

IOWA VIEW

Iowans must work together to improve natural resources

The 2007 legislative session stimulated discussion about how little politicians did to improve Iowa's environment. Increased spending for the Resource Enhancement and Protection program is a positive development, but progress on long-term sustainable funding for natural-resource protection was pushed to next year. Citizens can lament this, but answers to safeguarding the outdoors are not going to be found only under the Capitol's golden dome. This responsibility is one we share as citizens, especially if we own any of Iowa's land.

For Iowa to have a brighter future — with cleaner waterways and more places to recreate and experience nature's beauty — it will take the efforts of all Iowans. If we embrace private-land stewardship, Iowans can renew the commitment to conservation that once defined our state. If you are interested in being part of the solution, here are 10 actions to consider:



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- Serve on the board of a local conservation organization, such as the soil-and-water conservation district, county conservation board or city park commission.

- Consider how you manage your property, whether a farm, acreage or home. What are you doing to protect water quality, create wild-life habitat or enhance its natural beauty? What are the long-term stewardship opportunities for your land? How will you leave it, and what will its future be once you no longer own it?

- If your land has special features, explore the opportunities for their long-term protection. Your land's future doesn't have to be left to chance or the promises of the next buyer or even to your children's whims. There are tools you can use now to determine how the land will be used. The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation's new book, "Landowner's Options: Safeguarding Iowa's Natural Resources for the Future," explains the options and the economic effects.

- Consider volunteering for a local conservation effort, such as a river cleanup, prairie restoration or trail improvement. Involve your own child if you can, but a relative's will do. Opening the eyes and minds of Iowa's next generation to nature is important.

- Learn more about your own property. What species live there, what's the water quality in the pond and what unique physical features does it bear?

- Decide if there is some way your land can be used to create opportunities for public use. If a stream runs through it, do you have a place for canoe access? Could local residents use your farm lanes as walking trails? Iowa law protects landowners who allow recreational use from liability. By being creative we can provide new opportunities without always needing more public-land acquisition.

- Join one of Iowa's many conservation organizations, such as the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Nature Conservancy or the Iowa Environmental Council. These groups need you — your time, energy, ideas, passion and even your money — to support their work.

- Talk about land stewardship with your family, friends and neighbors and in your community. Consider what might happen if we had a statewide dialogue on how private landowners can make Iowa an even better place to live.

- Expect more from elected representatives and organizations. Does your employer have programs to support protection of natural resources? Do your civic groups, farm groups, churches and schools make efforts to assist private landowners?

- Identify how you can be involved and then take action. Write a check, donate an easement, build a trail, clean a stream or talk to local officials. Be engaged.

If we each accept our duty of stewardship to protect and conserve the land, Iowa's future can be brighter and more fulfilling for all Iowans.

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Attend conference

Drake University in Des Moines is sponsoring a conference on Thursday, Sept. 20, and Friday, Sept. 21 — "Rural Lands Rural Livelihoods: Using Land and Natural Resources to Revitalize Iowa" — featuring more than 30 speakers. It will be held at Drake's Olmsted Center. For information: www.law.drake.edu/centers/aglaw.