

A Needs Assessment for Outreach and Stewardship in Milwaukee County's Lincoln Park

Caitie McCoy, Erika Lower, and Mark Krupa
University of Illinois



Courtesy of University of Wisconsin-Extension

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SUMMARY

During ongoing remediation and restoration efforts of the Milwaukee River in Lincoln Park, Milwaukee, University of Wisconsin-Extension and Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant conducted two focus groups to evaluate the efficacy of outreach and communication efforts, to understand stakeholder perceptions of the cleanup project, and to generate ideas for long-term stewardship of the park. After compiling and analyzing feedback from focus group participants using qualitative analysis, four key findings emerged: 1) Recreation is the main benefit identified by park users, and many expressed a desire for greater access to amenities. 2) Negative perceptions regarding litter, vegetation overgrowth, and safety surround the park. 3) While participants identified lack of ownership and community engagement in the Lincoln Park area as potential barriers to mobilizing stewardship efforts, they expressed significant interest in participating in a stewardship group themselves. 4) Attitudes toward past Great Lakes Legacy Act outreach efforts were mixed, and most attendees provided suggestions to increase transparency and for more frequent updates. These findings revealed several implications for continuing outreach efforts, including which outreach tools are most effective, which audiences should be targeted, and which messages should be prioritized. These results will help improve future outreach efforts and decision-making processes in Lincoln Park, the Milwaukee River Estuary, and other Areas of Concern throughout the Great Lakes.

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INTRODUCTION

Past industrial activities in the Great Lakes region have left behind a legacy of contamination and habitat degradation that persists today. Although remediation efforts have been successful in reducing pollution in the past few decades, the Great Lakes and their tributaries still contain areas of contaminated sediment, which is hazardous to human and ecological communities. In order to address this habitat degradation and prioritize the cleanup of these contaminated areas, the International Joint Commission established a list of the most polluted and degraded sites, known as Areas of Concern (AOCs). Congress enacted the Great Lakes Legacy Act (GLLA), a collaborative cost-sharing program designed to accelerate the pace of sediment remediation in AOCs, in 2002 (EPA, 2014). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency works with federal, state, local, and private partners to administer sediment remediation and habitat restoration activities to remove AOCs from the list with funding from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

The Milwaukee Estuary AOC includes stretches of the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic rivers and the nearshore waters of Lake Michigan. The AOC was first listed in 1987 and suffers from habitat problems as well as sediment contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and heavy metals. The waterways within the Milwaukee Estuary were historically used for commercial shipping, and contamination was likely caused by upstream sources such as tanneries, factories, urban runoff, and sewage overflows. This AOC contributes pollution to Lake Michigan.

Since the development of the Remedial Action Plan in 1991, significant progress has been made toward “delisting” this AOC. The removal of the North Avenue Dam on the Milwaukee River included contaminated sediment removal and led to water quality

improvements in the area. Several habitat assessments and beach health monitoring initiatives have likewise contributed to delisting efforts. Work in Lincoln Park has also helped revitalize the AOC. Assessment of the sediment deposits in the Milwaukee River led to the identification of three priority sites in Milwaukee County's Lincoln Park area, where the Lincoln Creek meets the Milwaukee River (DNR, 2014). The Blatz Pavilion site cleanup was completed in 2008, with almost 4,000 cubic yards of PCB-contaminated sediment removed. Phase 1 of the GLLA project in Lincoln Park was completed in 2012, with 119,000 cubic yards of sediment removed and habitat restoration completed. Project design and planning for the Phase 2 remediation efforts are complete, with construction expected to begin as early as fall 2014.

Previous Research

There has been a growing emphasis on the need for more stakeholder involvement in environmental decision-making in recent years. In their 1999 study of environmental planning in the Great Lakes, Beierle and Konisky describe the potential benefits of stakeholder involvement in four different areas: decision quality, relationships among important players in the decision-making process, the capacity for managing environmental problems, and improvements in environmental quality. Agencies are moving more toward including all interested parties in the policy process, and understanding stakeholder perceptions and attitudes toward remedial action plans in Great Lakes AOCs is of utmost importance. Johnsen, Knaap, and Smith's 1992 study of public attitudes toward remediation of the Lower Green Bay watershed showed that a surprisingly large number of residents use the region's water resources for recreation despite negative perceptions of water quality. Industrial waste, disturbed sediment, and city sewage systems were identified as the major sources of pollution in the area, but respondents generally believed their community could overcome obstacles to water quality improvement.

While there has been previous research on the economic and social benefits of sediment remediation projects (Braden, Patunru, Chattopadhyay, & Mays, 2004; Isley, Isley & Hause, 2011; McMillen, 2003), this report will serve to fill in some of the gaps in the understanding of stakeholder attitudes toward sediment remediation in the Milwaukee Estuary AOC and their implications for outreach.

Purpose

This paper focuses on local community attitudes toward ongoing cleanup efforts in the Lincoln Park area. This study was conducted to determine local knowledge and perceptions of Lincoln Park and recent remediation efforts, evaluate the effectiveness of outreach efforts for past sediment remediation, provide suggestions for future outreach on GLLA Phase 2, and gauge the level of community interest in establishing a Friends of Lincoln Park stewardship group.

METHODS

Procedure

This study incorporated methods drawn from similar studies conducted at the Sheboygan River AOC in Wisconsin (McCoy & Morgan, 2012) and the St. Louis River AOC in Minnesota and Wisconsin (McCoy & Anderson, 2013). Participants were selected based on a pre-existing stakeholder list compiled over several years by the Lincoln Park GLLA outreach team and through a survey of local businesses and organizations. More than 100 neighborhood stakeholders were contacted by email, and the first 25 to respond were invited to participate. Six of those selected did not attend the focus group, for a total of 19 participants. Participants included local residents, park users, and members of Milwaukee River community groups. University of Wisconsin-Extension and Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant performed two separate focus groups on consecutive nights in April 2014, with 10 and nine participants respectively. Because

the study sample was not randomly selected and does not contain representatives of all stakeholder groups for the Lincoln Park neighborhood, this study is not generalizable to the entire Lincoln Park community. Rather, the study sample offers valuable, detailed insight into the attitudes of the represented stakeholders.

Each focus group was moderated by a member of the Lincoln Park outreach team, who guided the conversation with five close-ended questions using an anonymous audience response system (Table 1) and seven open-ended discussion questions regarding the cleanup, outreach, and stewardship at Lincoln Park (Table 2). The moderators allowed the comments of the participants to direct the conversation to a degree in order to allow for the emergence of stakeholder ideas and attitudes. Each focus group lasted two hours. Researchers took notes during the focus group, and sessions were audio recorded with the participants' permission to be transcribed at a later date.

The researchers want to note that the findings may be influenced by perceptions toward an ongoing controversial issue, the nearby Estabrook Dam. Milwaukee County Parks is currently exploring whether to keep or remove the dam, an issue that has divided neighbors. Before and during the focus groups, moderators requested that the dam be excluded from discussion to help maintain a comfortable environment for sharing opinions on Lincoln Park. However, it can be difficult for a person to separate their attitudes toward different projects in the same location that involve similar government agencies, so frustrations with the dam may have influenced expressed opinions toward the GLLA project.

Data Analysis

The researchers performed a qualitative content analysis of the transcripts and the close-ended dataset. Two researchers thoroughly read, took notes, and highlighted relevant information

in the text. This led to the development of a set of codes to organize the text, and similar codes were combined into major themes. The researchers found that their separate analyses produced very similar codes and themes, which were then consolidated into four findings.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

1) Recreation is the main benefit identified by park users, and many expressed a desire for greater access to amenities.

While focus group participants expressed an appreciation of the aesthetic value of the natural areas and wildlife in Lincoln Park, recreation was overwhelmingly identified as the park's greatest value. This included both recreational activities directly related to the river, such as boating, kayaking, fishing, and tubing, as well as land-based activities such as organized sports, cross-country skiing, and the use of the golf course and water park (I=interviewee quote).

I1: I'd also just like to add all the amenities in the park – there was a lot of controversy when they took out the pool and put in the water park, but it's wonderful. It brought kids there, and it's absolutely wonderful. The new playground is wonderful. I have students that have used [these] basketball courts. I think it's phenomenal to have that resource there. The thing I think is so amazing about the park is that it's the one park in Milwaukee that truly brings together such disparate interests.

I2: The other groups that I think of are all the sports teams – the basketball team – letting their kids play. There're hundreds of them. The soccer teams...the cricket team. There's the football team – any number of people moving in and out.

Participants expressed a desire for more access to recreational amenities, with a particular focus on more boat launches, improved navigability for boats and kayaks, and more fishing access. They even suggested installing additional amenities like an archery range to coincide with the completion of the park cleanup, indicating that increasing recreational access could help foster a greater sense of ownership of the park in the community.

I3: This park is very soon to become much more attractive, and if they capitalize on that, it would draw more people in the area.

Implications:

- Outreach on GLLA Phase 2 cleanup work should address exactly how remediation and restoration could negatively or positively impact recreation in the park.
- The GLLA cleanup schedule and location should be provided to park users as soon as possible to help them understand any short-term disruptions.
- Any improvements to the park that occur over a longer time scale, such as improved bird watching or shoreline plant growth that enables water views, should be communicated as a long-term result of the GLLA projects to help manage expectations.
- Post-cleanup improvements to the park will require long-term park maintenance and local stewardship to yield the greatest benefit from the GLLA cleanup efforts.

2) Negative perceptions regarding litter, vegetation overgrowth, and safety surround the park.

Stakeholders present at the focus group reported that Lincoln Park is heavily used and attracts visitors from a number of different demographics. Some residents hold negative views of the park due to large quantities of litter, especially near the sports fields after games. A few participants indicated that many of the park's trash cans were removed because visitors were starting fires in them. They said that without proper trash disposal options or signage reminders not to litter, heavy use results in high levels of trash. Many mentioned that it was a shame to cover up a newly remediated, beautiful park in trash. The perceived high quality of the project seemed to fuel further frustration with the trash issue.

I4: Millions of dollars were spent, and we're looking at frickin' shopping carts, tires, all kinds of garbage already. So, to me that makes no sense.... They wanted everyone to say "Aw, how beautiful." It's a beautiful project, but then you walk around and you look and you see already this garbage. It's very disheartening.

In addition to the sediment cleanup, participants spoke positively about the GLLA Phase 1 habitat work, saying that it provided clear views of the river through the removal of invasive brush. However, a couple participants noted that there is still some vegetation overgrowth in some areas. Participants particularly dislike the bushy habitat that has grown up between Blatz Pavilion and the Milwaukee River. They also raised concerns about perceptions of safety, acknowledging that crime exists but stating that the perceived threat might be higher than actual crime rates.

I5: Perception versus reality. Do a media blitz on the cleanup. Whenever there was an article about Lincoln Park, some time ago, that said there's a large perception that crime is a lot worse than it really is – it's one of the safe parks. So, that's something that once this media blitz happens after this – crunch some numbers. Maybe there're things we want to improve. Maybe there's reality vs. perception...

Along these lines, respondents commented on the mixed attitudes of the community toward safety regarding young adult use of the park in the late evening hours. Many liked that young adults had a safe place to go to be active and play basketball in the park, while others suspected the youth to be engaging in crime and complained about the noise.

I6: They put the basketball courts up. Well, fine it's gotten a lot of people to use it and stuff, but the government at the beginning had it open 24 hours, and the reason was, well, they're not out robbing people's houses or breaking into things. But the people that lived in the area had to listen to all that trash and the slurring and the drug activity in the parking lots.

Appropriate trash disposal and overgrowth maintenance were discussed at length, demonstrating the importance of maintaining the area's aesthetic and the high potential value of a well-organized stewardship group.

Implications:

- Outreach should emphasize maintaining park aesthetics, particularly through litter prevention.
- Signage near heavily trafficked areas like the basketball courts may be effective in reducing litter.

- A media blitz on park safety may persuade potential users that the area is worth visiting and respecting. Local authorities will need to coordinate this aspect of outreach in particular.
- Volunteer cleanup events, whether for trash removal or vegetation pruning, may be an effective way to encourage community engagement, preserve park aesthetics, and help relationships form across traditional boundaries like age, race, and residence location.

3) While participants identified lack of ownership and community engagement in the Lincoln Park area as potential barriers to mobilizing stewardship efforts, they expressed significant interest in participating in a stewardship group.

When asked about their level of interest in participating in a Friends of Lincoln Park stewardship group, all but two of the 19 participants responded that they were either “interested” or “very interested,” with the two explaining that they are already participating in groups for other parks. Some participants also mentioned involvement with recent or ongoing cleanup efforts at the park.

I7: As far as I know, our group – we’ve done some water cleanups where we were bringing a lot of tires up and stuff along the park here. I’m involved with the river and people that are concerned about the river and this reach.

Due to the high level of interest and concern participants expressed regarding park maintenance after the cleanup and restoration is complete, organizing a Friends of Lincoln Park group could be fairly successful. However, some participants suggested that the Lincoln Park neighborhood might lack the community engagement and sense of ownership required to form an effective stewardship group. Because many park visitors do not live in the neighborhood, it may be difficult to create the sense of connection that would encourage users to participate in stewardship efforts.

I8: Many users of the park are not here.... If you look at who’s renting out the sites, who’s golfing.... So, we’ve got people that aren’t from around here. When we tried to start a friends group, we were faced with people

looking [at us] like we're aliens or something. Like, "Hey it's nice to see you using the park. Would you be interested in being in a friends group? Would you help us do a cleanup?"

Participants pointed out that Milwaukee's history as a racially divided city could be an additional complicating factor when promoting stewardship, and that a deliberately diverse outreach group should be a priority. Another barrier participants identified was local divisions on the polarizing Estabrook Dam issue. Participants stated that the dam would have to be deliberately withheld as a topic for a Friends group to be successful. A lack of institutional funding for promoting park stewardship and the perception of the park as unsafe were mentioned as further obstacles to stewardship.

I9: I don't know that the community rallies around this park...but that doesn't mean it can't change. Even if it's not a Friends organization, I wonder if there are stewards, people who are interested in the park that could reach out to people...on weekends when groups are there to, you know, just engage with those people.... That stuff helps, and then people feel a sense of responsibility.

Finally, even with their significant interest in a stewardship group, participants demonstrated minimal interest in volunteering for leadership positions themselves during the focus group. With this lack of initial leadership, participants spoke of working with members of other local park Friends groups and the Park People to get support for organizing a group.

Implications:

- Communication, networking, and open dialogue between the agencies and citizen groups involved with Lincoln Park will be necessary to coordinate outreach activities.
- A Lincoln Park Friends group could create an ongoing dialogue with Milwaukee County Parks to help decide how to use limited resources to maintain plantings, reduce trash, perform outreach beyond the GLLA project, and more.
- Better demographic information on who actually uses the park and where they are from may help direct outreach efforts across Milwaukee, not just in the immediate Lincoln Park area.

- Diversity of stakeholders in the stewardship group should be considered and encouraged.
- Leadership positions are necessary in a citizen's group, and outreach efforts should encourage interested individuals to step up and participate in this capacity.
- Assistance from the Park People or other Friends groups to mentor the process of organizing a group could yield better, long-term results.

4) Attitudes toward past Great Lakes Legacy Act outreach efforts were mixed, and most attendees provided suggestions to increase transparency and for more frequent updates.

Some participants praised the effectiveness of past outreach efforts in keeping the public informed on GLLA cleanup and restoration progress. They appreciated the willingness of contractors to talk with them about the project while they were using the park. They mentioned that they had attended the public meetings and seen outreach materials like pamphlets and kiosks and found them to be informative. Other respondents generally expressed a desire for more frequent updates and a higher level of public involvement in decision-making. In particular, a couple attendees were unsatisfied with the level of detail provided in the answers they received at public meetings from Milwaukee County Parks.

I10: I wanted to find out what will you do about this, and who do you talk to? And all I was told was "Put your concern down, with your name and your email, and someone will get back to you with it." And I never received anything.

Almost all focus group attendees were upset that the kiosks were not updated and often contained outdated information. Suggestions for improvement included more regularly scheduled updates by email and kiosk on the Phase 1 restoration and upcoming Phase 2 project.

I11: And the onsite exhibits and kiosks – they had those posted for Phase 1, but they never updated them. They were very slow with updating, so that wasn't good.

I12: I would say have a separate list of emails...and say, "Hey, no matter what, we're going to tell you what's happening every two weeks, and if something occurs – if we get a setback, if we get flooded out, [if] we find some deposits that we didn't expect – and it's going to take more time, we're going to let you know.

Attendees also provided recommendations on outreach unrelated to the GLLA project for local outreach organizations and agencies like Milwaukee County Parks. Directing outreach efforts toward children, regular park users, and sports teams were identified as important ways for local outreach programmers and agencies to encourage long-term park stewardship. Participants pointed out that while the aforementioned groups are some of the park's most frequent visitors, they are also frequent contributors to the park's garbage issue, and emphasizing outreach could improve Lincoln Park's aesthetics on the whole.

Implications:

- Additional outreach efforts should prioritize answering stakeholder questions thoroughly as this builds trust and reassures stakeholders that their concerns are being heard. If answers cannot be provided readily, agencies should provide an answer as soon as possible.
- Kiosks and emails updates are effective outreach tools for reaching stakeholders onsite but should be updated regularly every 6-8 weeks to maintain relevance and provide transparency.
- A mixed-media approach including kiosks, emails, fliers, and having staff present in the park to answer questions during heavy use will reach the broadest audience. Directing outreach efforts to students and athletes may be particularly beneficial as they make frequent use of the park.

CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis of the Lincoln Park community focus groups provided four key findings and implications. These findings provide valuable insight into perceived values surrounding the park, community concerns regarding the environmental health of the park after the cleanup, and the level of interest in a Lincoln Park stewardship group. Park users highly value the recreational amenities of the park and would enjoy increased access if offered. Litter

was described as a main concern due to frequent use, and stakeholders shared ideas for reducing trash, such as signage at sports fields. Focus group participants overwhelmingly expressed interest in participating in a Friends of Lincoln Park group to help tackle some of their concerns and to help keep the park clean after significant federal investment. Stakeholders also expressed a desire for more frequent updates and transparency regarding the GLLA cleanup and restoration.

Implications were provided for each finding, including suggestions for outreach and mobilizing stewardship efforts. This information will be used to encourage greater citizen involvement at the Lincoln Park site, as well as to inform outreach in Lincoln Park, the Milwaukee River, and other Great Lakes AOCs.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Close-ended questions and responses for Lincoln Park focus groups

	Total	Group1	Group2
Clicker Q1: How knowledgeable are you of the Lincoln Park cleanup and restoration work?			
A)Huh? What project are you talking about?	0	0	0
B)I may have heard of this project at some point, but don't know what it's about.	1	0	1
C)I'm semi-knowledgeable of the work and could probably give a 1-2 sentence summary.	6	4	2
D)I'm knowledgeable. I can name project partners, describe purpose, process, & schedule.	12	6	6
E)I am an expert on the Lincoln Park remediation and restoration.	0	0	0
Clicker Q2: What is the best way to receive information on Lincoln Park?			
A)Public meetings or open houses	6	3	3
B)On-site exhibits or kiosks	2	1	1
C)Handouts	0	0	0
D)Mailings (incl. email)	5	1	4
E)Word of mouth	1	0	1
F)Other	4	4	0
Clicker Q3: What is the 2nd best way to receive information on Lincoln Park?			
A)Public meetings or open houses	6	3	3
B)On-site exhibits or kiosks	3	2	1
C)Handouts	1	0	1
D)Mailings (incl. email)	5	1	4
E)Word of mouth	1	1	0
F)Other	2	2	0
Clicker Q4: What is your level of interest in participating in a Friends of Lincoln Park stewardship group?			
A)Not at all interested	2	1	1
B)Somewhat interested	1	0	1
C)Interested	7	3	4
D)Very interested	9	6	3
E)So extremely interested that I'd like to be a Friends leader	0	0	0
Clicker Q5: How many Lincoln Park stewardship events would you attend/year if a Friends of Lincoln Park group existed?			
A)None	2	1	1
B)1 per year	3	0	3
C)2-3 per year	8	5	3
D)4-6 per year	4	3	1
E)Once per month	0	0	0

Table 2. Open-ended discussion questions for Lincoln Park focus groups

1. What types of things do people like to do at Lincoln Park?
2. What do people think about the cleanup and restoration of Lincoln Park?
3. Has anyone seen or received any information on the Lincoln Park cleanup? What do people like or dislike about these outreach examples?
 - a. Public meeting, kiosk, AOC handouts
4. What kinds of information would people like to receive on upcoming cleanup and restoration work? What is the best way to receive this information?
5. What kinds of concerns do people have about the environmental health of the park after the cleanup and restoration work is over?
6. What types of things can the Lincoln Park community do to help protect the park?
7. Are there any final thoughts?