

ADVERTISEMENT

WICKER PARK, BUCKTOWN, WEST TOWN

## Chonk The Thicc Snapping Turtle Is A Superstar — And Great News For The Chicago River

Experts are attributing the return of local wildlife to improvements in the water quality of the Chicago River over time.



By Maia McDonald May 18, 2023 Updated October 13, 2023



ADVERTISEMENT

Search ... 🔍

ADVERTISEMENT

Joey Santore and Al Scorch of the "Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't" YouTube channel discovered Chonk the enormous snapping turtle while kayaking on the Chicago River. Credit: Screenshot/Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't

GOOSE ISLAND — The appearance of a healthy, thick turtle named Chonk — Chicago's latest animal superstar — could show how the improving health of the Chicago River has contributed to the return of local animal species, experts said.

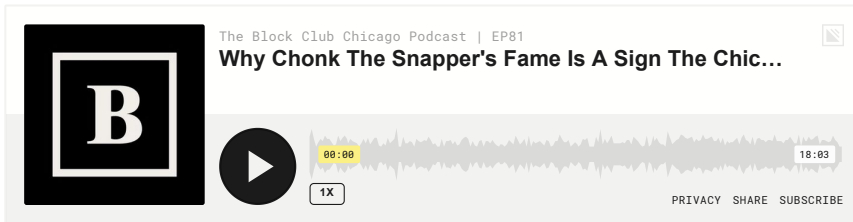
The enormous snapping turtle became an international sensation after Joey Santore and Al Scorch shared video of him on social media and through their YouTube channel, ["Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't."](#)



The original video from "Crime Pays But Botany Doesn't" featuring Chonk has about 183,000 views on YouTube.

Chonk captured hearts because of his size, but people who frequent the river have routinely spotted other snapping turtles and baby turtles near where Chonk lives, dating back several months.

That's an encouraging sign that local flora and fauna are starting to thrive along what had been a notoriously polluted waterway, experts said.



The Block Club Chicago Podcast | EP81

**Why Chonk The Snapper's Fame Is A Sign The Chic...**

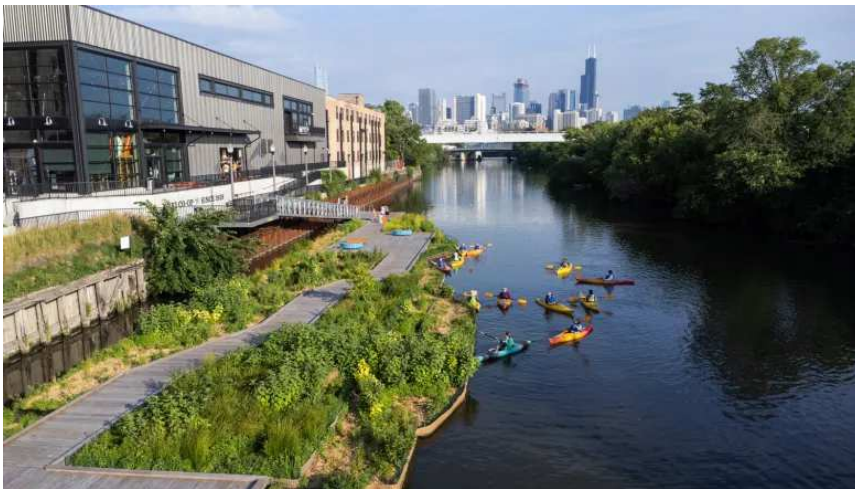
00:00 18:03

1X PRIVACY SHARE SUBSCRIBE

Santore said the enthusiastic response to Chonk shows many city dwellers are interested in and eager to connect with nature despite their highly developed surroundings.

“The simple fact of the matter is that it feels good for people to be around these things, and [it] helps draw people out of the often depressing and anxiety-inducing nature of the modern human world,” Santore said. “Native plants, native wildlife, etc. — it feels good to see it thriving so close to home.”

Many of Chicago’s waterways have long had a reputation for pollution as a result of years of local industrialization. The river has been threatened by invasive species like the Asian carp, which thrives in polluted waterways, Santore said.



The Chicago skyline is seen from the Wild Mile Chicago, a floating eco-park located on the North Branch Canal of the Chicago River, on July 7, 2022. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago

Chris Anchor, a senior wildlife biologist for the Forest Preserves of Cook County, said the Chicago River’s poor reputation dates back 40 or 50 years, when conditions were worse and the river could be likened to “an open sewer.”

“It had raw sewage and industrial pollution emptying into the river. ... The Des Plaines River was [in] the same condition. No one recreated on the river, and there were only two or three species of fish found in it,” Anchor [told Block Club Chicago’s Jon Hansen for the “It’s All Good” podcast.](#)

It was the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, coupled with the combined efforts of groups like the Forest Preserves of Cook County, Army Corps of Engineers and Friends of the Chicago River that helped improve the health of the waterway, Anchor said.

With dumping illegal and the culling of invasive plants while planting of native ones, the water quality of the river improved, attracting animals like Chonk, other snapping turtles and other species, Anchor said. Groups like [Urban Rivers](#) are working to restore the

river's ecosystem through initiatives like bringing freshwater mussels back to the waterway.

ADVERTISEMENT

**RELATED: [Here's How A Local Group Is Reviving The Chicago River's Freshwater Mussels](#)**

The river is far cleaner than it was in years past, but it's still home to bacteria, like any natural body of water.

"Currently, we can go out there and find 25, 30 species of fish, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people that recreate in the Chicago River during the course of the year," Anchor said. "So there's many more eyes out there looking around and actually experiencing what's living amongst us."



Nick Wesley picks up a mussel out of the Wild Mile Chicago, a floating eco-park located on the North Branch Canal of the Chicago River, on July 7, 2022. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago

Chonk is a common snapping turtle, one of two species of snapping turtle found in Illinois and North America, Anchor said.

While Chonk's size has a global following, snapping turtles can grow to even larger sizes if "you're actually out there serving them," Anchor said. The Forest Preserve handles 200-400 turtles every year, he said.

Scorch said snapping turtles have been seen by others who frequent the area, including a nearby kayak rental business and [Urban Rivers](#), an organization working to transform Chicago's urban waterways into wildlife sanctuaries. Santore said hatchlings have also been seen by people in the area in previous years.

Neighbor Byan A. Vuong saw similar snapping turtles in the north channel of the Chicago River near Wilson Street about a year ago, he said. The animals are a common sight if you know where to look, Vuong said.







Chicago resident Bryan A. Vuong took photos of these snapping turtles in the north channel of the Chicago River near Wilson Street about a year ago, he said. Credit: Provided

Santore and Scorch said local and national media attention on their discovery of Chonk — [who they came upon in a section of the Chicago River](#) near Goose Island earlier this month — has been has been a “crazy” experience.

The longtime friends and collaborators have been working together on “Crime Pays But Botany Doesn’t” since its inception in 2009, highlighting nature and wildlife areas across the world.

Santore hopes Chonk’s story isn’t just “clickbait,” but instead one that people can engage with and learn from, he said.

“It’s awesome to get a wonderful story about Chicago out there when we’re so maligned by the rest of the world, and we’re basically a right-wing talking point for a lot of people who don’t know anything about the city,” Scorch said.

With the attention on northern sections of the Chicago River due to Chonk’s newfound popularity, Scorch hopes Chicagoans also don’t forget to show some attention to other waterways around the city, especially on the Southeast Side, he said.

The Calumet River, Wolf Lake, Big Marsh and waterways in the southern parts of the city are other places to explore for those mostly familiar with Chicago’s northern natural areas, Scorch said.

“You want to talk about all this ecology, this marshland ecology and stuff, the Southeast Side by East Side and Hegewisch and the South Deering and that whole area of Chicago, a lot of people don’t get down there, but there’s some incredible nature growing where there were once all these steel mills and stuff, so that’s always a great place to get out to,” Scorch said.



Big Marsh Park in South Deering on Aug. 9, 2022. Credit: Colin Boyle/Block Club Chicago

After the experience with Chonk, Santore and Scorch hope to continue exploring local natural areas. Santore said he is interested to see what plant life is growing in rundown, urban areas and near train tracks.

“I always tell people, ‘Don’t try to pretend you’re somewhere else. Embrace where you live,’” Santore said. “Learn about the native ecosystems that took millions of years to evolve where you live, which lost all their ground, lost all their habitat when humans came in and built cities.

“That’s going to be the big thing that saves [us] as a species in the next centuries, if we start embracing where we live, embracing nature, embracing native plants and putting that [stuff] back in the cities.”

***Want a Chonk shirt? [Get one here.](#)***

*Subscribe to Block Club Chicago, an independent, 501(c)(3), journalist-run newsroom. Every dime we make funds reporting from Chicago's neighborhoods. Already subscribe? Click [here](#) to support Block Club with a tax-deductible donation.*

**Listen to the Block Club Chicago podcast:**

TAGGED: Chicago River



**MAIA MCDONALD**

Twitter @maiamcdonld More by **Maia McDonald**

[Previous](#)

**Ciao Ciao Gelato & Cafe Opens This Weekend In Portage Park With 46 Flavors**

[Next](#)

**Ald. Nicole Lee Plans To Help The Near South Side Thrive — And Make A New High School A Reality**

---

ADVERTISEMENT

---

**COMMUNITY**

[Our Team](#)  
[Board of Directors](#)  
[Our Supporters](#)  
[‘On The Block’](#)  
[Free Text Alerts](#)

**SUPPORT US!**

[Donate to Block Club Chicago](#)  
[Advertise](#)  
[FAQ](#)  
[Media Kit](#)  
[Staff Diversity Report](#)

---

Block Club Chicago is a nonprofit news organization dedicated to delivering reliable, nonpartisan and essential coverage of Chicago's diverse neighborhoods.

© 2023 Block Club Chicago. Proudly powered by [Newspack by Automattic](#) [Privacy Policy](#)

