



## Urban Agenda Platform

*The global platform for sharing progress, action and knowledge on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda to achieve sustainable urban development.*

# The Wild Mile

Region	North America
Award Scheme	Dubai International Award
Themes	Environmental Resilience Planning & Design Public Space Water & Sanitation
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 6 - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable Goal 13 - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts Goal 14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development Goal 15 - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
New Urban Agenda Commitments	Environmentally Sustainable and Resilient Urban Development

## Summary

The Wild Mile is the first floating park of its kind. Transforming an industrial canal into a vibrant wildlife sanctuary. The park uses a wildlife first approach, focusing on building a resilient and diverse ecosystem which in turn creates a unique amenity connecting residents with nature.

The park consists of a series of floating gardens arranged into a linear pathway providing a space for field trips, community programs and residents enjoyment.

## Background and Objective

Cities around the world have followed a similar pattern of development around their waterways to accommodate industrial growth and transportation needs of their time, straightened, lined with steel or concrete seawalls, and dredged to accommodate large ships. Over time many of these places have shifted their reliance on rivers as their main transportation centers toward highways and other modes of transportation. And as industry moves away from city centers our rivers have become empty concrete and steel channels, disconnected from the environment and people surrounding them.

Access to nature and green spaces is not equally distributed in our cities, and historically marginalized communities have been disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and pollution. The Wild Mile transforms these spaces into lush gardens and public walkways that benefit the communities around them, improving environmental quality and increasing access to nature.

## Actions and Implementation

Urban Rivers, the organization behind the Wild Mile was started by a small group of volunteers who realized the urban wildlife was able to survive in the smallest pockets of habitat found in the Chicago River. By creating more habitats that resemble a natural ecosystem that river could flourish into something truly special.

The project ethos is 'Wildlife First'. Every action taken is viewed through the lens of how it will help or harm the ecosystem. This simplifies decisions around how the park should be developed and results in a space where the diversity of wildlife becomes the attraction.



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To achieve these goals, Urban Rivers has built partnerships with researchers and organizations like the Shedd Aquarium to understand the impacts of the park and test new strategies for ecosystem enhancement.

## Outcomes and Impacts

1. 32,000 visits to the Wild Mile in 2023
2. 105 bird species spotted
3. 1300+ students attending field trips
4. 8 Active Research projects
5. 102 free public programs hosted

## Sustainability and Scalability

The Wild Mile has become the model for how to turn our urban rivers into public open space and continues to drive investment into transforming residents' relationship with their waterways.

Utilizing modular, prefabricated floating gardens and walkways, this approach is able to be adapted and expanded to fit the unique constraints common to our urban waterways and mimic the conditions of a healthy river.

Installations are phased over multiple years, allowing time to assess the impact and improve the approach to better enhance the ecosystem. The Wild Mile has been able to test hundreds of plant species, building different plant pallets for different goals and conditions and prototyping new habitat structures.

Certain native mussels filter over 40 liters of water per day. By creating a few small test beds in an early installation Urban Rivers was able to test different approaches then use these lessons to build a much larger section able to accommodate many thousands of mussels.

These same strategies are used to create floating forests, beaver, bat and turtle habitats and can be adapted to other areas based on local conditions.

## Gender and Social Inclusivity

We are committed to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where people of all backgrounds have an equal opportunity to connect with nature. The Wild Mile is a public park with an ADA accessible boardwalk. We host free school field trips, tours, and a variety of programs open to all ages, races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, religions, and abilities.



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We recognize that diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential values that must continue to guide our work in transforming once inaccessible urban waterways into accessible community spaces for all.

## Innovative Initiative

The Wild Mile is a floating eco-park which repurposes formally industrialized waterways into wildlife sanctuaries. This is accomplished by implementing modular floating gardens & artificial habitat structures attached to existing steel and concrete seawalls.

These floating gardens allow plants to grow without soil. The plant roots grow through the beds and hang freely in the river, pulling out excess nutrients from the river and providing structure and habitat for other wildlife.

## Resources devoted to delivery

The Wild Mile is made possible through numerous grants and contributions. Notably, the City of Chicago allocated \$1.4 million to help create the first section of floating walkway, called the 'Learning Platform'. Since that point they continued to invest in an extension of the Floating Forrest which opened in the summer of 2024.

As an organization originally started by volunteers, building community partnerships has enabled the success of this project. Each installation is put together by hundreds of volunteers and community groups over the course of a few days. The project is then maintained with the help of a large cohort of dedicated volunteers.

## Conclusion

Our urban rivers present one of the greatest opportunities to connect people to nature in the areas where they live. The Wild Mile is an example, utilizing wildlife's first principles to create accessible open space within some of the most densely populated areas of a city. By utilizing modular floating gardens, cities can adapt these principles to their local environment and test new approaches to increase access to greenspace and rewild their rivers.

Easy access to green space directly contributes to a person's wellbeing and happiness. A healthy and diverse ecosystem increases an environment's resilience to some of the external pressures which have degraded or eliminated many of our natural areas.

As cities look at their aging underused infrastructure, they must figure out how to adapt and reuse it for the challenges we will face in the future. The Wild Mile is one aspect of this challenge and the beginning of a global conversation about the future of our waterways.