

Caesar's Park Land Restoration Plan

Ree Klumb
Land Restoration School 2023

Land Acknowledgement

This statement hereby acknowledges the Indigenous American tribes that once occupied this land. The first people known to have resided in the area lived on or cared for the local environment. It is crucial to take into account those who previously called our city home before they were wrongfully displaced by the colonialism that those of us who live here today benefit from, especially when discussing altering land that may once have been - and still may be - considered sacred. These ideas for restoring land at Caesar's Park have been made with care and consideration for those who came before.



An art installation at Caesar's Park dedicated to Wisconsin Indigenous tribes (photo by Dan Collins)

The Site

Caesar's Park is a hidden gem of the Milwaukee River Greenway nestled along the Milwaukee River on the East Side of town, not too far from both downtown and the lakefront. Despite being right next to such business and bustle, it's an incredibly quiet corner of the city. Most of the time, the park is virtually empty. It's often used as an avenue to the nearby popular East Bank Trail for biking or to the cozy fishing spot underneath the Caesar's Park Trail Bridge, but it's rare during a visit to bump into anyone not passing through. Although it's admittedly a little rough around the edges, it's

packed with charm and potential. Notable native trees present in the park include Walnut, Cottonwood, Black Cherry, Green Ash, Elm, Basswood, Red Cedar, assorted Willows, and Boxelder. There is also a decent variety of native forb, shrub, and graminoid communities that could, however, benefit from some changes to the park's landscape. Humans have always been part of nature. The Indigenous People that were once here didn't just live on, or care for it, they were a part of it. Now, there are parks as if nature is a luxury or activity to do temporarily when we need something to do or learn about. That's not the case though. Humans have been, and always will be, a key piece of the environment and we should exist with it instead of alongside it. We have gotten used to living the way we do and aren't as accustomed to getting out, and for some people, accessibility adjustments could make a difference. Making some restorative changes to Caesar's Park could be what the community needs to feel more invited into the outdoors.



Map of Caesar's Park

Past to Present

The history of Caesar's Park starts with the Ice Age. As far back as 100,000 years ago, the Laurentide Ice Sheet covered a large part of Wisconsin. As it melted back, and the climate became more favorable, Indigenous People began to move up into southeastern Wisconsin, namely, the Mound Builders, around 800 BCE. They are thought to be responsible for many notable mounds still visible in Wisconsin today (such as in Aztalan), and were eventually followed by tribes such as the well-known Menominee, Ho-Chunk, Potawatomi, Sauk, Ottawa, Ojibwe, Fox, and Oneida. Many nations and tribes settled along the river because it was easy for transportation and trade. Unfortunately, European settlers had the same idea. In the 1600s, Jean Nicolet kickstarted the fur trade. Relations between Europeans and Indigenous People began favorably, but new trade partners created conflicts between previously trading tribes, and new diseases were accidentally (at first) introduced, which greatly impacted the populations caring for the land. About 100 years later, Milwaukee was founded as a trading post. The victory of the War of 1812 was what eventually started the process of displacing the Indigenous People from the area through a series of "treaties". Starting in the early 1900s, there was a small resurgence of Indigenous People back to the area, but the population that has remained resilient has few to no stewardship authorities for the local landscape.

Still, in the mid 1800s, Milwaukee's landscape was changing very quickly as it rapidly industrialized and urbanized. The river created a hub for both industry and recreation. The North Avenue Dam was built in 1835 to regulate the river flow and accommodate large freight ships, in addition to dredging the riverbed and replacing it with interlocking bricks. Eventually, the Milwaukee Water Department acquired the land near the dam and called it Milwaukee River Dam Park. It was later renamed to Caesar's Park in honor of Caesar Paikowski, a well-known resident of the neighborhood. The park changed hands from the Water Department to the City Parks Department, and finally, to the Milwaukee County Parks Department due to financial strains caused by the Great Depression. In 1997, the dam was removed and replaced with a pedestrian bridge in an attempt to return the river to its normal conditions. Unfortunately, the effects

of the dredging and the dam are still very apparent when compared to upstream conditions. The flooding that has washed out the riverbank over the years has made way for an ever-expanding monoculture of Reed Canary Grass that has replaced the biodiversity that once lined the Milwaukee River.



Aerial photos of Caesar's Park (green polygon), the Milwaukee River, and the North Avenue Dam in 1937, 1995, and 2022
(Milwaukee County GIS and Land Information Interactive Map)

Possible Future

The ultimate goal of this project is to develop Caesar's Park into a community space that is accessible and appealing to the locals of the Milwaukee East side. Hopefully, this will help encourage people to spend more time outdoors, and therefore fuel more environmental education, engagement, and advocacy; and also set an attainable example for other communities to incorporate into their local green spaces and set a trend for the restoration and revitalization of Wisconsin's landscape.

Part of the process involves assisting with biological and environmental processes. In general, the park is a relatively healthy environment, however, the monoculture of Reed Canary Grass is a notable factor that threatens its well being in the short term future. Due to the excessive erosion caused by flash flooding from the river dredging and brick riverbed, plants are regularly washed off of the shore, and due to its fast-growing nature, Reed Canary Grass is able to capitalize off of the flooding and

take over the banks. Some of it has even begun to encroach up into the forested area. The invaded areas have the potential to host small examples of three native biomes: floodplain forest, wet-mesic prairie, and shrub carr. Norway Maple is another present invasive species, however, compared to the Reed Canary grass, it is a much lower priority due to its smaller and less urgent impact. Being rid of monocultures and reestablishing biodiversity in the park could help the biological communities flourish into a newly born, diverse landscape. Many species of reptiles, amphibians, birds, and insects require multiple biomes to complete their life cycles, and their presence could greatly reduce the mosquito population in the park, which is certainly a deterrent to visitors. Due to its proximity to saturated soil and slow-moving water, the park is sometimes unbearable in the summer, promoting fauna biodiversity through restoration may help to ease some of the discomfort of visiting.



Reed Canary Grass monoculture and riverbed bricks (photos by Dan Collins)

The other important part of reaching the goal is enhancing curb appeal and accessibility of the park. Part of getting people involved in nature is letting them find it and feel comfortable in it. Not all natural landscapes are wild and unkempt and human-free. For thousands of years, humans have existed as part of the environment, and to shape it as though we were never there or never lived with it isn't necessarily productive in building (reestablishing) connections. The park is sprinkled with evidence of human influence, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. There are several spots that, with some care, have the potential to be beautiful and welcoming but immersive gathering spots. Signs about the local landscape, land acknowledgment, or even the

history of the park or community can do a lot for making a green space more interesting. Additionally, the park, despite being a good place for boating and fishing, has fairly poor water access. It has a long concrete switchback staircase that awkwardly connects to the trail at the bottom, and very few spots to access or enjoy the river up close. The riverbed bricks provide some area to stand, but only when the water level is low, and even so, one might risk a twisted ankle on the holes, loose bricks, and uneven footing. A more accessible entrance, a floating pier boardwalk, or even some benches in scenic spots could create a more welcoming environment. Many people walk past the area without even knowing the park is down the staircase because it's so hidden; a tasteful, but noticeable entranceway sign could change that.



The bridge where fishermen stand, the small sign at the top of the staircase, and two examples of gathering spots
(photos by Dan Collins)

For the biological changes, the full process could take roughly 5 years. The first year, the Reed Canary Grass monoculture areas could be mowed down and tarped

over. The mowing would have to be done in early spring before the seeds germinate too heavily. After three years, the tarps should be able to be removed, and planting of the various communities could begin. No cover crops would be necessary since it's very unlikely the soil is particularly compacted. Trees and shrubs should be livestaked with deer barriers first, and the smaller plants should be seeded in 1-2 years afterwards. The Department of Natural Resources has a fantastic and comprehensive list of plants that are suitable replacements for Reed Canary Grass in Wisconsin in various regions and hydrology types. From that list, several notable contenders are also present in the DNR's outlines of those various biomes, which have been used as reference communities for this plan. It suggests making 15-seed mixtures with plants that have phenologies equally spanning early, mid, and late in the growing season. This phenology strategy ensures a consistent canopy to shade out the Reed Canary Grass should any have survived the tarping process.

In the shadiest areas closest to the floodplain forest, some flood-tolerant and fast-growing trees such as Eastern Cottonwood, Swamp White Oak, and Willows would be suitable could help with erosion. Because of the trees' maturation speed, the added floodplain forest could look very similar to the one that's there now in a decade or less. The concrete bricks on the riverbed could potentially cause an issue planting the larger plants, but they don't cover the entire park. Removal of some or all of them on the park grounds for planting purposes would need to be discussed with an official, but could be beneficial to the flooding situation as well. Smaller plants such as grasses, sedges, and forbs have their place in floodplain forests, add texture and color, and even have the potential to be planted in between the bricks, such as Canada Blue Joint, Virginia Wild Rye, Tuckerman's Sedge, Cardinal Flower, Bergamot, and Sneezeweed. Many of the suggested forbs are shade tolerant and are particularly good at sprouting from seeds, so they could also be spread sparsely into the already established floodplain forest to add some visual appeal and break up the monotony of colors throughout the growing season with their individual blooming times.

In the areas along the river that are still very wet but less dominated by tree life, a small shrub carr community would serve to hold the riverbank together better during future flooding events. Shorter, shrubby areas would serve a similar purpose as the

forested areas without blocking the entire view of the river. Dogwood, Black Current, Nannyberry, and High Bush Cranberry would be good community members, and are popular with many wetland bird species. Various native ferns, Giant Goldenrod, Joe Pye Weed, and possibly more Blue Joint Grass could be good companions for the shrubs and help support the pollinating insect population. Some of the available areas are a bit farther away from the floodplain area, but they're flat and sunny. These places would be ideal for a brand new wet mesic prairie. The grass and sedge population could include Big Blue Stem, Canada Blue Joint, Canada Wild Rye, River Bulrush, and Common Lake Sedge. Tussock sedge is also an option, but needs to be planted in plugs. The Canada Wild Rye is more shade tolerant than the others, and should be planted around the perimeters adjacent to the forest or shrubland. The forbs keep in mind the pollinating insect population that would benefit from them, including Swamp Milkweed, Sawtooth Sunflower, Virginia Mountain Mint, Yellow Coneflower, and Bergamot. The prairie areas have the potential for the most easily managed trails to the river since just periodic mowing and no trimming or sawing is necessary. No forbs should be planted along the trail areas for ease of management.

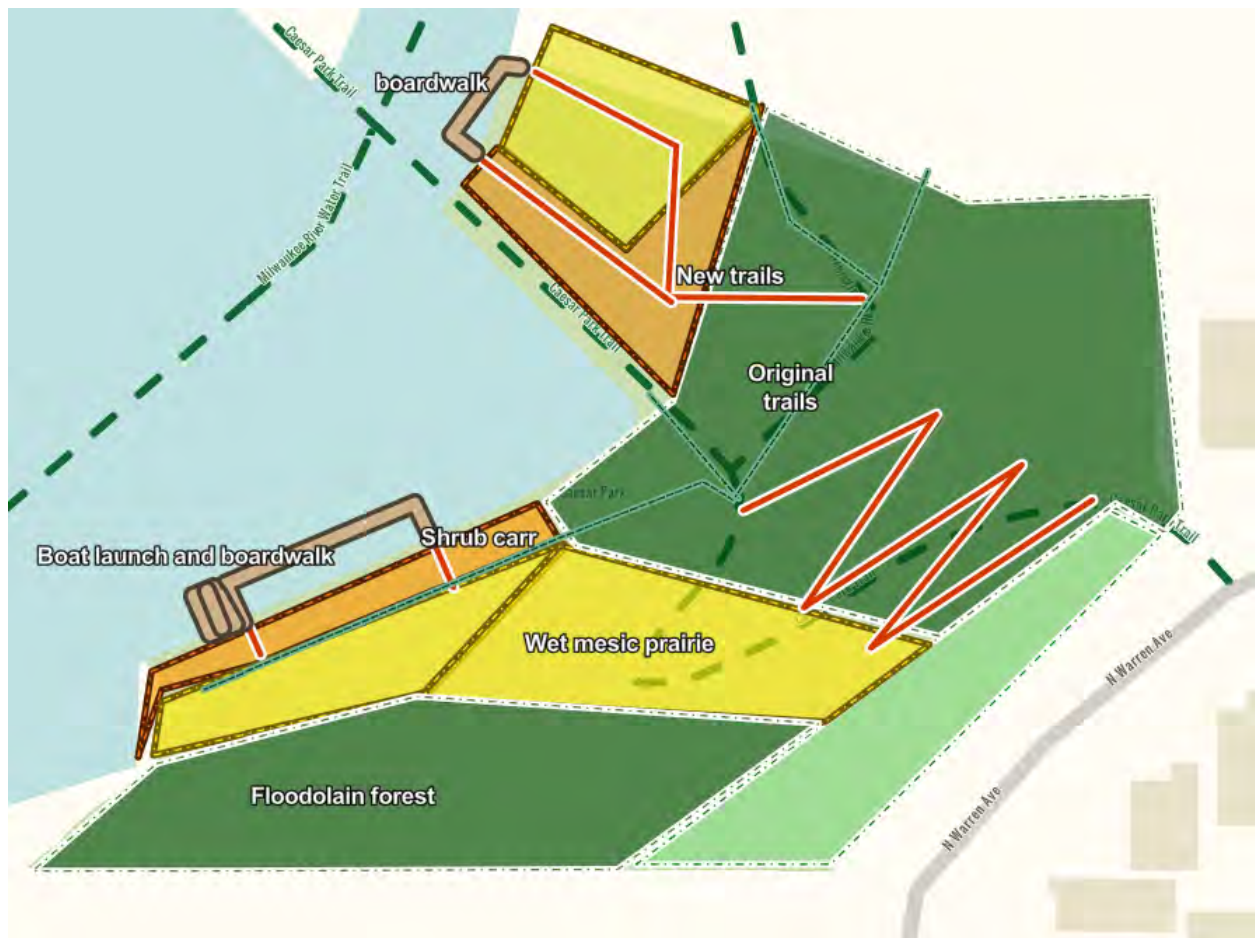
As for structural changes, the stairs and visual appeal take the most priority. If the stairs are able to be removed, it could be replaced with a less steep switchback trail with more turns; however, some cement and rebar structures under the soil might be necessary to support it. That way, it could be plowed in winter more easily for winter access, and accommodate bikers, strollers, and people with disabilities; currently, the stairs are a hassle for anyone with wheels or limited walking abilities, and become icy and unmanageable in winter. Because the trail could take up less space, the area where the stairs used to be, the empty space could be filled with short, short or soft grasses and sedges that can easily be flattened with snow to provide a new local sledding hill, which are very important winter gathering spots for Milwaukee families. Organizing the plants in a gradient from mesic to wet mesic prairie species from the top of the hill may be best here since the steep incline may keep the soil much drier at the top than at the bottom of the hill. Big and Little Blue Stem, as well as Bebb's Oval Sedge come to mind as decently tolerant of both environments. The construction would undoubtedly create

some disturbance and soil compaction, so re-planting in the area could be considered the year after it's complete. Additionally, a more decorative sign or entranceway might attract more attention than the small markers that are currently at the top of the stairs. A gathering space with picnic tables or play equipment on the small lawn by the street may also serve to attract more visitors. Down on the trail at the bottom of the hill, there are already a few structures that draw the eye, as well as some open spaces among the trees. Cover crops could be planted to break up the soil so a new plant community could be established, or these would be excellent spots for signs, wings, benches, picnic tables, or bike racks. Oftentimes, multiple signs encourage people to find the others and read the entire series, therefore exploring the area. The signs could be about Milwaukee river history, environmental advocacy, the Indigenous People who lived there, or even facts about the landscape, local flora and fauna, and the restoration process. A floating boardwalk that extends from the riverbank (above the flood level) could allow easy, even access to the water, even when the water level is high. It requires no mowing, and provides a safer option to fishermen, boaters, and local explorers that isn't scrambling across the rough bricks or the bottom of the bridge.



The switchback staircase (photo by Dan Collins)

In order to decide on which structural projects to choose and when, surveys could be sent out to the community. Email or fliers with QR codes with links to the survey are preferable to paper mail surveys due to the demographics of people that use those modes of communication. Older, retired people are the ones more likely to fill out a mail survey and mail it back. Younger, working people, and children - the main users of the park in 5-10 years after the restoration project is complete - have the target opinions for the development of the park. Fliers can be distributed in schools, parks, and Milwaukee County Parks-associated educational facilities such as the Milwaukee County Zoo or the Urban Ecology Center to families invested in their local green spaces.



Map illustrating a potential layout for restoration

Monitoring and Management

The only foreseeable management needs would be invasive species monitoring and removal, year-round trail maintenance, and upkeep of community programs to get people to the park. Invasive species management could be done by using yearly transects and pulling invasives manually in time increments depending on the severity of any invasions. For more urgent situations, isolated chemical application could be a possibility, but manual removal should be prioritized. The trail maintenance could be carried out by park workers, but the others could be activities for local community members to participate in. The Urban Ecology Center and the Milwaukee Recreation program host many environmental stewardship children's camps and volunteer opportunities. Milwaukee Public Schools and interested students at UW Milwaukee are also opportunities for finding people to help with local projects. Even the signs could be written and created by students. Picnic tables and benches could be put together and decorated as a group activity for locals to sign up for. There are opportunities involved for all age groups and abilities to participate to some degree in the process.

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