Metropolitan Water Reclamation District *of* Greater Chicago

PRESS RELEASE

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"Chonkosaurus" represents Chicago River water quality improvements thanks to MWRD and clean water advocacy

A mammoth snapping turtle dubbed "Chonkosaurus" that was spotted on the North Branch of the Chicago River and shared on social media earlier last month has offered new insights into the work of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD).

As the legend of Chonkosaurus grows, so too are the stories of the environment where "Chonk" roams. Improved water quality and habitat have been largely credited with providing a healthier ecosystem for Chonk and friends, as well as kayakers, boaters and others seeking to recreate and visit the Chicago River.

The 30–40-pound snapping turtle became an internet sensation when botanists and podcast hosts and YouTubers Joey Santore and companion Al Scorch spotted it while paddling on the North Branch. The viral tweet, from the hosts of "Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't," attracted 900,000 views and caused flocks of turtle seekers to visit the river in search of Chonk. The turtle has garnered the attention of Chicagoans longing for the next "Chance the Snapper" or Monty and Rose the piping plovers, and despite its monstrous appearance, the turtle is proving to be as beloved as a new pack of fox pups spotted at Millennium Park recently.

Tasked with protecting the quality of the Chicago River and area waterways, the MWRD is proud to see Chonk emerge but not surprised by this resurgence of wildlife on the waterways.

"We welcome Chonkosaurus to the Chicago River and appreciate the attention shown to the turtle by the world," said MWRD President Kari K. Steele. "The Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS) has never been healthier. It has taken years of investment, testing and innovation from the MWRD to improve the quality of the water to the level we see today."

The MWRD treats about 1.3 billion gallons of water per day, turning wastewater into clean water and returning it to waterways. The MWRD controls 76 miles of navigable waterways, managing waterway elevation, monitoring water quality and fish populations, and also deploying a fleet of boats to respond to trash, debris and other pollution in the waterways. Thanks in part to advancements at MWRD water treatment operations and the MWRD's Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), the CAWS is thriving. Game fish are routinely caught by anglers, marinas and riverside economic development are booming and more turtles are turning to the waterways for habitat.

Could it be the one and only Chonkosaurus? Days after a massive snapping turtle was spotted in the North Branch of the Chicago River and made international headlines, a crew with the MWRD's Monitoring and Research Department came across this basking turtle atop the pylons near Division Street.

In 2012, the MWRD published a report on plants and wildlife living on or near Chicago area waterways and MWRD properties. The biological survey documented the presence of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, birds, dragonflies, damselflies, butterflies, and plant life at 25 Chicago area locations that included edges of waterways, treatment plant sites, reservoirs, and aeration stations.

Among the 911 plant and animal species counted, the survey discovered five different turtle species. Snapping turtles were documented in the Calumet region as well as the North Shore Channel, where in fact, another 40-pound snapping turtle was found. *(continued)*

“It looks like a prehistoric animal with its dinosaur-like tail. It might be called a snapping turtle, but when alarmed the reptile actually first tries to ram sharp projections from the outer shell into the intruder, rather than biting,” the report stated. “Not picky about food, the snapping turtle will eat just about anything it can fit into its mouth, including other reptiles.”

Could it have been the almighty Chonk or a distant relative, no one knows. But Chonk’s presence has educated listeners of the BBC and readers of National Geographic and the New York Times that Chicago is home to a thriving river scene.

“Area residents see the Chicago Area Waterway System as a major asset that was not envisioned decades ago,” said MWRD Vice President Patricia Theresa Flynn. “Improved water quality is evident in the water we collect and study, as well as the balanced ecology of human activity. It’s wonderful to see Chonkosaurus and other aquatic life benefiting from a healthy environment, and we are proud to play a role in hosting Chonk and friends.”

In addition to its role treating wastewater, managing stormwater, monitoring and protecting the region’s water resources, the MWRD has also partnered with organizations like Friends of the Chicago River to promote advocacy for the Chicago Area Waterway System, while also partnering with Urban Rivers, which has coordinated a Wild Mile of floating vegetation in the North Branch of the Chicago River near where Chonk was found. As part of the Wild Mile project, the MWRD has conducted dozens of fish surveys and macroinvertebrate collections.

The MWRD conducts fish monitoring periodically throughout its service area, which includes the Chicago, Calumet, and Des Plaines River Systems. The number of fish species found in the CAWS has drastically increased since the 1970s when monitoring of the fish population first began from 10 to 77 today. According to a recent study the MWRD partnered with the Shedd Aquarium to conduct, since 2001, a total of 19 new species were collected, of which only one (mosquitofish) was considered invasive.

The study shows a gradual increase in both the total number of fish and fish species in Chicago’s waterways. Results indicate that local Chicago waterways are more ecologically productive and conducive to aquatic life and less degraded than they once were.

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