Friends Readies Next Generation for Climate Crisis

“The world is waking up,” Swedish high school student and climate crisis activist Greta Thunberg told the U.N.’s Climate Change Action Summit this fall. And young people are waking up first. While it is with a degree of chagrin that we find them forced into this position by the inaction of their elders, their enthusiastic response is inspiring.

At Friends of the Chicago River, we have been fostering environmental stewardship by students and their teachers since 1996 through our Chicago River Schools Network (CRSN), helping more than 400,000 young people learn about their local environment and how to keep it healthy, diverse, and resilient.

Through curricula, lesson plans, and workshops, CRSN empowers educators to teach their students by using the Chicago River as an open, living classroom for a variety of subjects ranging from math and science to history and language arts. Schools can also adopt a site along the river where they become involved in monitoring, restoring and advocating for the river. These outdoor experiences enhance students’ understanding of their local environment.

“CRSN gives students an up-close look into some of the environmental problems we face today. Studying the river leads students to make more environmentally sound decisions in their homes such as recycling, water conservation, reducing energy use, and eco-friendly shopping,” said Mac McFeely, science teacher at Chicago City Day School.

Climate Podcast Features Friends

This fall the Climate Pod podcast did a live taping at Chicago’s Lincoln Hall as a benefit for Friends of the Chicago River. Friends’ Executive Director Margaret Frisbie was part of the show along with a number of climate crisis activists.

Frisbie touted the value of a blue/green corridor of open space approach to developing the river as a way to address climate change. “You get wildlife habitat, you mitigate the heat island effect, you get less flooding, and it’s good for people to be outside,” she said.

Studying the environmental sciences is a critical component of student education. It prepares them to be active citizens and understand the complex and varied environmental issues facing their region, nation, and the globe. Our educational and outreach mission is to engage, provoke, and inspire all people, especially those who live or work in the watershed, to increase their awareness of, empathy toward, and actions benefiting the Chicago River ecosystem.

See page eleven for membership opportunities,
or visit our website, www.chicagoriver.org for more information on getting involved.
Healthy River, Healthy People

While my heart has been breaking over the climate crisis and kangaroos, I was buoyed by a recent PBS News Hour story on how much people benefit from being out in nature.

The focus of the report was a study by the University of Exeter in England which found that individuals who spend two or more hours a week in natural areas were considerably more likely to report good health and psychological well-being. The effects held true across all sorts of demographics: occupational, ethnic, economic, and health status, including people with chronic illnesses and disabilities. Excitingly, studies like this one, which number well over 1,000, reveal to us that regular doses of nature can reduce stress, blood pressure, and anxiety while improving mood and self-esteem, the immune system, and how well students do in school.

This natural remedy ties directly to Friends’ tangible efforts to improve and protect the Chicago River system for people, plants, and animals, and our vision of the river as a blue/green corridor of connected natural open space. Friends’ projects and programs are making our lands and water cleaner, safer, and more accessible and our advocacy has advanced our vision for a continuous Chicago River trail. These are prescriptions for a healthier community.

Yet despite our success, there is still much more to do.

To truly address the issues such as climate, habitat fragmentation, sewer overflows, stormwater runoff, litter, and invasive plants, as a society we need to enforce and expand laws that make the river and adjacent lands healthier. If we did, there would be many more fish swimming, turtles sunning, and beavers gnawing. In communities all up and down the river more people would be hiking, biking, dining, paddling, or just enjoying the view. We would have harder, protected, connected landscapes providing habitat, offsetting the urban heat island effect, and serving as a sponge to collect valuable clean rain water. Protecting our planet’s plants and animals from the climate crisis and actively offsetting it would result in a healthier human population.

We already know what we need to do.

Good public policy can require nature-based green infrastructure, a continuous Chicago River trail for the river’s full 156 miles, and an end to sewage, litter and salt pollution. Through good public policy we can invest in the protection and restoration of public natural open space for wildlife and in our own chances for fitter, happier, and more productive lives.

As a friend of the Chicago River, we ask for your support. When we ask you to speak on behalf of the river, please do.

Margaret Frisbie
Executive Director
Riverprize Honor Brings Global Exposure

The world got a closer look at the Chicago River system at the 22nd International Riversymposium in Brisbane, Australia in October, a gathering that included an international audience of river experts.

Friends’ Executive Director Margaret Frisbie at the symposium made a presentation about the river’s renaissance and current challenges as part of a competition for the coveted Thiess International Riverprize. Friends was one of three finalists for the award, which was won by the James River Association for its stewardship of the James River in Virginia.

In Brisbane, International RiverFoundation board chairman Paul F. Greenfield said, “All the finalists shared the same characteristics: dedication, persistence, and commitment to work over many, many years.”

Survey Reveals Ways to Improve the North Branch

A new coordinated series of walking, paddling, and in-stream wading surveys of the North Branch of the Chicago River between River Park and Gompers Park concluded there a number of ways this reach of the river can be improved for paddlers, hikers, and bicyclists.

Among the recommendations:

• Increase recreational opportunities by activating the River Park Boathouse; enhance a canoe and kayak launching area at Kiwanis Park; and investigate a new launch site at Carmen Avenue.

• Remove the concrete lining the riverbed from the confluence of the North Branch and the North Shore Channel to Central Park Avenue.

• Make the waterway stretch safer by adding low-cost signage to alert recreational users to river hazards such as rocks and pipes.

• Improve trail surfacing, access, and signage.

The river audit tools and tasks were created by Friends to survey specific components of the corridor, including riverbank stability and recreational hazards.

“‘The river survey was a unique opportunity to expose residents and agency partners to this somewhat undiscovered stretch of the river system,” said Friends’ Planning Director Adam Flickinger. Partners included Friends, Active Transportation Alliance, and the North River Commission, with the support of REI and the Chicago Park District. Local residents, Northeastern Illinois University students, staff from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, the Chicago Department of Transportation, the Metropolitan Planning Council, and Ald. Samantha Nugent’s 39th Ward office also contributed.

Friends will continue to work with the North River Commission and partners to implement the recommendations.
Friends’ Brewery Talk Reveals the Majesty of Bats

Friends’ efforts to educate people about the wonders and importance of the Chicago River system and its native wildlife included a talk on bats by Friends’ Conservation Programs Manager Maggie Jones.

“Bats have a bad rap,” Jones told a group at Half Acre Beer Co.’s Balmoral taproom in November. “But bats play a hugely important role in our ecosystem so we tell people they need to focus on the three Ps: pollination, propagation, and pest control.”

In the tropics, bats pollinate plants like insects do here. They help support crops of agave, mangos, and bananas. As propagators, bats consume the fruit and distribute the seeds over a wide area. This is especially helpful when land has been stripped by agriculture, logging or ranching.

Our native bats play a great role as controllers of pests like mosquitos. They can eat half their weight in bugs in just one night, and nursing females eat even more. This reduces the need for pesticides and saves billions of dollars a year.

To support bats, Friends has erected bat maternity colonies at six locations in the Forest Preserves of Cook County. These provide a place for bats to roost and raise their young. Friends helps monitor bats in partnership with the Illinois Bat Working Group as well.

Equipped with sound recording devices, Friends’ staff and other volunteers walk through set transects along the river in forest preserves and parks digitally recording and analyzing echolocation calls. A half dozen species were heard in the Chicago area test sites in 2019.

Bats can be helped by planting native plants to support insect populations and volunteering with land restoration work, she said. And, Jones continued, we can work to combat the negative PR: “There are a lot of good things about bats—tell other people about how important they really are.”

Become a Monitor

Support our wildlife projects and help evaluate their success through Friends’ volunteer monitoring program for our habitat initiatives.

If you would like to become a volunteer wildlife monitor for bats, turtles, or ospreys for 2020, sign up to become a Chicago River Eco-Warrior at [http://bit.ly/RiverCREW](http://bit.ly/RiverCREW) or contact us at (312) 939-0490, ext 14.
Story continued from page 1

Each year, under the oversight of Friends’ Ecology Outreach Manager Mark Hauser, hundreds of students and teachers gather for the Chicago River Student Congress. The Congress, which is designed to emulate a professional conference, allows students to share their environmental knowledge, experiences, and enthusiasm with their peers through informative workshops and view displays created by other students and professionals from local colleges, nonprofits, and government agencies.

The theme for this year’s Congress in February 2020 will be the climate crisis. Among other local impacts, the effects of climate change have increased the frequency and intensity of rainstorms. These storms result in an increase in stormwater runoff pollution and combined sewer overflows (CSOs) in which untreated sewage is released into the Chicago River system when the sewer system is overwhelmed.

Climate change research shows that by the end of the 21st century there will be noticeable temperature increases in Chicago, including extreme heat days, which are those days that exceed 97°F. Less soil moisture will kill off native plant species and allow non-natives to encroach. Reduced summer water levels are likely to reduce the area of wetlands, resulting in poorer water quality and less habitat for wildlife and plants.

“When students learn about the Chicago River, it can help them learn about climate change, and how it affects ecosystems,” said Chicago City Day School student Wyatt Carlson. “Because of this, students will be better prepared to face climate change and reduce their impact on the environment.”

Friends’ Executive Director Margaret Frisbie was the keynote speaker at the 2019 Storm Water Solutions Conference in Tinley Park in November where she discussed the value of developing the river as a blue/green corridor. Frisbie spoke to more than 100 stormwater professionals whose job it is to prevent flooding, erosion, basement backups, and combined sewer overflows.

Highlighting the importance of using nature-based solutions to capture stormwater, Frisbie exhorted the value of a blue/green corridor design approach to the Chicago River system and others like it which can be measured not only in aesthetics and health benefits for people and wildlife but economically as well.

Such an approach “can also help us combat and withstand the climate crisis by tempering extreme heat and defending against intensifying storms,” Frisbie said.

The blue/green corridor approach is a sustainable design solution that uses a river and adjacent lands to establish a passageway of natural open space to connect large-scale natural habitats. Such corridors provide people with a place to play, allow for natural movement of wildlife, and create stormwater-absorbing open space.

In boosting the blue/green corridor idea, Frisbie noted that studies have shown that access to nature can help lower blood pressure, reduce stress, increase energy levels, and boost immune systems. Some children with ADHD saw increases in their ability to focus after exposure to outdoor activities, researchers say.

In 2019, a Friends-commissioned study by the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater’s Fiscal and Economic Research Center concluded that every $1 spent on developing blue/green corridor projects would provide $1.77 in additional economic return.
Photo Contest Exposes River’s Beauty

The Chicago River system is one of the greatest rivers in the world. Along its 156 miles, one can see the majestic urban canyons, amazing architecture, natural areas of beauty, dashing fish in its streams and wildlife on its banks. It’s a photographic wonderland.

Friends of the Chicago River’s 40th anniversary photo contest certainly captured the river and its environments in all their beauty. To see all the winners (and more) in color visit http://bit.ly/ChicagoRiverPhoto40. In the meantime, here’s a sampling of the winning entries.

Wildlife, 1st Place
Richard Pallardy

Native Plants and Landscape, 1st Place
Louise Barrett

Urban Scenes, 1st Place
Joel Porterfield

People and Recreation, 1st Place
Holly Swyers
Great River Spots: 40 for 40

As a final reflection on Friends’ 40th anniversary we compiled one more Top 40 list—Top Spots on the Chicago River—to help you discover more of the amazing places along the system where you can view wildlife, ride your bike, enjoy world-famous architecture, watch a barge unload, fish, paddle or just enjoy the view.

“When Friends launched in 1979, most people would have been hard-pressed to name any ‘must-see’ spots, such was the deteriorated and neglected shape the river system was in,” said Friends’ Executive Director Margaret Frisbie. “That there are now so many wonderful locations along the river is a testament to all the hard work by Friends and organizations like ours, all of our partners, the forward-thinking, environment-minded officials, and the thousands and thousands of volunteers.”

See all 40 sites at http://bit.ly/40riverplaces. Hopefully it will take you somewhere you have never been. If your favorite site is not on the list we would love to hear about it. Email us at river@chicagoriver.org.

Biodiversity Bounces Back with Project at Watersmeet Woods

Veteran and first-time volunteers alike helped make an 18-month land restoration collaboration a success at Watersmeet Woods near Northfield.

Working with Friends of the Chicago River, volunteers spent more than 450 hours using saws and loppers to remove nearly 10 acres of invasive plant species such as European buckthorn (Rhamnus cathartica), glossy buckthorn (Rhamnus frangula), multiflora rose (Rosa multiflora), and alien honeysuckles (Lonicera spp.).

Additional educational events at Watersmeet Woods have included seed collecting, a spring ecology and wildflower walk, and a late-summer mushroom identification outing.

Friends is collaborating with the Forest Preserves of Cook County to install a kiosk onsite. It will educate the public on the value of improving wildlife habitat (more beneficial for turtles and other creatures) and of planting native plants (which aid in flood prevention by absorbing runoff). It will also be used to advertise future volunteer work days.

Eileen Sutter, who serves as a site steward with John Berg, noted that the area is now home to sneezeweed (Helenium autumnale), boneset (Eupatorium perfoliatum), cardinal flower (Lobelia cardinalis), and great blue lobelia (Lobelia siphilitica). “Two years ago, it was full of buckthorn and very little else,” she said.

“The loss of biodiversity is a loss for all humankind,” added Berg. Experts warn that decreased biodiversity can negatively impact soil quality needed for human nutrition, affect the development of new medicines, and exacerbate infectious diseases.

The effort was funded by an Illinois Clean Energy Foundation community stewardship grant and private donations.
Friends Targets Nutrient Pollution Through Policy Work

Described as one of America’s most widespread, costly, and difficult environmental challenges, nutrient pollution can be seen in the Chicago River system in oxygen-sucking algal blooms, fish kills, and food scarcity for wildlife. High levels of nitrogen and phosphorous—primarily the result of fertilizers, certain detergents, and yard waste—are also devastating downstream in the nearly 7,000-square-mile “Dead Zone” in the Gulf of Mexico. Cook County is one of its largest contributors.

Friends’ policy efforts include working with state and local governments and partnering with fellow environmental organizations to set new, higher standards for nutrient levels. In 2017, a settlement between the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) and environmental groups, including Friends, required the parties to work together to curb phosphorous discharges from MWRD plants and set new, stricter standards. The MWRD has agreed to meet stricter standards at its largest wastewater plants by 2030.

Friends has also been working with the North Branch Watershed Workgroup to set similar standards for the North Branch portions in the North Shore Sanitary District. Jointly-formulated Nutrient Assessment and Reduction Plans (NARPs) serve as the framework for improving water quality.

Reductions can be achieved in a number of ways. Nutrient loads can be cut by reducing fertilizer use and harmful detergents, street sweeping, and by adding more green infrastructure to degrade nutrients before they reach the waterway. Downstream, water reclamation districts can increase the amounts removed, with some of those costs being offset by re-selling the phosphorous and nitrogen for use in the production of environmentally friendly fertilizer.

“Nutrient pollution has a big impact on ecosystems and food chains. Without enough oxygen, fish die, which affects the wildlife that eats fish,” said Friends Director of Watershed Planning John Quail. That includes fish-eating migratory birds such as herons and cormorants, and mammals including muskrats and beavers. Ingesting toxic algae created by unnatural blooms can be fatal to ducks.

“Ultimately, as a community that values clean water we have to do our part to reduce the amount of nutrients that we put on our lawns or down the drain, and our public agencies need to make sure that the water that is going into our streams and rivers is as clean and healthy as it can be,” said Quail.

Award Winners Honored

Friends of the Chicago River’s annual service awards recognize exceptional efforts on behalf of the Chicago River system. The 2019 winners were:

Spirit of the River: Chris Parson (left), who launched Friends’ Chicago River Schools Network in 1997 and has been a volunteer canoe guide with the organization for more than 20 years.

River Champion: Lauren Umek, Ph.D. (center), a Chicago Park District ecologist who worked to remove the North Branch Dam at River Park in 2018 to improve water quality, wildlife habitat, and paddler safety.

Volunteer of the Year: Stephan Vandenbroucke (right), a volunteer steward at Ronan Park, Chicago River Day site captain, Chicago River Revival Festival participant, and a Chicago River Student Congress volunteer.
Evanston, a frequent partner of Friends, became the first Illinois city to be certified as a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), a recognition for its long history of environmental initiatives. NWF partners with communities to become healthier, greener and more wildlife friendly. “Creating and preserving habitat for birds, bees, butterflies and other pollinators strengthens our ecosystem and creates healthier communities for all,” said Mayor Stephen Hagerty. “I’m proud of our city’s collective efforts to achieve this important designation and our continued leadership on environmental issues.”

Capitalizing on the massive effort to restore the river and its banks along the North Branch and North Shore Channel, Phase 2 construction of the North Branch Chicago River Habitat Restoration Project began in December. The first phase of the project included riverbank restoration and the removal of a concrete lining of the river and the North Branch Dam at River Park. The dam was blocking fish, mussel, and paddler passage. Its removal reconnects 48 miles of the river system for the first time since 1910. Benefits of the three-park project include vast improvements to fish passage, fish habitat, migratory bird habitat and replacement of about 49 acres of Eurasian weed thickets with native oak savanna. Contractors will slope back the precarious edge; remove predominantly invasive and non-native trees, shrubs, grasses and forbs; establish aquatic bed wetland along the bank; and establish riparian savanna on banks and parkland natural areas.

These birds have historically lived near rivers in Illinois as the rest of the state was covered in prairie. They nest in the decayed cavities of snags, tall stumps, or in live trees that have softer wood such as elms, maples, or willows. Snags are preferred as they house the woodpeckers’ main food supply – insects, although these birds are omnivores and also eat fruits, nuts, and seeds. The dead, decaying wood supports a rich community of decomposers like bacteria, fungi, and insects. Snags have greater structural complexity than living trees providing shelter and food for woodpeckers, other birds, and bats. Additionally, cavities excavated by woodpeckers help support dozens of other species that help control insect populations, including non-native species like the emerald ash borer and gypsy moth.

Predators of adult red-bellied woodpeckers include sharp-shinned hawks and Cooper's hawks (also river-edge regulars), snakes and even house cats. When approached by a larger animal, red-bellied woodpeckers will either hide from it or harass it. They will defend their nests aggressively, even against much larger predators.

Next time you are out for a walk in the woods, look and listen for one of our native woodpeckers. They’re a sight to behold.

The particular rat-a-tat-tat of the red-bellied woodpecker drum draws attention in the winter woods along the Chicago River. Predominantly found east of the Mississippi, the red-bellied woodpecker prefers moderate-density forests with larger trees for nesting cavities and dead trees, called snags, for hunting insects, an excellent source of nutrition. LaBagh Woods on the city's north side is home to a few.

Superficially similar to the northern flicker and ladder-backed woodpecker, its common name is somewhat misleading. You might expect this bird, with its flashy red cap and nape, to be called the red-headed woodpecker, but that name refers to Melanerpes erythrocephalus which has a completely red head. The red-bellied woodpecker has a subtle red patch on its belly that gives its name. Adults are generally light gray with a black and white pattern on their back, wings, and tail. The red feathers on the head are more prominent in adult males.

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HIGH Water Marks

Friends of the Chicago River gratefully acknowledges all the ways members, donors, and partners helped us achieve our mission to improve and protect the Chicago River system for people, plants, and animals from August 16, 2019 through December 31, 2019. Individuals, businesses, and organizations who have given or pledged $250 and above are listed below.

**The Otter Society**

The Otter Society is Friends’ giving society and recognizes individuals, businesses, and foundations that contribute $1,500 annually to the General Operating Fund or the Voice for the River Endowment. Chicago River Legacy members, who are thoughtfully providing for Friends in their estate plans, are also recognized as Otter Society members.

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Continued on page 11...
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- $500 Yellow-headed Blackbird
- $156 Black-crowned Night Heron
- $156 Tributary Member (Emerging Leaders)
- $10 Prairie Dropseed / Volunteer,
- $35 Chorus Frog / Individual
- $75 Tiger Salamander / Family
- $100 Blanding’s Turtle / Business

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Friends Team Grows

Cristine McDowell has joined Friends as development associate.

Possessing a strong background in database management, donor relations, event logistics, information analysis, marketing materials, and communications, her experience will be invaluable to Friends. McDowell comes to Friends from a nonprofit rehabilitation center where she served as the development and communications coordinator. She received her MBA from National Louis University and graduated from Western Illinois University with a BA in anthropology.

In her spare time, McDowell volunteers at Chicago Animal Care and Control and Fresh Vision Group.

“I wanted to work at Friends because I wanted to be a part of having a positive impact on our environment,” she said.
Chicago River Summit, March 12

Managing stormwater on a watershed-wide scale using nature-based solutions is the focus of Friends’ 2020 Chicago River Summit on March 12. Learn how experts from across the country have utilized successful nature-based approaches for coordinated stormwater management and reduced impacts on their cities and natural resources. The annual event drives policy change and exposes decision makers to new ideas. Reserve your spot at http://bit.ly/ChicagoRiverSummit2020.

Get Up, Get Out

It’s time to start thinking about ways for you and your co-workers, church, or club members to get out on the Chicago River this year. Our River Action Day program provides a rewarding river-edge volunteer experience. “We greatly appreciated the time and resources to lead our people through a day full of learning and serving. Our volunteers thoroughly enjoyed the day,” said Julie R. Gyure of Ernst & Young, which arranged a RAD in 2019. Contact aanderson@chicagoriver.org or call (312) 939-0490, ext. 14 for more information.