

# Leadership in Action: My Time at Urban Rivers in Chicago

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## Who are Urban Rivers?

I completed my Leadership in Action Project with Urban Rivers, a Chicago-based non-profit dedicated to transforming formerly industrialised urban waterways into thriving wildlife sanctuaries and vibrant community spaces. Most of my time was spent by the **Wild Mile**, the world's first floating eco-park that is home to hundreds of native species, from Blue Vervain to Beavers.



In addition to the Wild Mile, Urban Rivers has projects at other sites around the city, including River Park on the North Branch and Bubbly Creek on the South Branch. Their strong community of volunteers supports everything from gardening to kayaking clean-ups, helping keep Chicago's rivers clean and accessible.



## The Block Party!

The Block Party is Urban Rivers' largest-scale event of the year. With over 1000 attendees this year (a record turnout!) and partnerships with over a dozen local organisations, the block party featured a range of exciting, interactive activities, and was the perfect place to learn more about Urban Rivers whilst meeting new people!



It is a very involved day for staff, interns, and volunteers, with activities ranging from putting up barricades in the early morning to serving drinks at the tent in the day. The day went by so quick with all the fun, and the work put in by the staff at Urban Rivers in the lead up to the event doesn't go unnoticed. It was an exceptional experience!

## BURP – Macroinvertebrate Study

The river is home to a wide variety of species, including macroinvertebrates. These creatures are particularly sensitive to changes in their environment and, as such, serve as excellent indicators of water quality and ecosystem health. Through the *Bugs in Urban Rivers Project (BURP)*, Urban Rivers studies the diversity and abundance of these bugs to assess the river's overall health.



Set-up for bug examination

I worked alongside another research intern to collect and count bug samples in Hester Dendies along the Wild Mile and at other sites. Examining them under the microscope was exciting – we found especially high numbers of scuds and midges in our analysis!



Bug Sample

## Trash Collection Data

I also helped digitise and analyse data collected by kayakers during their trash clean-up sessions. It was interesting to see which types of waste were most common and where they tend to accumulate.

## Research

I spent most of time in the Research Division at Urban Rivers, though, thanks to the team, I got to try a bit everything!



Research Team

## Installing Submerged Modules

At Bubbly Creek in the South Branch of the river, I helped install submerged modules into the river, containing underwater-growing plants, like native *Lilies and Water Shield*.

It took some experimenting to get the modules in place underwater, but efforts from Urban Rivers, the Shedd Aquarium, and the active community of volunteers paid off, with updates from the 360° submersible camera showing promising growth!

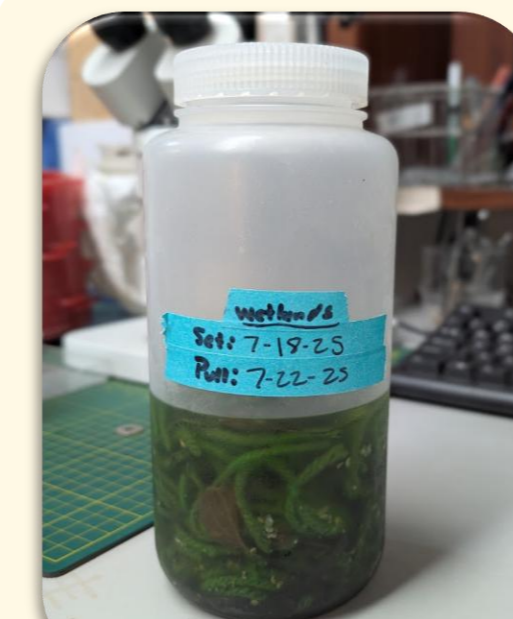


The module frames (made of biodegradable potato starch!)



Lillies emerging from submerged modules

## Fish Mops for Egg Collection



Sample Collection

I had the chance to kayak along the Wild Mile to place and regularly collect green mops along the wall of the Wild Mile, which mimic algae to attract fish to lay eggs. The collected eggs are being used by an external researcher to study fish migration patterns and the distribution of species adjacent to the Wild Mile.

## Freshwater Mussels

I measured the growth of freshwater mussels that have been gradually reintroduced to the river. Freshwater mussels play an essential role in supporting healthy rivers, but are heavily threatened, making regular monitoring of their growth critical.



## Grant Writing

I learnt about grant writing through an informative workshop, focusing on funding for the River Ranger Stewardship program.

## My Final Reflections

I had such a memorable time at Urban Rivers this summer. The work that is done in both revitalising Chicago's urban waterways and bringing the community together is truly inspiring, and I hope that other cities follow in connecting people with nature through urban garden spaces and education initiatives. A huge thank you to Urban Rivers, the Laidlaw Foundation, and UCL for making this unforgettable experience possible. Please check out more at [urbanrivers.org](http://urbanrivers.org)!

