

Friends of the Chicago River

Final Grant Report to FishAmerica

Project Description

The mission of Friends of the Chicago River (Friends) is to protect and restore the Chicago-Calumet River system for all people, water, and wildlife. Our vision is that the river is a healthy, biodiverse, climate resilient ecosystem with equitable, open access for all. We are the only organization dedicated solely to the Chicago-Calumet River system.

Friends' Paddle and Plant program seeks to specifically address the lack of fish habitat in the river by installing thousands of native plants in the riparian zone to improve aquatic habitat, water quality, and the health of our river ecosystem. These plants, water willow and lizard's tail, adapt to frequent water level changes and quickly spread on their own under the soil via rhizomes, growing exponentially after being planted to amplify the program's impact. They not only provide habitat for fish but also provide forage and cover for organisms from aquatic insects, amphibians, birds, and others. Riparian plant communities improve water quality by filtering pollutants and preventing erosion, create refuge for animals during flood conditions, and help the river and neighboring communities recover from intense rainstorms, which are happening more often due to climate change.

Plantings took place along the Little Calumet River of the Chicago-Calumet River system, launching from the Kickapoo Woods forest preserve in Riverdale. In addition to providing much-needed fish habitat, plantings will also achieve social and equity benefits. Analysis from Friends' Natural Solutions Tool (an award-winning GIS mapping system), the EPA's EJSCREEN, and the Federal Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool indicates that plantings are taking place in and near environmental justice communities.

Workday volunteers conducted the planting from canoes, with assistance and leadership from Friends' staff and volunteer canoe guides, with support from Shedd Aquarium staff. Friends' staff trained volunteers how to install a plant using dibble bars, an ergonomic tool to ease in planting to create the right-sized holes to install the plants. Then the volunteers were outfitted with waders, loaded into the canoes with the plants, and directed to ideal planting locations by staff. Plantings took place in the emergent zone in the immediate area of their canoe at depths less than one foot or at the water's edge. Once the volunteers were in the planting areas, work began in earnest while at the same time the river corridor was peppered with conversations, laughter, and beaming smiles from the collaborative experience. While we were out there, staff made sure to point out previous years plants to show volunteers how their day's efforts would continue to improve the habitat for years to come.

Expected Outcomes

As stated in the September 2023 proposal to FishAmerica, the expected outcomes for this project were to:

1. Install 1,000 native plants to benefit fish habitat and water quality
2. Restore at least 1,000 linear feet of the Chicago-Calumet River system within an environmental justice community
3. Recruit 48 volunteers to implement the work
4. Empower 192 hours of community environmental stewardship

Progress and Measurements

Friends is proud to report that this project exceeded all projected outcomes. The actual outcomes for this project are:

1. Installing 1,440 native plants to benefit fish habitat and water quality
2. Restoring at least 1,440 linear feet of the Chicago-Calumet River system within an environmental justice community
3. Recruiting 78 volunteers to implement the work
4. Empowering 352 hours of community environmental stewardship

In the long term, as the native plant colonies grow and expand, these improvements to the river will lead to better water quality and habitat for native fish.

Planning for the project started in November of 2023 with coordinating with our partners and local governments, planning logistics, and recruiting volunteers ahead of the summer workdays. Friends relied heavily on the capacity of our all-volunteer canoe guide program. Recruitment, training and project assignments for these devoted volunteers began in November 2023, with a classroom training in February 2024 and hands-on training in April 2024. Plantings took place in June through August of 2024.

Volunteer participation from Friends' canoe guides and from community members was instrumental to this project's success. Full details about how volunteers contributed are in the following section.

Volunteer Involvement

Volunteer involvement for this project involved two distinct groups: Friends' corps of canoe guides who support our on-the-water events all year long, and planting volunteers who participate day-of.

Canoe guides haul canoes to and from launch sites, train beginners on the basics of paddling to make the program broadly accessible to the community, and assist anyone who needs help on the water. Most guides have been participating in the paddling program for multiple years, assisting with not only Paddle and Plants events but also recreational paddles and litter removal directly from the water. Thirty guides contributed 150 hours of volunteer service during the project period.

Day-of volunteers came from local communities to install the native species along the riverbanks. During the project period, 48 community volunteers contributed 202 hours of service.

Friends has formed many local community partnerships through our work, including the Shedd Aquarium, whose staff also help recruit volunteers. We both leveraged our community connections to invite local residents to volunteer for the planting days. This process included sharing through Forest Preserves of Cook County site stewards and environmental and community organizations, and posting flyers on the Kickapoo Woods community board. We collaborated with the Friends of the Forest Preserves and Forest Preserves of Cook County to bring out their Beaubien Youth Ambassadors on July 25. Imani Village's Green Health Advocates planted in August, part of a larger professional development partnership between them and Friends throughout the summer. Another special guest planting with us this year came from Country Road Greenhouses, the family-owned

greenhouse business in Rochelle, IL that has supplied our native plant plugs for Paddle and Plants for years.

In addition to the project benefits, volunteers contributed an in-kind value of \$11,788.48 to Friends for their time on this project, as calculated by Independent Sector's 2024 National Value of Volunteer Time.

Attachments

The following documents are enclosed with this final report submission, per the FishAmerica award agreement:

- Copies of receipts for approved expenses, and timesheets and financial ledgers for salaries/benefits
- Project photographs
- Invoice to FishAmerica for funds