

Investing in Our Conservation and Recreation Infrastructure

But are we doing enough? And what is the return on such investments?

One of the primary functions of government is to provide for the health, safety and welfare of its citizens. Governments at all levels want to make sure they are making wise expenditures of precious public resources. Don't overlook the value of natural resource conservation and outdoor recreational opportunities to your citizens.

We all hear a lot about economic development - attracting new businesses and keeping those we currently have healthy and growing. We also hear about the importance of an area's quality of life. Iowa has what most people are looking for - small town living (even our largest cities are considered small by many), safe communities, good schools, low cost of living and ready access to the outdoors. From the business standpoint, Iowa has an attractive state tax code, according to the Tax Foundation. We also have a productive and educated workforce.

More and more of us in the natural resource conservation/outdoor recreation field have seen the positive impacts of quality of life investments to areas all over Iowa. We need to not only keep our young people here, but also our older population. We can do that by ensuring wise investments in quality of life improvements, not only in good educational systems, but also in cultural and recreational opportunities and clean air and water.

People want and need places to recreate close to home, not only for personal enjoyment and relaxation but also for their health. The rise in health problems related to sedentary life styles is well documented, and according to the Iowa Department of Public Health costs Iowa nearly \$1 billion annually. Public open space conservation and recreation areas can provide connections to nature and active or passive outdoor experiences. In addition to a healthier public, protecting green spaces and connecting greenways along our rivers and streams can also help provide for a healthier and more diverse environment. Unfortunately, Iowa ranks near the bottom in the United States in the amount of land devoted to public recreation. Iowa's system of county conservation boards provides many of these important areas in cooperation with cities and state agencies.

Iowa Must Do More

Iowa must invest much more in its 'green infrastructure' to ensure the improvement of our water quality, expansion of public recreational opportunities and protection of the special places that are unique to each of our counties. Parks and recreation areas provide pleasant experiences for family and friends and are the focal point in many areas.

Conservation and recreation is good for business and is big business. Tourism expenditures in Iowa are approximately \$5 billion annually. Iowans spend nearly \$750 million annually on fish, wildlife and related activities - nearly \$35 million alone to feed birds in their backyards! Trails provide at least \$25 - \$50 million per year to local communities, in addition to the tremendous health benefits. Farmers and contractors receive millions

By: Mark C. Ackelson, President of Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation & Don E. Brazelton, Executive Secretary, Iowa Association of County Conservation Boards

of dollars each year for soil, water and wildlife conservation practices. Recent studies have also shown us that those counties and communities that have readily accessible public conservation and recreation areas are experiencing the most economic growth.

Legislative Support

The state of Iowa's Resource Enhancement and Protection program (REAP) provides support to every county in the state and also makes matching grants available for specific projects for soil, water and wildlife conservation and recreation. REAP is currently authorized at \$20 million per year but has been only funded at the \$11 million level. This year the Iowa Legislature and others are working to increase the level of support to this program. We should all voice our support to our legislators.

Last year, the Iowa General Assembly saw the importance of conservation to our future by forming the Sustainable Natural Resource Funding Advisory Committee. The Iowa Association of County Conservation Boards and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation were members of this committee, along with such diverse members as the Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, Pheasants Forever and the Sierra Club. The members of the committee all came to the realization that these issues are critical to the future of Iowa - both urban and rural. They also realized that a stable source of funding is key to being able to plan and complete the necessary projects. You can learn more about this study and read the final report by going to www.iowadnr.com/sustainablefunding/index.html.

Plan Ahead

Efforts, both public and private, should be encouraged. Many times we get so busy in our day-to-day duties that we don't take the time to "plan ahead." The future of your county, your region and your state will be enhanced if we all take the time and effort to determine how best to protect, expand, and utilize our natural open spaces to improve our attractiveness to our citizens and our businesses - to those we want to keep here and to those we want to attract. Each county should have a plan for how to protect and improve their natural resources and provide recreation opportunities. County conservation boards should be involved in that process and help lead implementation. Plans can help ensure that you are getting the most from your investments.

How is your county doing? Investments in your land, water, wildlife and conservation education programs are also investments in your economy, your people and your county's future.