Improving Health through Nature

Friends of the Chicago River launched our Inside, Out & About initiative this year as a purposeful, in-person, and virtual engagement resource that illuminates the many benefits of spending time outdoors, building a relationship with nature, and improving individual health.

With easy-to-use online materials and a podcast (which can be accessed at chicagoriver.org), we take people on a journey along the Chicago River system, exploring the wonderful places and introducing the people who make the river system and surrounding communities special. The resources include in-depth looks at river system sites, their history, health, wildlife, family activities, community connections, and wellness. To ensure the programming reaches a broad audience, all online programs are available in Spanish and English.

“The goal of Inside, Out & About is to build relationships with the river and these extraordinary landscapes for everyone, especially people who live in communities where there is less green space and higher rates of flooding, basement backups, and air pollution, which are predominantly Black and Brown,” said Margaret Frisbie, Friends’ executive director.

By promoting the use of natural areas, Inside, Out & About encourages stewardship, and helps people understand that being outside in nature is good for physical and emotional health. Studies show that as little as 120 minutes a week in nature can improve physical health and mental well-being.

“Over the last 16 months there has been a surge of people outside along the river north and south,” said Frisbie. “By using a multidisciplinary approach, we hope to empower them and other newcomers to learn about and enjoy the wide variety of natural areas within the Chicago River system and to help them learn about the physical and emotional health benefits of being in nature. There’s lots of great information and fun outdoor activities for people of all ages.”

Frisbie hosts the monthly Inside, Out & About podcast that includes interviews with wildlife scientists, environmental journalists, authors, artists, musicians, and Chicago history experts.

Connect to Nature with Hands-on Learning

Students, families, individuals, and groups are deepening their connections with nature through hands-on learning as part of our Inside, Out & About initiative.

At the Forest Preserves’ Kids’ Fest at Wampum Lake in July, our ecology outreach manager Mark Hauser helped more than 100 kids and parents learn about chemistry testing and water quality. Kids also got to make a craft on insect metamorphosis to take home.

Kids’ Fest is one of the largest events of the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

See page eleven for membership opportunities.

Please visit our website, www.chicagoriver.org, for more information on getting involved.
Swimming with Unicorns

Friends’ inaugural Summer Float Party, hosted with Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) Commissioner Josina Morita in August, was a smash success. Over 70 people happily floated about and fell in the North Shore Channel including kids of all ages, Friends’ members and partners, and lots of elected and local officials including Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. President Preckwinkle is a veteran river swimmer; she also joined us for the Big Jump three years in a row. Ever creative in their choices of craft, the floaters turned up with traditional rings, inflatable sofas, roosters and fried eggs, dragons, and, yes, even a unicorn.

The Summer Float Party is the next step in our effort to draw attention to the fact that 10 years after USEPA approved swimming as a protected use in many reaches of the Chicago River system after an 11-year campaign and a record number of hearings before the Illinois Pollution Control Board, regulators have still not enforced the rule. That is not to say that people don’t swim in the river because we know they do. Last summer I recorded a dozen children in the Upper North Branch at LaBagh Woods having a merry time splashing about—in an area of the river that is subject to combined sewer overflows (CSOs). This July I saw a little family wading in the river just above the River Park Riffle on a beautiful summer day—again in a reach where CSOs occur.

While the subjects of my anecdotal observations may not number in the thousands, the number of people who are recreating in and on the river and getting wet swimming, rowing, paddling, fishing, floating, and on jet skis certainly does. It is time that USEPA and Illinois EPA step up and enforce the rules.

The river is cleaner than it has been in over 100 years. Advocates including Friends have completed projects which improve water quality and secured significant legal victories that have resulted in essential changes to the rules and how we invest in the river. Today, according to MWRD, water quality stations are consistently recording levels well within the Illinois EPA safety targets for Primary Contact Recreation waters.

While there is more work to do to ensure equitable access and infrastructure and develop strategies that address complicating factors (e.g., sediments and boat traffic), it is clear that the Chicago and Calumet Rivers are clean enough for swimming most of the time. And now, it is time for our government agencies to make it safe for everyone everywhere all of the time.

And then we can all swim with unicorns.

Margaret Frisbie
Executive Director
Bridgehouse Museum News

Annual Summer Cruise Moves to Autumn

Support Friends’ McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum by joining us for the eighth annual cruise on Thursday, October 14 from 6 to 8 p.m. This highly anticipated event unites river-front businesses and Chicagoland leaders in support of the museum’s education and public outreach programs.

A great opportunity to get to know less familiar reaches of the river system, the cruise will travel down the South Branch of the Chicago River. Tickets include an open bar, appetizers, and entertainment. This year’s cruise is presented by the Molson Coors Beverage Company, PepsiCo, and Wendella. Lead sponsors are d’Escoto, Inc., and Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr. Additional sponsors include City Cruises, The Fletcher Family, The Robert R. McCormick Foundation, and The Wrigley Building.

All guests will be required to show proof of vaccination against COVID-19. More information and tickets are available at chicagoriver.org.

Mobile Cart Coming to the Museum

The museum is honored to receive an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant supporting a mobile cart with hands-on, immersive experiences and educational materials, which will allow the Bridgehouse Museum to reach a broader and more diverse audience along the Chicago Riverwalk plaza in front of the museum. The cart will be introduced for the 2022 museum season.

Award-Winning Exhibit

In June the Bridgehouse Museum and our partners at the design firm Space Haus, received an award from the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) in its Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition. The annual competition invites writers, editors, and museum visionaries to submit their best labels – the primary tool for sharing ideas, information, and stories with the public – for judging by a diverse selection of esteemed jurors from the museum and heritage sector.

The museum’s entry entitled “A River and Its City” is the large interpretive panel exhibit located directly opposite the museum entrance. As the first interpretive content encountered by visitors, the exhibit evokes curiosity and excitement as well as orients visitors geographically and temporally.

The award-winning exhibit is part of a major update of the museum’s exhibits last summer that showcases a river teeming with wildlife and the progress made since the museum first opened in 2006. The exhibits reflect the action and advocacy of Friends and our partners to improve the health of the river.

The Bridgehouse Museum is open Thursday through Monday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. through October 31. Private event rentals are available as well as guided tours on weekends. The museum is participating in the acclaimed Open House Chicago event on October 16 and 17. Bridge lift viewing reservations where guests get an up close look at the massive gears of the DuSable Bridge in motion are available at bridgehousemuseum.org. If you are interested in a private rental for a fall bridge lift or an event, please contact Josh Coles at jcoles@chicagoriver.org.
Community Action on Sewage and the River

Last spring Friends of the Chicago River began hosting community meetings to inform the outcome of Chicago’s next National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit, which regulates polluted discharges into the Chicago and Calumet Rivers from Chicago’s combined sewer outfalls. There are more than 300 such sewer outfalls that discharge directly into the Chicago and Calumet rivers; the City is responsible for over 180 of them. An NPDES permit is required through the Clean Water Act which provides criteria and mechanisms for water quality attainment including the NPDES permit process.

At the meetings, City staff presented updates on their efforts to reduce sewer overflows and Friends’ partners and community stakeholders discussed hopes for future uses such as safe swimming and improved habitat, and their frustrations with litter, combined sewer overflows, and limited access to the river in too many communities. The discussions will be used as the foundation of a draft permit that will be developed this fall and presented to Illinois EPA.

“A community approach was vital to ensure that everyone had a voice in these permits which will influence the health of the river for decades to come,” said Margaret Frisbie, executive director of Friends of the Chicago River. “Our goal is to establish effective, enforceable permits that improve the river; protect public health; and reduce sewage, stormwater, and litter pollution.”

Organizations participating in the meetings included the Alliance for the Great Lakes, Illinois Environmental Council, Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization, People for Community Recovery, River Park Advisory Council, South Branch PAC, Urban Rivers and staff from the City of Chicago including Chief Sustainability Officer Angela Tovar. The NPDES review process was developed by the Water Quality Task Force which currently includes Friends, the Abrams Law Clinic at the University of Chicago, Environmental Law & Policy Center, Openlands, and Sierra Club-Illinois Chapter.

New Staff at Friends

Friends is growing our capacity for watershed planning and for building partnerships across the watershed with new team members Aqsa Ali, project planner, and Joe Hinton, director of environment, equity, and engagement.

Ali brings several years of experience managing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for data monitoring, data management, and training programs. She works on several watershed-scale data collection and analysis projects including the creation of a watershed-wide decision support mapping tool that will get underway this fall.

Prior to joining Friends, Ali was a GIS analyst at Davey Resource Group, Inc., where she managed data maps to maintain trees along ComEd power lines as well as conduct GIS training for field staff.

Hinton has researched and utilized strategies to help a diverse array of audiences develop a commitment to the environment and discover their role in sustainability, conservation, and justice settings. As a researcher and learning resource specialist with the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, Hinton served on a team developing learning opportunities to help people deepen their understanding of health, health equity, and utilizing data to move to action. Hinton was also an assistant professor of geography at Harold Washington College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago.
How to Listen to the Landscape

Chicago sound artist, designer, and composer Norman W. Long helps people listen to the landscape to breakdown the barriers between ourselves and the natural world. He leads sound walks with the Chicago Park District’s Night Out in the Parks program to help people quietly contemplate nature so they can see it and hear it more deeply.

As a guest on Friends’ Inside, Out and About podcast about Big Marsh Park, Long discussed sound art production using field recording, electro-acoustic composition, and dub technique within the larger context of landscape. His work includes the Big Marsh Soundscape.

Long is also a board member of the Midwest Society of Acoustic Ecology (MSAE) which is dedicated to exploring the role of sound in natural habitats and human societies. Throughout the summer MSAE hosted the Sixth Annual Summer Soundwalks in the Parks which included a Singing Insect Soundwalk at Big Marsh Park in August. Follow Long and his work on Twitter @n_dub_L or listen to his work at soundcloud.com/normanlong and at normanlong.bandcamp.com. Visit chicagoriver.org to listen to our interview with Long.

Story continued from page 1

Most of the initial Inside, Out & About episodes feature significant sites of the Calumet region including Kickapoo Woods, Beaubien Woods, Big Marsh Park, and Wampum Lake. Other episodes include LaBagh Woods on Chicago’s Northwest Side, the Chicago Portage National Historic Site, and Bubbly Creek, the South Fork of the South Branch of the Chicago River.

In-person programming includes Canoe & Clean events led by Friends’ Volunteer and Events Coordinator Annette Anderson, and workshops and field trips led by Friends’ Ecology Outreach Manager Mark Hauser, who helps students and families learn about natural areas through hands-on water quality testing and habitat assessment.

With the generous support of the Walder Foundation, Inside, Out & About builds on Friends’ work to improve and protect natural areas by advocating for meaningful policies, planning, and programs such as the Chicago-Calumet River Watershed Council. All residents and elected officials of the watershed benefit from better understanding of our rich natural heritage and local natural resources and the need to protect, increase, and restore them.

The Watershed Council is a coalition of government, planning, and nonprofit partners working across traditional boundaries to develop policies and implement projects that increase the use of nature-based solutions to manage stormwater, create habitat, improve community health, combat climate change, and more.
Chicago River Day Success

Chicago River Day 2021 was a huge success. More than 2,000 individuals, families, community groups, and corporate teams participated in Chicago River Day. They volunteered in and along the river system on May 8 at 74 locations in the city and suburbs, making the Chicago River system healthier and more accessible for people, plants, and animals.

Volunteers fanned out as far north as Lincolnshire, Lake Forest, and North Chicago in Lake County and south and southwest including Dolton, Riverdale, Palos, and Summit. Following Chicago River Day was a summer-long litter removal effort under Friends’ Litter Free Chicago/Calumet River program including volunteer cleanups on the river’s banks and by canoe.

Collective, on-the-ground action like Chicago River Day is vital to raise awareness of the stubborn problem of litter. Since 1992, Chicago River Day volunteers have carted off over 986 tons of garbage and invasive plant material from the Chicago River system and restored banks along its 156 miles and its tributary streams.

Alaina Harkness, executive director of Current, hoisting litter at Beaubien Woods (above) and dedicated volunteers remove a discarded tire at Big Marsh Park (left).
Friends would like to thank our sponsors for making the 2021 Chicago River Day possible:

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Alongside the Little Cal - Science Comes to Life

Students from various Chicago Public Schools (CPS) spent their summer working with Calumet is My Back Yard (CIMBY).

Their service this summer took them to Kickapoo Woods, nestled along the Little Calumet River. There they spent a day with Friends’ Ecology Outreach Manager Mark Hauser learning to conduct water quality tests, assessing the quality of natural areas, hiking along the river, and spending time out in nature.

CIMBY is a joint program of The Field Museum and CPS. It is an organization that works with high school students from the South Side of Chicago to improve natural sites and bring science lessons to life.

Students in the CIMBY program this summer doing a plant quality assessment at Kickapoo Woods.
Improving Habitat on The Little Cal

Friends and our partners at the Shedd Aquarium improved habitat in the Chicago River System this summer by installing native aquatic plants along the Little Calumet River. Through our Paddle and Plants program, volunteers canoed from Kickapoo Woods on the Little Calumet to plant lizard’s tail and water willow along the banks. Over time the plant species expand into lush colonies in the river’s emergent habitat providing many benefits including areas for fish to locate food and rest, bank erosion control, and water quality improvement. This initial planting in the Little Calumet is an extension of successful plant installations in the North Shore Channel.

CLIMATE NEWS

A report by the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative released in July finds that communities along the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River will spend “nearly $2 billion over next five years to combat coastal damages from climate change.” One piece of the climate solution is to make peace with nature and use it as a force for good. Landscape-scale restoration, such as Friends’ Crooked Creek project funded by the Chi-Cal Rivers Fund, and the utilization of nature-based green infrastructure to capture stormwater in urban areas can have an enormously beneficial approach. Nature-based solutions reduce sewage and litter pollution, flooding and basement backups, the urban heat island effect, and air pollution. They also improve wildlife habitat, physical health and mental well-being, and environmental justice opportunities. Read the full report at glslcities.org.

STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT WATER QUALITY

People across the watershed are deepening their connections with nature and increasing their awareness of our natural areas through hands-on learning as part of our Inside, Out & About initiative. Friends’ Ecology Outreach Manager Mark Hauser, who leads our Chicago River Schools Network, trained a group of high school students at Beaubien Woods this summer to conduct water quality testing as part of the Forest Preserve Experience, a five-week summer program for high school students to get a hands-on education in conservation, and summer employment. The program includes restoration work such as invasive plant removal, litter cleanups, and opportunities to learn about nature and explore green jobs and career opportunities.

Welcome to Michael Moran

Friends of the Chicago River is pleased to welcome Michael Moran, executive vice president of Aon, to Friends’ Board of Directors. Moran has been a supporter of Friends for over a decade and Aon served as a Lead Sponsor for this year’s Chicago River Day.

“The Chicago River is a tremendous natural asset that is vital to the public good, our health, and the health of wildlife,” said Moran, who regularly hikes, jogs, and bikes along the river from Horner Park through the North Branch trails. “The work of Friends to improve the quality and openness of the Chicago River system as a blue-green corridor is fantastic. I’m massively impressed by what Friends has been able to achieve. Yet at the same time it’s unfinished, there’s a ton more to do so I’m excited to be a part of helping guide the great work of Friends.”

Moran also serves on the board of Friends of Northside College Prep in the North Park neighborhood of Chicago.

Michael Moran, Aon EVP
Northern Watersnake

Throughout history, humans have had a complex relationship with snakes; wary at best, sometimes loving, but mostly fearful. Even those who work outdoors and encounter them frequently can be scared of snakes.

Yet despite some humans’ aversion, snakes are amazing animals. They are well-adapted to their habitat, important to the environment, and just want to be left alone. And snakes are beneficial. They rid our communities of pests, rarely, if ever, hurting humans always choosing flight over fight unless they aren’t given a choice.

Stephen Bell is not a huge fan of snakes, but does appreciate and respect them. Bell is the director of the brand new Ford Calumet Environmental Learning Center at Big Marsh Park, a 280-acre park in the South Deering Community of Chicago with off-road biking, nature areas for bird watching, and hiking trails.

Big Marsh is great habitat for snakes. As Bell says, “At first, I was somewhat relieved to only find garter snakes and McKay’s brown snakes, both of which are pretty cute and about as non-scary as a snake can get. In 2020 I started to see what I thought were common watersnakes at Big Marsh.” These were later identified as northern watersnakes.

According to Bell, “Many contemporary sightings of northern watersnakes have occurred on the southeast side of Chicago where marshland, rivers, and other aquatic habitats allow them to thrive. So far, 2021 has proven to be a banner year for sighting watersnakes at Big Marsh, some impressively large and inquisitive—not that I’ve gotten very close.”

By way of identification, the northern watersnake is light brown or gray color with darker bands of black or brown on its neck and body. The older the snake the darker the pattern generally becomes. Some appear almost entirely black. They can grow to over four feet in length, although they usually average under three. Females are slightly larger than males.

The northern watersnake is active during the day and at night. They are most often seen basking on rocks or trees at the water’s edge. They hunt for food in the shallow water and on the shoreline, preying on small fish, frogs, worms, leeches, crayfish, salamanders, small birds, and even mammals.

Muskrat houses and beaver lodges are good places to find northern watersnakes. These larger herbivores don’t eat the snake, and the snakes are sheltered from the heat and cold. Northern watersnakes live their entire lives in bodies of water where food is plentiful, and away from human development.

Unlike most other snakes, female watersnakes do not lay eggs, but rather, keeps them protected inside her body. The eggs hatch inside the mother and she gives birth to live young. The young snakes, each about seven inches long, are born in the late summer and must immediately fend for themselves. The mother snake can give birth to as many as 30 young, but the average is only eight.

Many larger animals prey on watersnakes including herons, raccoons, foxes, and snapping turtles. The northern watersnake, although nonvenomous, resembles the venomous cottonmouth. For this reason it is often killed by humans out of fear. Unlike the cottonmouth, watersnakes have a long slender body, a flattened head that is the same width as the neck, and rounded pupils. The venomous cottonmouth is not found in Chicago or Cook County at all.
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 March 16, 2021, through August 11, 2021. 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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By becoming a member, you are making a strong statement that you want a healthier river for people, plants, and animals. Gift memberships are also available.

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Calendar of Events

October 2 at 9 a.m.
Calumet Fall Colors Wilderness Paddle

October 9 at 9 a.m.
Canoe and Clean at River Park

October 9 at 10 a.m.
Nature Hike at LaBagh Woods

October 16 at 11 a.m.
Family Day at Big Marsh

October 16 and 17
Open House Chicago at the Bridgehouse Museum

October 30 at 6 p.m.
Halloween Paddle at River Park

Find more information about these and other events at chicagoriver.org/events

Your generous support directly impacts Friends’ efforts to improve the Chicago River’s health and vitality in three important areas: education and outreach; on-the-ground projects; and public policy and planning.

Members receive:
- Free general admission plus discounts on bridge lift, tour tickets, and merchandise at our McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum,
- Discounts on our canoe trips,
- A subscription to The River Reporter newsletter,
- Volunteer bulletins, email alerts, and other opportunities for hands-on involvement, plus
- Invitations to special events such as Chicago River Day, Big Fish Ball, and Summer Cruise, and
- Listing in Friends’ Annual Report.

Otter Society members represent Friends’ most important philanthropic partnership. In appreciation of their generous support, they enjoy unique benefits at three levels of giving. To learn more about how you can participate as an individual, household, or business, please contact kolsenclark@chicagoriver.org or call (312) 939-0490, ext. 19.

Interested in joining our monthly giving club? Support Friends year-round through automatic monthly contributions as small as $10 per month. Contact membership at friends@chicagoriver.org or call (312) 939-0490, ext. 10.

Friends of the Chicago River is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Please send this form and payment to: Friends of the Chicago River at 411 South Wells Street, Suite 800, Chicago, IL 60607, or join online at www.chicagoriver.org/get-involved/membership.
Friends’ Annual Meeting Postponed to February

Our Annual Meeting, which is typically an in-person event held in downtown Chicago in October, is postponed to February 2022 to safeguard against the rise of COVID-19 variants. Please check our website in the comings weeks (chicagoriver.org) for more Annual Meeting details to celebrate Friends, our members, our volunteers, and the Chicago River system that all work so hard to improve. If you have questions regarding the Annual Meeting, please contact Annette Anderson at aanderson@chicagoriver.org or (312) 939-0490, ext. 14.

Plan Ahead:

Contact Friends of the Chicago River to create custom experiences for your family, friends, or corporate team in 2022. A wide array of opportunities are available. Contact Joe Hinton for more information at jhinton@chicagoriver.org.