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TIME FOR SUCCESS

PEOPLE

May 2021
County Conservation
in Iowa



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ISAC's Mission:

To promote effective and responsible county government
for the people of Iowa.

ISAC's Vision:

To be the principal, authoritative source of representation,
information and services for and about county government
in Iowa.

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Individual, innovative county projects are featured briefly throughout the magazine. Find more information about each project, including funding sources and a complete list of amenities, on www.iowacounties.org.

EXPLORE

IOWA COUNTY CONSERVATION

Thomas F. Hazelton

CEO, Iowa's County Conservation System
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Have you felt like you lived several years over the past 14 months? Most of us even expanded our vocabularies with new words and phrases for conversation of the times...social distancing, self-isolation, essential workers, quarantine bubble, PPE, contact tracing, super spreader, zoom fatigue, flatten the curve, pandemic 20...the list could go on for pages! The early days of the pandemic found everything being closed and shuttered with folks retreating to their homes and social isolation. As the gloomy days wore on, open spaces with ample social distancing and the warming spring sunshine were drawing folks to the nearby parks and trails where there was fresh air and outdoor recreation. They had re-discovered Iowa's expansive county conservation system with hundreds of things to do and see across all of Iowa's 99 counties!

And then...they came. They came with their boats, kayaks, and fishing poles; they came with tents, trailers, and motorhomes; their bicycles, hiking boots, walking sticks, and day-trip picnic baskets...for weeks on end. The steady streams of visitors were arriving from those nearby backyards, across the state of Iowa, and adjoining states around the region. Unprecedented visitation with records falling in most all statistical categories across the board, and it was good for everyone's soul. The warm days of the fall recreation season were on the wane and seasonal closures were looming, but still the parks and trails were busy. By mid-November, county conservation staff were finally able to catch their breath, or were they? As early as June of 2020, we were noticing a monthly trend for advance reservations of cabins and campsites through our website around 40 to 60% ahead of the same month of the previous year. As we rolled into March of 2021, the advanced bookings posted an amazing 306% increase over 2020. Considering that number would be inflated by the pandemic, a comparison to a "normal" March 2019 still reflected a 93% increase. The enchantment with these "new" outdoor recreation opportunities was not going to be a flash-in-the-pan – residents and visitors alike had discovered what may have been one of Iowa's best kept secrets – thousands of COUNTY PARKS!

Many of the new techniques and protocols that were created, learned, and improved upon during the pandemic will necessarily be a part of a new normal going forward. Heightened cleanliness and sanitization of facilities, virtual tours and educational outreach, and of course those online meetings and training opportunities all come to mind. Some have made us more efficient, while others have guided us to more out-of-the-box thought processes in evaluating everything we do. The COVID-19 adventure has been a thorough learning experience on so many fronts. Let us migrate from the amazing ride we have all had through these pandemic months, and visit how best we can assist both local residents AND those new and repeat visitors in their exploration of our local county parks.

Iowa's County Conservation System Guide to Outdoor Adventure has been around in printed form since the mid-1960s, and made the leap to a 242-page online and downloadable digital version in 2012 (available on the MyCountyParks.com website). County conservation boards (CCB) also had a 40-year presence at the Iowa State Fair from 1968 to 2008. They shared exhibit and promotional space with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in their building near the aquarium. Partnering with the Iowa Tourism Office and DNR have historically been excellent marketing opportunities to cross-promote with county conservation facilities and happenings – the same has been true with local businesses and other stakeholder organizations. It was along about 2006 when the concept of an internet presence representing our vast statewide county conservation system was first considered. With an initial partnership and financial support from the Linn, Polk, and Black Hawk County Conservation Boards – the first version of MyCountyParks.com was launched in 2009. For the first time, there was a website where you could explore all 99 of Iowa's county conservation boards in one place! Fast-forward 12 years, and you will find a vibrant and modern multi-million-dollar online operation that currently has 47 CCBs that now offer online reservations for facilities and/or events. There is at least one website administrator that participates in website management in each county – with a total of 275 CCB folks statewide that manipulate the website in some manner. It truly has become the fabric of county conservation marketing and promotions. It is a bit of a chore being able to keep a hold of this tiger by the tail, but we are dedicated to providing exceptional customer service for the millions of visitors and over 140,000 registered users that depend on the site!

\$609 million is the conservative estimate of the annual economic impact that our county conservation operations collectively pump into local economies across the state, and each of our 99 county conservation boards play a key role in this statewide economic engine! In a recent presentation to the East Central

2020 ORGANIZATION AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

Iowa's County Conservation System

In retrospect, receiving this award in 2021 is actually a tribute to the staff, board members and volunteers that stepped-up, got out-of-the-box, and out of their comfort zones in so many ways to meet and conquer the challenges that confronted every county during the pandemic! From a complete shut-down in March 2020, to record attendance and usage of parks and trails throughout the warm recreation season, the innovations and new techniques were emerging at a rapid-fire pace. Were it not for the immediate and constant networking among numerous county departments, coupled with the sharing of information across our system, the collective movement forward would have been far more daunting.

Much appreciation to Keep Iowa Beautiful and the State of Iowa for recognizing county conservation's positive influence on the local quality of life across the state – even prior to the pandemic. And kudos to the staff and administrators of all county departments for pulling together and shining brightly during these extreme times of unprecedented impact on local government operations.....pretty awesome!



Intergovernmental Association (Cedar, Clinton, Delaware, Dubuque, and Jackson Counties), we noted the following economic impact that each of these county's conservation operations generate locally and regionally: Cedar - \$6.465 million; Clinton - \$12.192 million; Delaware - \$6.577 million; Dubuque - \$20.469 million; Jackson - \$4.969 million. Collectively, if you bundle-up the statewide impact of certain activity categories you will find: 1,949 miles of trails managed by CCBs generate \$26,292,790 of economic impact; 11,100+ county conservation campsites generate \$41,719,583 of economic impact; and, 146,262 acres of CCB hunting lands generate \$58,504,800 of economic impact. It is not difficult to observe that your return on investment for dollars directed to support these activities are a good choice for the future economic health and quality of life for residents of your county!

Let us not forget that one thing that county conservation does best – the educational outreach and personal touch of outdoor and interpretive conservation education. It is a niche at which CCBs excel and thrive within! What's not to like about 70+ stunning county conservation interpretive nature centers across the state – each with their own unique focus on local natural resources, history, landforms, and inhabitants. Recognition in 2017 with the Friend of Science Education Award by the Iowa Science Teachers Section of the Iowa Academy of Science was a tribute to the ongoing innovative programming for lifelong learning opportunities provided by CCB staff for ALL Iowans. Just think – over 27,000 programs annually statewide - reaching over 770,000 participants. Just shy of 20% of our 674 permanent staff are classified as Naturalists, but we are all educators – dedicated to preserving our natural resource for those who will follow by educating our youth of today. Yes, funding is always an issue, but innovative and awesome CCB staff can always make great things happen!



Buchanan County IRON BRIDGE ACCESS

Dan Cohen, Executive Director

Project included:

- Universal Launch
- Paved Trail
- Parking Area
- Restroom
- Lighting

RESULT - A gateway to river use for people of various physical and boating abilities.



Jasper County ASHTON OBSERVATORY CHILDREN'S MURAL

Keri Van Zante, Director

Thirty foot by nine foot painted mural that accurately depicts the glow in the dark southern summer night sky settling over a prairie.



Kossuth County COZY GROVE SUGAR SHACK RENOVATION

Kendall Stumme, Director

Replacement of the original "Cozy Grove" sugar shack continues the unique maple syrup operation with a history of over 70 years.

Lest we forget, here's but a snippet of our social media and paid advertising marketing efforts – with the main mission of driving folks to our centralized website – MyCountyParks.com! Many of our local county conservation boards maintain their own Facebook pages, and some have also ventured into Twitter and Instagram. Our statewide network utilizes the presence of two Facebook Pages: “Iowa’s County Conservation System” (primarily targeting staff and board members internally); and “MyCountyParks.com” (public engagement). Both of these sites are currently intertwined with our two-year, 99-week promotion of all 99 county conservation boards through the end of 2022 (see more on pages 18-19)! Though we are looking to expand, our paid advertising has been limited to the Iowa Travel Guide (Iowa Tourism Office), Iowa Outdoors Magazine (DNR), Our Iowa Magazine, Iowa Tourism Regions, and periodic promotions in partnership with Iowa Tourism. We also maintain an inventory of rack card brochures to stock the Iowa Welcome Centers and supply all 99 CCBs. Additional revenues now being generated through the website will allow for expansion of these efforts!

Exploring can also mean looking for fresh avenues of moving forward, a path that has been lesser traveled perhaps? While we will always strive to find the right buttons to push that will energize public interest, we must be eternally introspective – internally discovering and implementing new methodologies that can propel us to new levels of being the best version of ourselves. We look forward to having you celebrate with us - this great 65th (+1) year of outstanding adventures that is Iowa’s County Conservation System – county government and public service at its finest....see you in a local county park soon!



Linn County WAPSI BLUFF SHELTER

**Ryan Schlader, Community
Outreach Specialist**

The open air shelter and deck offer a breathtaking view of the Wapsipinicon river that will be used as a regional attraction for many years to come.



Loess Hills Missouri River Region CABIN INITIATIVE

**Scott Nelson, Director, Harrison
County Conservation Board**

Harrison, Mills, and Pottawattamie Counties worked together in a regional partnership to build cabins. Harrison County’s cabins are located within the Willow Lake Recreation Area.



Marshall County LEONARD GRIMES MEMORIAL AMPHITHEATER

Michael J. Stegman, Director

The amphitheater accompanies the Grimes Farm and Conservation Center and is used for educational programming, live concerts, and private events.

PANDEMIC POSITIVES

ARE WE READY FOR A NEW NORM?

Michael D. Cox

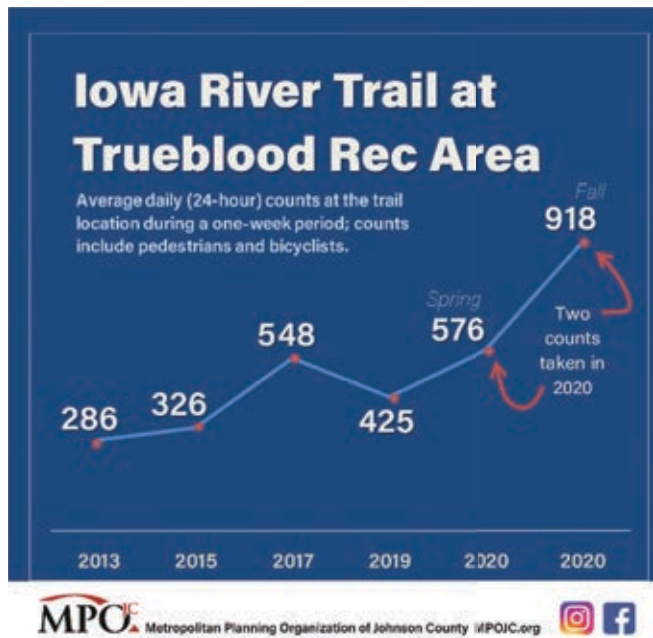
Director, Story County Conservation

mcox@storycountyia.gov

As we look back on the last year we see a year that was unexpected, forced us to develop new lifestyles, to measure personal risk, to operate in new ways, and to try to respond to, let alone forecast, ever changing dynamics.

Many of these new things we are now accustomed to may become new norms. Virtual meetings are here to stay and working from home will remain commonplace. One thing I hope people continue to embrace is time spent outdoors. This year brought unprecedented levels of trail and park use; outdoor recreation is at an all-time high. In the several years leading up to 2020, the number of people fishing, hunting, or engaged in outdoor recreation in some fashion had been declining. COVID-19 brought a halt to that decline. With so many social events and activities curtailed, individual and family use of our parks, trails, and nature areas skyrocketed.

Did you try to buy a kayak or camper in 2020? How about a bicycle or even a tent? These things were flying off the shelves almost as fast as toilet paper. Increases in camping have been as high as over 250% in one Iowa county park. Outdoor recreation is good for us both individually and collectively. It also leads to more pressure on natural areas – places to recreate, watch birds, unplug from a busy world, and places for nature to be nature. We all need nature's respite and fortunately many more people realize it now. Recently in Iowa, representatives from the camping industry and outdoor recreation industry met to



discuss future trends and the need for the outdoor recreation industry to meet this high level of use.

Although use was high, many park maintenance operations were nearly at a standstill due to work from home mandates and illness. Some Iowa counties declared park staff as essential workers and some did not. Each county was faced with trying to navigate a very dynamic environment. Use was up and resources were down.

- 76% of U.S. adults say it is important for people to have access to outdoor amenities to continue or create new family traditions, including nearly half (49%) who say this is extremely or very important.
- Parents (86%) are more likely than non-parents (71%) and U.S. adults overall (76%) to say it is important for people to have access to these outdoor amenities, which can include picnic areas, parks, campgrounds, and pavilions.
- Gen Xers (85%) and millennials (83%) say it is important for people to have access to outdoor amenities to continue or create new family traditions.

Statistics from the National Recreation and Park Association

“During the summer and through the fall of 2020, the Fayette County Conservation Board has seen a usage increase of over 200%. Most exciting is the number of citizens who have discovered or re-discovered the recreational opportunities available in their own backyard.”

Rod Marlatt

Director, Fayette County Conservation

- 66% of U.S. adults say that they support their local government dedicating revenues, taxes, and levies that specifically target park and recreation operations or expansion projects.
- Nearly 80% of parents support an initiative by their local government to dedicate revenues, taxes, and levies to park and recreation operations, making them more likely than non-parents (61%) and U.S. residents overall (66%) to feel this way.
- Gen Xers (73%), Gen Zers (72%) and millennials (68%) are strong supporters of their local government dedicating different funding sources to target park and recreation operations or expansion projects.

Statistics from the National Recreation and Park Association

As a life-long conservation and outdoor recreation professional, I know that time spent outdoors is good for our health. This has been proven repeatedly across the world in the medical community. I firmly believe people go outside in large part because it makes them feel good, and our pandemic experience should stand as evidence. Nature is therapeutic.

The questions now shift to how we can best respond to this increased engagement with nature, and how we can use this as a springboard to retain or, better yet, increase the number of people using county facilities. Are you ready to sustain and or increase last year's usage? Let's use this opportunity to advocate for and support more places to recreate outdoors, and continue to spend time in nature ourselves.

"It is budget time for our county. The Board of Supervisors asks for how many of our employees are "essential employees". I respond that with a 150-200% increase in all of our parks and trails, tracked by cell phone and counter data, ALL of our employees are essential employees!"

Rich Leopold

Director, Polk County Conservation



Palo Alto County BURNS PRAIRIE

Mary Barrick, Director

Beautiful 160-acre wildlife area of prairie, wetlands, and a food plot. Restoration project completed at four wetlands to improve water quality and benefit wildlife.



Poweshiek County DIAMOND LAKE

Mark Vavroch, Director

New 33-site campground, trails, and a shower house allowed for holiday weekend crowds every weekend during the summer of 2020.



Ringgold County LIBERTY LAKE

Kate Zimmerman, Director

The park will offer fishing, kayaking, canoeing, camping, disc golf, and more with the 12.5 acre lake as the park's focal point.



TRAIL TRAFFIC

ROLLING INTO 2021 WITH RECORD USE

JENNA POLLOCK

Director, Clayton County Conservation

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Traffic counts on recreation trails jumped in early 2020 and continue to trend higher than normal as people seek outdoor, socially-distanced activities amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when bicycles and toilet paper were both hard to come by, trails provided a lifeline for folks experiencing social isolation anxiety. Scott Flagg, Iowa Department of Transportation – Systems Planning Bureau, Federal/State Recreational Trail Program Manager, says, “It’s simple. Recreational trails allow Iowans to connect to their natural environment. Having a place to go, to get out of the house and to enjoy an activity provided a needed break during the pandemic. Hopefully, as COVID-19 recedes, we see a continued interest in these amazing resources.” In Northeast Iowa, rural land trails use saw their monthly traffic average increase by 200%.

Howard, Winneshiek, Fayette, and Clayton Counties are collaborating on a plan to connect their existing trails on a regional basis. The Backbone Trail would fuse together trail segments in each county to form one contiguous land trail for the county conservation system. Howard County’s Wapsi Great Western Line Trail, Prairie Springs Trail, and the Prairie Farmer Recreational Trail traverse the county from west to east. Winneshiek County’s Trout Run Trail, Freeport Trail, Dry Run Trail (in progress), and Prairie Farmer Recreational Trail traverse the county from north to south. Fayette County’s Turkey River Recreational Corridor Trail will connect with Winneshiek County trails before heading east into Clayton County connecting with Pony Hollow Trail, Motor Mill Trail, and ultimately connecting to the Mississippi River Trail. Predominately rural, the trails navigate the streams and rocky hill country of rural Northeast Iowa.

In March of 2020, trail managers noticed a visible uptick in persons treading these trails. Infrared counters were installed a month earlier than normal due to the high use and favorable weather outlook. A summer in-person count was conducted across the region as a validity test on the data. Loose summary: trails saw a big increase!

Monthly Trail Use by County Trail Segment														
County	Trail Segment	Pop.	June			July			August			September		
			2019	2020	Increase	2019	2020	Increase	2019	2020	Increase	2019	2020	Increase
Howard	Prairie Farmer Rec. Trail (Winneshiek Trail Counter-Cresco)	3733	1700	4930	290%	2838	5075	179%	2766	4997	181%	1789	3542	198%
Winneshiek	Trout Run Trail (Decorah)	7578	2896	4680	162%	3804	5189	136%	3621	5230	144%	2019	3896	193%
Fayette	Turkey River Rec. Corridor (Elgin & Clermont)	1225	279	458	164%	242	484	200%	192	455	237%	175	374	214%
Clayton	Pony Hollow Trail (Elkader)	1205	449	793	177%	289	945	327%	396	996	252%	259	665	257%

Trail users typically cite a connection with nature and health benefits when describing their desire for trails. Trail development also causes a ripple effect on the economy. Property values tend to trend higher in communities that border trail corridors, and travelers that utilize trails spend money in communities that support trail infrastructure. In January 2012, the University of Northern Iowa's Sustainable Tourism and Environment Program released a report showing that the direct and indirect impact of bicycle-related activities generates about \$364 million per year across the state. Also, recreational and commuter biking provides an estimated \$87 million in health care cost savings to the state of Iowa each year.

Howard, Winneshiek, Fayette and Clayton Counties are assessing the built segments of trail and what the economic benefit would be once all trail segments are fused. Rod Marlatt, Fayette County Conservation Board Executive Director and Regional Planning Association (RPA) 1 Regional Enhancement Chair, shares that, "The region knows and is confident that the completion of the Regional Backbone Trail will augment the natural resource based economy of Northeast Iowa and serve as the catalyst for expanded economic development and vitality."

In November of 2015, Master's Degree candidates from The University of Iowa's School of Urban and Regional Planning examined the economic impact of the Trout Run Trail in Winneshiek County. They estimate the total economic impact of the Trout Run Trail at \$1.8 to 2.2 million annually (amounting to 7.35% of tourism expenditures in Winneshiek County). Many can attest to the popularity of the "Backbone Trail" segments in Northeast Iowa. Fusing these disparate segments into one unified regional destination could significantly increase sustainable tourism and provide important growth in local economies, not to mention the improved quality of life for the region's citizens and visitors.

Trail Funds (Project Cost x Requested Amount x Available Funding)					
	Fiscal Year	Total Projects	Total Project Cost	Amount Requested	Available Funding
State Rec. Trail (SRT)	2021	24	\$ 24,214,380	\$ 7,219,414	\$ 1,000,000
	2020	25	\$ 22,628,466	\$ 10,428,240	\$ 1,500,000
	2019	39	\$ 39,874,565	\$ 11,450,989	\$ 1,309,100
	2018	31	\$ 25,090,073	\$ 13,586,818	\$ 1,268,287
	2017	36	\$ 40,364,568	\$ 19,464,735	\$ 2,514,678
Federal Rec. Trail (FRT)	2021	20	\$ 12,428,406	\$ 5,282,922	\$ 1,338,337
	2020	20	\$ 19,694,284	\$ 7,226,756	\$ 1,383,485
	2019	41	\$ 33,721,763	\$ 14,154,302	\$ 3,195,880
	2018	19	\$ 15,734,068	\$ 7,712,522	\$ 1,417,770
	2017	17	\$ 13,123,914	\$ 6,318,837	\$ 1,332,829
Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)	2021	5	\$ 2,525,256	\$ 1,280,087	\$ 930,087
	2020	5	\$ 4,677,706	\$ 1,721,055	\$ 1,327,655
	2019	5	\$ 1,986,328	\$ 1,267,217	\$ 849,404
	2018	6	\$ 5,710,230	\$ 3,800,818	\$ 756,084
	2017	5	\$ 3,257,816	\$ 1,499,585	\$ 503,035

Trails have historically been viewed as leisure amenities, but the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how pivotal a role these land trails play in Iowans quality of life. Not surprisingly, with travel discouraged and socially-distanced activities encouraged, trails, the recreation byways of the great outdoors, became an outlet for anxious minds and itchy feet. Trail managers across the state expect to see the rise in land trail use continue throughout 2021.

Historically the SRT, FRT, and TAP programs demonstrate a 5:1 ratio when it comes to applicants being funded. This demonstrates the demand for trail projects far outweighs the funding available.



IOWA'S WATER TRAILS

A SOCIALLY DISTANT ESCAPE

MATT COSGROVE

Director, Webster County Conservation Board

mcosgrove@webstercountya.org



Iowa is blessed with 18,000 miles of navigable streams and rivers that offer a “socially distant” way for paddlers to reconnect with Iowa’s history, geology and natural resources. Of those 18,000 miles, only approximately 1,000 miles are considered “designated water trails”. The “designation” implies the water trail has been developed through a planning process and provides a basic level of amenities for paddlers in order to meet the state designation requirements. At a minimum, designated water trails offer public access, parking, signage, and safety information. Many of the existing water trails also offer camping, restrooms, park space, and picnic areas that are provided by city, county, state, and local partnerships.

The Water Trail Program provides opportunities for a variety of users, from beginners to experienced paddlers. The program has a classification system that ranks water trails by skill-levels and availability of services by segment. The classifications are rated as Gateway, Recreation, Challenge, and Wilderness experiences. The Rivers Program under the Iowa Department of Natural Resources coordinates the Water Trail Program; however, the majority of the designated water trails are managed and maintained by county conservation boards, cities, and private partners.

In addition to Iowa’s water trails, the state also offers over 130 recreational lakes. In a recent report by Iowa State University regarding water-based recreation, six out of 10 Iowans visit Iowa lakes multiple times each year and spend \$1.2 billion annually on water recreation. Many of these lakes are managed by local county conservation boards and provide vital tourism dollars for Iowa’s rural communities.



With these ample paddling opportunities and a need for “socially distant” activities in 2020, canoe and kayak sales exploded during the pandemic. Similar to the increased use of hard-surfaced recreational trails, rivers, streams, and lakes were seeing unprecedented numbers of visitors.

ESCAPE



“This year alone in Dallas County I have seen more users recreating on our Iowa waters than I have ever seen in my career. There were not very many weekends where I didn’t see less than 75 to 100 cars at several boat ramps along the Raccoon River. Kayaks have made for an inexpensive purchase for families that want to get out and explore our Iowa waters and visit our rivers that most have never seen before. I would say that accessibility to the rivers has been a huge part of that.” - Dustin Eighmy, Iowa DNR Conservation Officer (Dallas County)

2020 has been called “The Year of the Yak” for good reason. If you tried to purchase a kayak, canoe, or stand-up paddleboard, you were likely placed on a waiting list or spent a considerable amount of money to accomplish your purchase. Local sporting goods retailers had an extremely difficult time maintaining inventories of outdoor recreation equipment, especially kayaks, partly due to supply issues caused by manufacturer shutdowns, but more specifically by the extreme demand. Even used kayaks were selling on Craigslist and Facebook in minutes and, in many cases, above retail value. Cancelled vacations, sporting events, concerts, and youth activities coupled with government stimulus checks, provided surplus funds that many chose to invest in outdoor recreation equipment.

“The interest in kayaking in 2020 was almost overwhelming. I have never seen anything like it. Boats were spoken for before they were off the truck. I can’t say that for any other product.” - Jim Simmons, Regional Sales Manager Midwest, Scheels Sporting Goods

“In 2014, we sold 150 kayaks all year. This year, we sold 150 a week and sold out 14 times. We have semis arriving loaded with boats, and we sell out before they are unloaded.” - Camrein Cam, Shipping Manager and Paddling Retail Manager, Dicks Sporting Goods, West Des Moines.

This lack of ability to purchase outdoor equipment proved to be the “silver lining” for many small businesses that provide livery and outfitting services.

“Year-to-date was at an overall increase of 504% compared to 2019. While COVID may have put extra people outdoors this year, paddling as a whole, continues to explode in Iowa. We also had the opportunity to work with the city of Johnston this year, renting at Beaver Creek, and also Terra Lake which led to significantly more exposure.” - Tiffany Rhames, Marketing Manager, Quarry Springs Outfitters, Colfax Iowa

As businesses, schools, and offices began to shut down due to the pandemic, parks, trails, lakes, rivers, and every available greenspace saw record numbers seeking a “socially distant” escape. Local, state, and national public health officials providing recommendations for “safe” activities during the pandemic helped fuel this reconnection to the outdoors. Mayo Clinic released an article titled “Safe outdoor activities during the COVID-19 pandemic” that listed kayaking, canoeing, and boating as “Low-risk ways to move more.”

“Paddlesports have increased tremendously this year and I think it’s popularity in general is increasing, but bigger than that, I think that since people cannot go on their trip to Europe, or the cruise thru the Caribbean, or even the local pool, they are learning more about what Iowa has to offer outdoors wise (which is a lot) and enjoying the outdoors locally. I see that as a small silver lining in the cloud of COVID.” - Eric Grodt, Owner, Up A Creek paddle shop, Central City, Iowa

The million-dollar question is “How do we sustain Iowan’s reconnection to the outdoors?” The unexpected opportunity of a global pandemic is our rediscovery of the natural wonders that exist in our own backyards. As park and natural resource managers, our task is large, but we are ready for the challenge. As stewards of the land, it is our task to maintain those “backyards” and invite our fellow Iowans to visit them often.

IOWA'S NATURAL RESOURCES AND OUTDOOR RECREATION

TIME FOR SUCCESS



ONLY IN IOWA a bald eagle incorporates a corn cob in building its nest in rural Black Hawk County. The return of nesting bald eagles, sandhill cranes, ospreys, and other watchable wildlife are huge successes due in large part to past major federal and state initiatives. Is Iowa poised for another major success?

DAN COHEN

Executive Director, Buchanan County Conservation Board

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In 2010, Iowans voted overwhelmingly to amend Iowa's Constitution by creating a Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. The ballot language states the Fund will be created for "purposes of protecting and enhancing water quality and natural areas in this State including parks, trails, and fish and wildlife habitat, and conserving agricultural soils in this State. Moneys in the fund shall be exclusively appropriated by law for these purposes". Hence, the Trust Fund is protected by the Iowa Constitution for these purposes, and cannot be raided or redistributed in another manner. To assure Iowans realize the associated benefits of this spending, a distribution formula aligned with the Constitution was enacted in the Code of Iowa. A promise was made to Iowans – the State would invest in a legacy of stewardship of its natural resources and opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. Iowa no longer would be ranked near or at the bottom nationally in making these needed investments. The public will was asserted. Political will, however, has fallen short of keeping the promise. Eleven years after Iowans went to the polls, the Trust Fund remains empty.

Sac County

GRANT PARK SPOOKTACULAR

Kristen Bieret, Naturalist

Provided a drive-through, over-the-top community event for Halloween 2020. This project was low cost and had a huge impact during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Major past successes led to today's status of Iowa public lands, waters, and wildlife.

This issue of *The Iowa County magazine* features some great successes of county conservation boards. It also documents renewed public understandings, in the wake of a national pandemic, that natural resources and outdoor recreation are essential to the lives of Iowans. It's important to realize nearly all these wonderful projects and enhanced natural splendor described in these pages relied on past milestone legislative success stories. Major pieces of legislation – state and federal – led to improvements, or at least protections, for water quality, wildlife, enhanced outdoor recreation, and overall quality of life. County conservation boards leverage these successes with local projects to magnify the effects and enhance public opportunities to enjoy the benefits. By doing so, a lot has been done with relatively little. A “Top 10” list of key past successes that have had important outcomes for current Iowans arguably include:

1. **Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration (1937) and Sport Fish Restoration (1950) Acts:** Provide funds to states from federal excise taxes on hunting/fishing equipment – a tax requested by hunters/anglers.
2. **1955 legislation creating the mechanism for County Conservation Boards:** Residents in each county voted to create county conservation boards, with the first ones established in 1956.
3. **Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (1964):** Provides matching grants to states and local governments.
4. **Federal Clean Water Act (1948, but sweeping changes in 1972):** Important controls on point source pollution
5. **Banning DDT and related pesticides (1972):** Key to the return to Iowa of nesting bald eagles and scores of other wildlife species.
6. **The federal Endangered Species Act (1973):** Prioritized protections and habitat enhancements for the most rare and threatened species.
7. **Conservation provisions of the 1985 Food Security Act (Farm Bill):** Established soil, water, and wildlife conservation programs such as CRP, WRP, swampbuster, etc.
8. **Iowa's Groundwater Protection Act (1987):** A host of initiatives to clean Iowa's waters
9. **State Recreational Trails Funding Program (1987) and federal Recreational Transportation Program and Transportation Alternative Program (1991):** Fund most trail projects in Iowa.
10. **Iowa's Resource Enhancement and Protection Program (REAP) Act (1989):** Funds distributed to a variety of state, county, cities, roadside departments, historical sites, education programs, and soil and water conservation districts (unfortunately, REAP has never been fully funded).

Although there have been some successes in recent years, passage of REAP arguably marks the last major victory for large-scale public investment (millions of dollars statewide) in Iowa's natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities. Lacking more than three decades without a major conservation win, Iowa remains near-bottom among states in per capita conservation investments. Iowans continue to endure water quality problems, and have fewer amenities and public places to pursue healthy outdoor pursuits.

Scott County ALGAE WHEEL WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT

Roger A. Kean, Executive Director

Replacement of existing wastewater treatment plant with the “First in Iowa AlgaeWheel” that became fully operational in January of 2020. This option was more sustainable and could potentially improve water quality in the discharging stream.



Iowans now need a major natural resources win for today and future generations.

The Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund is the game-changer for Iowans in this moment. Iowa's political leaders must enact the funding mechanism – a mere, fractional increase of the state sales tax by 3/8 of one cent. There have been several proposed ways to do this over the years. Last year's Invest in Iowa initiative would have done it through tax reform. There have been proposals to raise the tax to fund both the Trust and mental health.

Funding the Trust will generate nearly \$200 million annually – protected by the Iowa Constitution to be used only for natural resources and outdoor recreation purposes. County conservation boards will have access to funds for local projects that provide citizens with cleaner water, protected soils, improved parks, and more enhanced places to hike, hunt, fish, bike, boat, picnic, watch wildlife, and relax and enjoy beauty in the outdoors. The Trust represents a legacy – a gift to ourselves and future generations. Consider the following:



Dan Cohen and granddaughter Ella Kisner enjoy quality-of-life benefits in rural Buchanan County. These benefits will be more fully realized and protected once the Legislature and Governor enact funding for the constitutionally protected Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust.

PUBLIC HEALTH BENEFITS

BENEFITS TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

CLEAN WATER



Story County

TEDESCO ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING CORRIDOR

Erica Place, Outreach Coordinator

Unique, 37-acre community space in the ISU Research Park that showcases conservation techniques, sustainable technologies, environmental education, water quality awareness, and trail connectivity.



Wapello County

PEARSON BUTTERFLY PARK

Rick Tebbs, Director
Paige Shafer, Educational Specialist
Faith Henrichs, Naturalist

Three-phase plan to create a one-of-a-kind butterfly park with an emphasis on the importance of pollinators and pollinator habitat in Iowa. This will be a hands on learning experience of the diverse Iowa ecosystem and what people can do to implement habitat on their property.

PUBLIC HEALTH BENEFITS

In 2019, the Iowa State Board of Health and many local boards of health officially endorsed raising the sales tax to fund the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. Buchanan County Board of Health stated, “Thanks to Iowans’ support of the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust, we have the opportunity to redirect the course of our children and provide a thriving environment that supports their health and well-being.” The statement goes on to read:

The preservation and investment to protect Iowa’s green spaces, water, and air quality can be keys to improving the health of current and future Iowans.

- A child’s risk for obesity can increase by as much as 60% if they live in a neighborhood without parks, sidewalks, and other green space or recreational amenities.
- Children living in neighborhoods with easy access to outdoor recreation and green space have a higher likelihood of being physically active, achieve better grades in school, and require less disciplinary intervention.
- Nebraska reported a \$3 return on investment in direct health cost savings for every \$1 invested into trail infrastructure.
- Numerous studies prove that separation from nature is detrimental to one’s physical health and mental well-being.

BENEFITS TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

Iowa’s rural towns do not have large stadiums, concert venues, and vast, bustling downtown nightlife as key elements to attract employers and skilled workers. What they often do have are areas of natural beauty, and opportunities to enhance outdoor spaces and provide quality-of-life experiences. Parks, rivers, lakes, trails, and natural areas that provide wildlife habitat are key resources to make rural communities vibrant places where people want to work, live, and play.

CLEAN WATER

Iowans deserve a legacy of clean water. To date, no legislation has been enacted or proposed that would benefit water quality to the extent of funding the Trust. More than 60% of funds distributed through the current Trust Fund formula are estimated to be invested annually in ways that benefit water quality. Much of the investment will help private landowners implement conservation practices, but local communities also will have enhanced abilities to invest in water quality/quantity projects, and projects to enhance lakes and rivers. The Trust Fund requires annual reports and audits, so people are held accountable for how money is spent.

Citizens have spoken – repeatedly.

They have amended the Constitution, and surveys consistently indicate Iowans are in favor of the sales tax increase. County conservation boards and their staff stand ready and eager to do the good work of implementing important projects. It now is up to the Legislature and Governor to more fully deliver on the wants and needs of its citizens. Will this generation of Iowans succeed in this major success, leaving a legacy of improved health, vibrant communities, and clean water and lands? Let’s see.

Woodbury County

BROWNS LAKE SHORELINE

Dan Heissel, Executive Director

A shoreline enhancement and development of 1,300 feet of shoreline allows for use by park users and anglers includes the construction of a handicap fishing pier.





COUNTIES 99 WEEKS

It's only 99 weeks they said – just a bit of social media work here and there - and linking things up a bit, eh? But...but..... there are 2,024+ parks, trails, preserves, natural areas, and historic sites scattered around Iowa that are managed by individual county conservation boards (CCB) – including 19 State Parks....where would one even start this trek? What then to focus on? The 11,000+ campsites, the 1,900+ miles of trails, the 29,000+ acres of water recreation, the 70 nature/interpretive centers, the 146,000 hunting acres, or just simply that the quality of life in your county is better because of the dedication and vision of your county conservation staff, board members and volunteers!? THAT'S IT!! There's no ONE story – there are 99!

Where to start, indeed!? Alphabetically? (too standard) Smallest to biggest, or vice-versa? (too traditional) West-to-East or North-to-South? (too lineal) Soooo, what then? Let's do them oldest to youngest! With the Iowa Legislature creating the county conservation board system in the spring of 1955, Code 111A provided that it would require a favorable vote by the citizenry of each county in a general election (in even numbered years) to establish a county conservation board. The general election in the fall of 1956 would be the first opportunity for counties to vote, and 16 counties initiated the launch of what would become the finest county conservation system in the nation! This would be where we started the journey for our "99 Counties in 99 Weeks" Facebook promotion on January 18, 2021 with Benton County – then alphabetically through the first 16 CCBs formed that fall. Next it would be on to the 34 counties in the "Class of 1958", the 12 counties in the "Class of 1960", and so on. It is now May 2021, so we are marching through weeks 16 to 20 with those rascals from the Class of '58!

The success of Iowa's County Conservation System is derived, in part from the unique diversity of programming and scope of operations that you will find in individual counties - frequently developed around local natural resources, the county's historical presence, and priorities as determined by the citizens. Budgets are supported by local property taxes, park user revenues, grants, and fundraising. It is truly amazing to experience the successes of each and every county conservation board across the state! When Thomas MacBride wrote about the need for county parks in Iowa back in 1896..... he could never have imagined where we would be today!

Each week, we are connecting with the public and our CCB network via two Facebook pages - "MyCountyParks.com" and "Iowa's County Conservation System" with posts about the highlighted county designated for that particular week. Posts consists of a state map identifying the location of the county, a gallery of only the BEST pictures from their operations, highlights of their overall statistics (facilities, activities, programming), and as many links as necessary for visitors to obtain additional information. These posts also

include pictures and links to the specific county's pages in the 242-page digital version of the County Conservation Guide to Outdoor Adventure. AND, of course, this is all integrated with their online presence on [MyCountyParks.com](https://www.mycountyparks.com) - the award-winning statewide website which provides a virtual visit to all 99 county conservation boards 24/7. Forty-seven counties now provide online reservations through this website - for cabins, camping, shelters, and events/programs - generating upwards of 31,000+ reservations and \$3.3 million plus revenue annually for participating counties.

Our first born (CCBs from '56) are now celebrating 65 years in 2021 - please join us as we continue our virtual feasting on all that each county conservation board has to offer....county by county, week after week - all the way thru December 2022!

It has been an awesome ride so far. What's not to like about the incredible quality of life opportunities being served up by YOUR local, regional, and statewide county conservation boards and their economic impact engines?





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Warren County Justice Center
Image courtesy of Shive-Hattery



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2021 Calendar

May 2021

11-14 Treasurers May School
(Doubletree Hilton Conference Center, Cedar Rapids)

June 2021

22-25 ISACA Summer Conference
(Hilton Garden Inn Riverfront, Sioux City)

July 2021

7 ISAC Board of Directors Meeting
(Virtual)
9-12 NACo Annual Conference
(Hybrid - Virtual/Prince George's County, MD)
29 ISAC Scholarship Golf Fundraiser
(Toad Valley, Pleasant Hill)

August 2021

25-27 ISAC Annual Conference
(Veterans Memorial Community Choice Credit
Union Convention Center, Des Moines)
26 ISAC Casino Night Fundraiser
(Hilton Des Moines Downtown)

September 2021

12-15 ISSDA Fall Jail School
(Airport Holiday Inn, Des Moines)
15-17 ISAC Board of Directors Retreat
(Delaware County)

October 2021

10-13 Assessors Fall School
(Airport Holiday Inn, Des Moines)
12-14 Records Annual School
(Dubuque)

November 2021

9-10 ISAC Board of Directors Meeting
(Clay County)
17-19 ISACA Conference
(TBD)

December 2021

1-3 ICEA Conference
(Veterans Memorial Community Choice Credit
Union Convention Center, Des Moines)
5-8 ISSDA Winter School
(Holiday Inn Des Moines Airport)

2022

October 9-12 Assessors Fall School (Des Moines)

If you have any questions about the meetings listed above or would like to add an affiliate meeting to the ISAC calendar, please contact Kelsey Sebern at ksebern@iowacounties.org.

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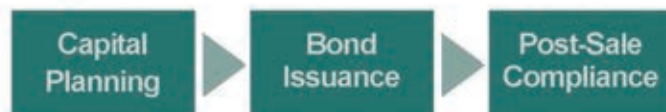
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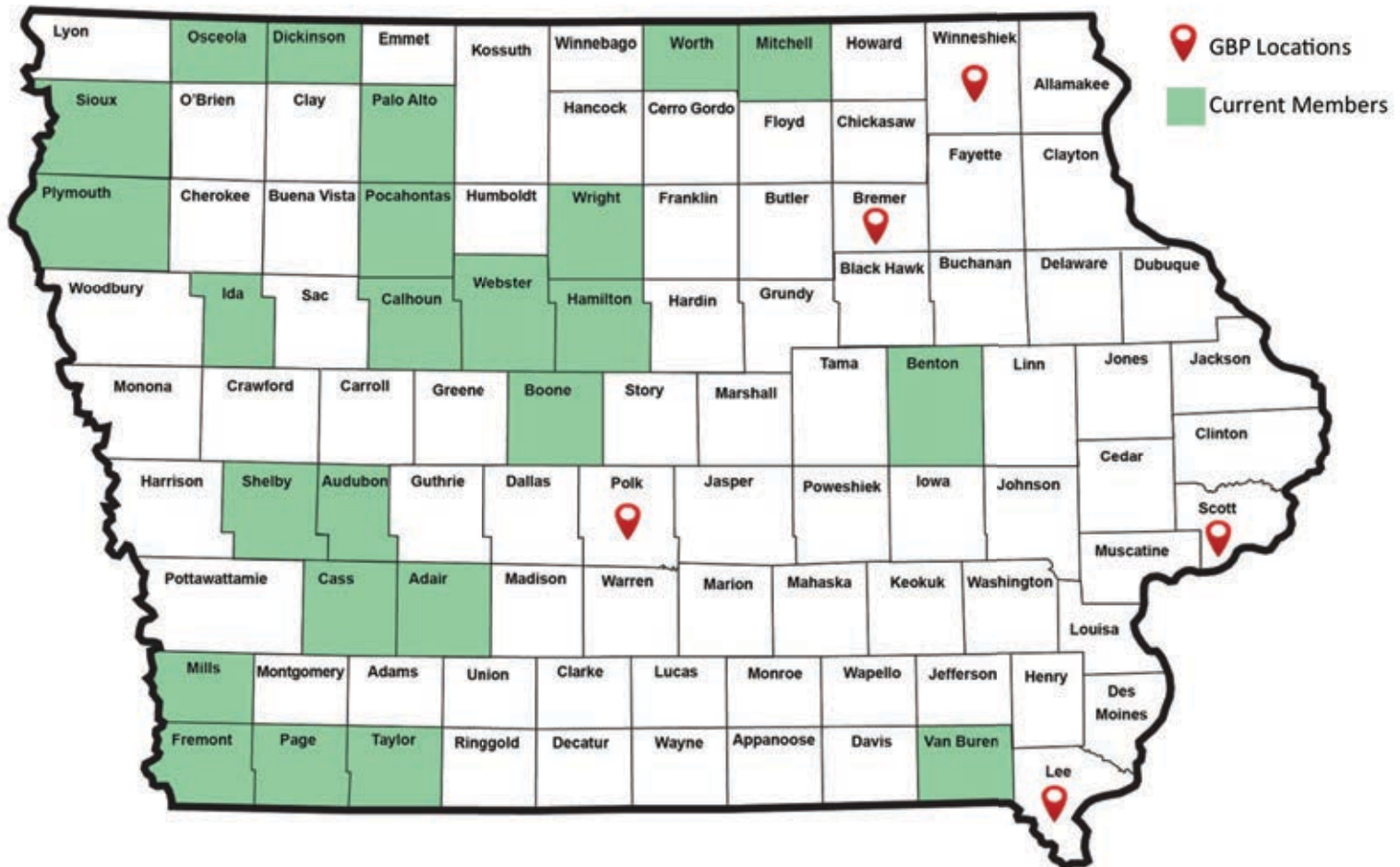
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