to-identify four square hopmarks left by squirrels and the delicate cloven hoof prints of the white-tailed deer. These creatures are active by day and I spot the animals as often as I see their tracks. More unusual to discover are the hand-like impressions of the opossum and raccoon, the pitter patter of a fox, and the larger trot of the coyote. I have glimpsed them all in the summer, but their footprints in the snow reveal where they go in winter.

On occasion I have also been lucky enough to come across the snow angel wing prints of a hawk or an owl accompanied by a spatter of blood and a few bits of fur. The grim reminder tells a story all its own.

If you are looking for a more action-oriented way to be outside this winter join us on Centennial Volunteer Days on almost any Saturday. The Centennial Volunteers are a group dedicated to restoring river-edge preserves to improve wildlife habitat, public access, and water quality. Current sites include Blue Star Memorial, LaBagh, and Somme Woods to the north and Kickapoo and Whistler Woods to the south. Winter activities include cutting and burning invasive brush and enjoying time outside with a dedicated crew of outdoor enthusiasts. New volunteers are always welcome.

Of course, if a day on the river is not your idea of how to spend a winter’s day then hold out until spring when a myriad of warm weather river activities will begin again.

In the meantime, stay warm, enjoy the river from where ever you see it and have a Happy New Year.

Margaret Frisbie
Executive Director

LaBagh Woods in winter.
Putting a Face on the Centennial Volunteers

When Mark Perrine first turned his red Ford pickup into Whistler Woods, he was just three month removed from a heart attack. Not one to take it easy, he had heard about cleanups occurring along the Calumet River and found the Centennial Volunteers webpage. Perrine is chatty and affable, and, as a tool and die maker, more than a little handy. He fondly recalls using a ski jump in Dan Ryan Woods as a child. “I’ve used the forest preserves for fishing, hiking, and cross-country skiing,” he explains. But until now, he had never done restoration work.

Perrine is part of a new generation of volunteers that’s restoring critical habitat throughout Chicagoland. At Whistler, he joins a small but energetic group from all walks of life. For Perrine, the diverse group is part of the appeal. “I enjoy people,” he says simply. The Centennial Volunteers are supported by a collaboration of the Forest Preserves of Cook County and three local groups—the Friends of the Chicago River, Friends of the Forest Preserves, and Audubon Chicago Region—and marks the one-hundredth anniversary of the forest preserve system.

Making Dam Progress

At the first meeting of the New Year, the Board of Commissioners for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) voted to negotiate an intergovernmental agreement with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to modify or remove the North Branch dam at River Park in Chicago. Identified as one of dozens of dams that should be removed or modified across the state and one of four on the Chicago River, the North Branch dam is an impediment to paddler safety and healthy fish distribution. Friends has been working with IDNR, MWRD, the Forest Preserves of Cook County, the Niles Park District and Chicago Park District to connect 55 miles of waterway currently blocked by dams. This project will complement the MWRD’s clean water investments underway at the O’Brien Wastewater Treatment Plant and Friends’ and IDNR’s channel catfish habitat project.

At the same meeting Commissioner Mariyana Spyropoulos was voted president of the board, Commissioner Barbara McGowan was reelected vice president, and Commissioner Frank Avila was voted Finance Committee chair.

Next Steps on Asian Carp

In November 2014, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) announced plans to explore ideas for a one way control system at the Brandon Road Lock and Dam near Joliet, IL, to prevent the passage of aquatic invasive species upstream. Located five miles downstream from the electric barriers in the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal that the USACE installed to prevent carp reaching Lake Michigan, the site is a strategic location to add further prevention measures. “The Brandon Road control point is located at the base of the Chicago waterway system,” said Dave Wethington, USACE. “It’s unique because it allows a single control point to control for all five of the potential ways that a species could move from the Mississippi River Basin toward the Great Lakes.”

Watershed Partners Earn Awards

A number of Friends’ partners have been recognized recently for their efforts in planning and restoration efforts that meet their missions and benefit the Chicago River system. In December, Chicago Wilderness recognized 23 sites for Conservation Excellence including Eugene Field Park in Chicago on the Upper North Branch (Chicago Park District and USACE), Somme Nature Preserve in Northbrook on the West Fork (FPCC and the North Branch Restoration Project), and the Middlefork Savanna Forest Preserve in Lake Forest (Lake County Forest Preserves).

The selected sites included wetland, mesic prairie, tall grass savanna and oak savanna.
Friends of the Chicago River recognizes the generous contributions and support of members, donors, and program participants and partners at $250 and above from July 1, 2014, to November 30, 2014.

INDIVIDUALS

$20,000
The Crown Family

$1,000 - $6,000
Karen Alber
Kenneth M. Arenberg and Susanne Swisher
Judith Bassoul
Mr. and Mrs. Henry T. Chandler
Sally Fletcher
Ken Hubbard
Lawrence and Denise Kaplan
Diane Tecic
David M. Wong and Wai-Sinn Chan

$500 - $999
Joe and Ann Marie Arden
Robert and Quinn Delaney
Mike Freker and Allison Park
Mr. and Mrs. Howard Garoon and Family
Lee and Lori Alber
George and Ellen Benson
Joe and Paula Dempsey
Patricia A. Fosmoe
Charles R. Gardner
Cynthia Ann Gray
Rob Hannah
Dennis Henry
Timothy Huizenga
David Jones and Jayne Lilienfeld
Gary Snyder and Mary Lundberg
Diane Tecic
Michael J. Tobin
Michael Willian

FOUNDATIONS, CORPORATIONS, GOVERNMENT, AND OTHER

$50,000 and above
Grand Victoria Foundation

$10,000 - $49,999
The Boeing Company
Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Coastal Management Program
MillerCoors

$250 - $999
Associated Colleges of Illinois
Chicago Quantitative Alliance
Earthshare of Illinois
Girl Scout Troop 23002
Healthy Schools Campaign, Inc.
Intrinsic Landscaping, Inc.
Martin J. and Susan B. Kozak Fund

FRIENDS’ ENDOWMENT

Kenneth M. Arenberg and Susanne Swisher

We apologize if any names have been omitted, misspelled, or otherwise incorrectly listed. Please contact us at friends@chicagoriver.org so that we can correct our records.

Friends of the Chicago River is a proud member of EarthShare Illinois.

MWRD Land Use Plan

This month Friends of the Chicago River and Openlands completed a formal study that analyzed land owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) in the Chicago River watershed.

The goal of the project was to come up with a tool so that, together with the MWRD, we could define potential uses for lands that are not needed for the District’s corporate purposes or otherwise dedicated.

The team met regularly with MWRD staff and last year presented our findings to its executive director, David St. Pierre. The new tool provides a greater understanding of the land’s value as public open space, wildlife habitat, and stormwater management. Friends will begin reaching out to potential partners this spring to discuss developing projects that will increase habitat and opportunities for recreation.

Hiking along a bird sanctuary in Ronan Park, a great example of river-edge land use.

Friends’ Wish List

Flat screen TV, up to 48” wide, needed for our Bridgehouse Museum

An outdoor, portable pop-up canopy/tent, preferably white (or another solid color) with no existing logos or names, maximum 10’ x 10’

Cloth tablecloths (for 8’ x 30” tables), any solid color
Another perspective is a student who has gone through the CRSN, graduated, and is on to other things. That viewpoint is essential when we evaluate the long-term benefits of river study. Griselda Baca is such a student. She is currently a senior at DePaul University majoring in Environmental Studies. She attended Waters Elementary until 2007 and Pete Leki was her teacher.

Baca says she was a typical middle school student. “School was not my favorite. I hated having to wake up early. However, when we would have field trips to the river or prairie I was fascinated. It wasn’t so much the science behind it but just being in nature.” She always loved being outdoors, and has a lifelong passion for gardening. As with most people who choose a career in the environmental field, the first spark is their love of nature. Thinking back on her trips to the Chicago River, Baca says, “It was most likely the best experience I had at Waters. Because I had a connection to nature at such a young age, now I care for the environment and have chosen to be in this line of work.”

While no less impactful, many of the students we see on field trips don’t fully realize the benefits of their experience at the time. Says Baca, “During my teen years, I didn’t pay attention to what I wanted to do as a career. Later, I realized what my passion and interests were - the environment and creating a sustainable form of living.”

Indeed, the benefits can be life-long. “Even today, I live just down the block from the river and that is my nature getaway. I truly believe that the river is a part of me,” says Baca.

Another important viewpoint is from current students. Israel Zarate and Deena Mikbel are both seventh graders at Waters Elementary, and Pete Leki is their teacher now. Says Zarate, “After going on these trips I feel that I have a responsibility towards these places. Because after doing these trips I realize how important it is to take care of our water and of our Forest Preserves.”

Empowerment and the ability to take action are essential. “I feel more responsible in a way. I can go places and make it better…” says Mikbel, “Without going to those places and helping out, I would never have known that it is possible to help.”

These students are already showing a passion for the environment and that, no matter what they choose to do in life, they will always be good stewards of the Chicago River. “I think in the future I might be involved with nature because I might decide to help out in programs, such as the Mighty Acorns,” says Zarate, “We should all help the environment as much as we can.” “I will definitely volunteer in the forests and other places,” says Mikbel.

In order to improve the Chicago River, we need to Think! Beyond the Banks. This year, through Friends’ Chicago River Schools Network and the support of the Wrigley Company Foundation, we launched a pilot project and distributed 40 “Think! Learning Kits.” Our goal is to transform students’ knowledge about the Chicago River and encourage deeper connections to the river. By demonstrating how easy it is for students to take small everyday actions to improve the river, the kits will allow students to collectively make the river an even greater resource for the community and for the wildlife that lives there. Our simple kit included a tote bag with print materials, supplies, T-shirts, a lesson plan and an interactive PowerPoint presentation to help teachers introduce their students to these everyday actions.

Teachers are Friends’ greatest river ambassadors and multipliers. They have already put these kits into action. A class at Schurz High School created their own Think! display for their entire school. Another school, Drummond Montessori Middle School, liked the “Eco-Friendly Cleaning Recipes” book provided in the kits and asked students to perform a cost-benefit analysis of some of the recipes. We hope you will take a look at our eco-friendly recipe book and other Think! Beyond the Banks materials. Visit www.chicagoriver.org/think and help spread the word.
Strengthening Chicago River Habitat: 50 New Spawning Structures for Channel Catfish

One of Friends’ overarching goals is to encourage and celebrate the wildness of our vibrant river system. In our wildest habitat-building project to date, Friends, in partnership with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is working to design, construct, and install nesting cavities to help boost the river’s population of channel catfish; a hearty native species that is well-suited to life in the Chicago River system.

This effort was prompted by the fact that while the Chicago River currently has a small population of breeding channel cats, the growth of the population is limited by a lack of spawning habitat. With the addition of 100,000 yearling channel catfish and the installation of 400 nesting cavities at locations ranging from the North Shore Channel to the Little Calumet River, we are doing our part to help this critical species repopulate the system after years of degradation limited its breeding success.

Ideally, channel catfish spawning habitat should have the shape of a horizontal, narrow tube, much like a hollow log or pipe, which could be easily swept clean by spawning fish. As for the location, the structure should be located in a part of the river where water is between three to four feet deep and placed next to existing in-stream habitat, like a downed tree. With all of this basic information as a starting point, we were able to make some creative updates to our design, resulting in the structure that has a direct impact on water quality as well as other aquatic organisms.

The habitat is made out of pervious concrete, similar to what you might see in parking areas, residential streets, or green houses. In those cases, pervious concrete is a choice construction material not only because it allows rain water to pass through it and infiltrate into the soil, but because it protects water quality by providing an additional filtration system. As the Chicago River flows past the habitat structures, water will filter through them in a similar way. During this process, sediment in the water, considered a pollutant, will be trapped in the cavities of the concrete and removed from the water column.

While the gaps in the pervious concrete are small enough to filter out sediment, they are big enough to provide living space for a wide range of aquatic organisms. These organisms will feed on the organic material stuck in the gaps and growing on the structure. Their movement will help keep the pore space open to improve filtration and they’ll also serve as an additional food source for larger organisms, like macroinvertebrates, which will then provide food for the catfish young once they have hatched!

In 2014, 50 habitat structures were installed and the remaining 350 units will be placed in 2015.

Thanks to continuous efforts to improve water and habitat quality, the biodiversity of our own urban wilderness continues to grow. From the “downtown canyon” to the river’s headwaters, the quality of the river has reached a place where we can be confident that our efforts to build new habitat for river-dependent species will be successful and that there will be more wildness to celebrate every year.
Meadow voles, otherwise known as field mice, play an important role in the Chicago River ecosystem. They reproduce in great numbers, which in turn feed birds-of-prey; a variety of snakes; and several mammals such as foxes, coyotes, and weasels. Large connected habitats like the upland prairie at Linne Woods and the savanna woodland at Miami Woods are essential to the survival of all the animals mentioned above, including the meadow vole.

Meadow voles are the most widespread vole in North America. As their name suggests, they prefer to live in meadows, fields, grassy marshes, and along rivers and lakes. Voles are good swimmers and diggers. They make extensive use of tunnels and burrow underground chambers where they sleep and keep food stores. Voles take refuge from predators in their system of burrows and grassy tunnels. During the cold winter months meadow voles will nest with other family members and consume large amounts of food to keep warm. They can eat up to 60% of their body weight each day, mainly grass, seeds, grains and berries.

Especially because they are so abundant in the habitats where they are found, meadow voles have crucial roles in the ecosystem. Many predators rely on voles to make up a significant portion of their diet, especially owls, hawks and falcons. Because of their importance as a food source, voles need protection – as does their habitat. Voles consume large quantities of grass and recycle the nutrients held in the grass through their droppings. They also help to aerate the soil through their digging activities.
2015 Chicago River Blue Awards, Submissions Due April 3, 2015
The CRB Awards recognize developments with river-sensitive design both along the river and throughout the watershed. Award winning projects exemplify sustainable practices and take people, wildlife, and clean water into special account. Additional information and submission materials are available on our website.

Chicago River Day Save the Date – May 9, 2015
Mark your calendars for Friends’ 23rd annual Chicago River Day on May 9, 2015, from 9 a.m. until 12 noon. From litter pickup to restoration to habitat creation, Chicago River Day is about helping the river become one of the world’s greatest! Come out, roll up your sleeves, and make a difference for the river. With over 60 cleanup sites throughout the Chicago River system there is sure to be one near you! Registration will begin on March 1, 2015.

Chicago River Commodores is back!
Can’t make it out to Chicago River Day or you just want to do more? You can help improve the river by becoming a Chicago River Commodore. Please visit http://chicagoriver.donorpages.com/Commodores2015/ to make your donation. Commodores may donate $35, $50, or $100. Your donation will help purchase native plants and supplies that will beautify and clean up the river on Chicago River Day. Do you want to do even more? You can also create a personalized Chicago River Commodore fundraising page to raise money from family and friends. The first ten people to bring in $100 in donations will receive a free gift courtesy of REI.