

Iowa Public Land – By the Numbers

Public lands are important

Parks and recreation areas provide significant benefits to the community. Iowa's natural areas

- Are habitat for wild plants and animals
- Provide recreation opportunities for hiking, camping, canoeing, viewing wildlife
- Cleanse the air, retain and absorb water, sequester carbon
- Provide relaxation, stress relief and satisfies spiritual needs
- Provide beautiful scenery
- Provide economic benefits to the neighboring communities when visitors spend money for things such as hotels, gas, restaurants.
- Provide jobs and careers to people who work in parks and recreation, both in the public and private sector
- Preserve places where children can learn about nature, can play safely, and can enjoy being outdoors.



Great blue heron

Outdoor recreation, including state parks and forests, has great financial benefits to Iowans and to the state

A 2018 study prepared by Governor Kim Reynold's administration found:¹

- Consumers spend \$8.7 billion annually on outdoor recreation
- That leads to \$2.7 billion in wages
- That recreation contributes \$649 million in in-state and local tax revenue

So how does Iowa stack up?

Since the Europeans settled in Iowa, a significant amount of the state's natural area has vanished. The Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) law,² adopted in 1989, summarizes the loss:

"The general assembly finds that:

1. The citizens of Iowa have built and sustained their society on Iowa's air, soils, waters, and rich diversity of life. The well-being and future of Iowa depend on these natural resources.
2. Many human activities have endangered Iowa's natural resources. The state of Iowa has lost ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent of its prairies, ninety-eight percent of its wetlands, eighty percent of its woodlands, fifty percent of its topsoils, and more than one hundred species of wildlife since settlement in the early 1800's. There has been a significant deterioration in the quality of Iowa's surface waters and groundwaters.
3. The long-term effects of Iowa's natural resource losses are not completely known or understood, but detrimental effects are already apparent. Prevention of further loss is therefore imperative.
4. The air, waters, soils, and biota of Iowa are interdependent and form a complex ecosystem. Iowans have the right to inherit this ecosystem in a sustainable condition, without severe or irreparable damage caused by human activities."

Among the challenges facing the Iowa Department of Natural Resources in protecting what natural areas are left.

- Iowa has 36 million acres of land³; 30,563,878 acres are under farming.⁴

¹ Olivia Allen, "Visitors, but not funds, flock to Iowa's state parks", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 5, 2021

² Iowa Code, Section 455A.15 Legislative findings

³ Tammie Krausman, "Iowa's Public Lands", Iowa Department of Natural Resources, January, 2018

⁴ "Over 1M pigs call this area home", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, April 21, 2019

- Iowa ranks 49th in the country in the amount of public land owned by federal, state, and local governments, with slightly more than one percent of the land owned by state and federal governments.⁵
- The Iowa Department of Natural Resources is responsible for 425,000 acres of public land, including 245 lakes, 71 state parks and recreation areas, 4 state forests⁶. Within the public lands, there are hundreds of miles of roads, parking lots, campgrounds, office buildings, nature centers, lodges, shelters, trails, artificial lakes, golf courses, and lawns. 40% of the public land managed by the DNR is forested; 14% of the public land is water⁷.
- Iowa's public lands fit into a 40-mile square. Iowa has 1,576 square miles of public land, the eighth smallest of all states. If you look at the percentage of public land in the state, Iowa's 2.8% places the state in the 47th position.⁸ Of the publicly-owned lands, about 50 percent are road right-of-ways.⁹ 919,405 acres of public land are in Iowa's Road Right-of-way¹⁰
- 68,000 acres are protected as state parks, which is 106 square miles or a 10-mile square.¹¹ Wildlife management areas hold another 585 square miles of land.¹² 29,000 acres of land held by the DNR is leased to farmers, 8 percent of the land held by the DNR.

All the while, funding for the parks has been a challenge.

- Annually 15 million park visitors use the state parks, recreation areas, and forest, including 1 million wildlife observers¹³. Over a ten-year period, the numbers range from 13.7 to 15.5 million visitors a year.¹⁴
- The Iowa Department of Natural Resources budget was \$134.3 million in fiscal year 2019¹⁵
- The DNR had 1,400 full-time and part-time employees in fiscal year 2018¹⁶.
- The number of park rangers has been reduced from 55 in 1995 to 35 in 2021. In 1995, there was 1 park ranger for every 217,700 visits, but only 1 park ranger for every 474,286 visits in 2021.¹⁷
- Funding for the park operations has seen steep declines since 2010. In 2010, funding was at \$6.6 million in 2010, declining to 5.7 million in 2019, and rising to \$6.2 million in 2020.¹⁸



Wapsipinicon State Park, Anamosa, Iowa

Public lands are not prime farmland

When the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) acquires public land, the following principles are used:

- The land the DNR acquires must have a large benefit for conservation, recreation, or the environment; must have a public benefit; must have public access; and the DNR must be able to efficiently manage the land.¹⁹
- The Iowa DNR does not use eminent domain.
- The DNR works with willing sellers.

⁵ Figures are from Natural Resources Council of Maine, as reported in Erin Jordan, "Public Land Buys at Risk", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, April 28, 2019

Also Iowa Natural Resource Commission, Iowa Department of Natural Resources "2019 Annual Report and Recommendations", January 30, 2020

⁶ Erin Jordan, "Iowa DNR goes one year without permanent director", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, May 1, 2019

⁷ Tammie Krausman, "Iowa's Public Lands", Iowa Department of Natural Resources, January, 2018

⁸ Chris Jones, "Iowa needs public land", *Bleeding Heartland*, May 18, 2019

⁹ Chris Jones, "Iowa needs public land", *Bleeding Heartland*, May 18, 2019

¹⁰ Tammie Krausman, "Iowa's Public Lands", Iowa Department of Natural Resources, January, 2018

¹¹ Chris Jones, "Iowa needs public land", *Bleeding Heartland*, May 18, 2019

¹² Chris Jones, "Iowa needs public land", *Bleeding Heartland*, May 18, 2019

¹³ "Parks 2020 Overview", Iowa Department of Natural Resources

¹⁴ Olivia Allen, "Visitors, but not funds, flock to Iowa's state parks", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 5, 2021

¹⁵ Erin Jordan, "Iowa DNR goes one year without permanent director", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, May 1, 2019

¹⁶ Erin Jordan, "Iowa DNR goes one year without permanent director", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, May 1, 2019

¹⁷ Olivia Allen, "Visitors, but not funds, flock to Iowa's state parks", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 5, 2021

¹⁸ Olivia Allen, "Visitors, but not funds, flock to Iowa's state parks", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 5, 2021

¹⁹ Tammie Krausman, "Iowa's Public Lands", Iowa Department of Natural Resources, January, 2018

- The DNR does not take land with high corn suitability ratings – average corn suitability rating (CSR) on DNR lands is 32.²⁰
- The DNR pays at or below appraised market value.
- The DNR pays property taxes – on 109,206 acres of land.²¹

Conclusion

Iowa's state park system was created in 1919. In 1988, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources created the "1988 Iowa Open Spaces Plan" that laid out goals to increase the public lands in Iowa. Unfortunately the goals to increase public spaces in Iowa to 10 percent by 2000 were not met²². Even so, Iowa should continue to increase public land holdings and should work toward 10 percent of the land in Iowa being preserved as a public space. Doing so would improve water quality, would improve wildlife habitat, and would improve recreation opportunities for all Iowans.

Appendix – Iowa Laws and Their Status

At times in Iowa's history, the state has been a leader in protecting Iowa's soils, water, and natural areas. Iowans have had a long-standing commitment to protecting natural areas, soil conservation, and water quality improvements. But it has not always been easy to keep those commitments.

1. In 1919, a hundred years ago, Iowa created the state park system.
2. In 1955, the Iowa legislature created the county conservation boards, which have resulted in the protection of natural areas across the state.
3. In 1987, the Groundwater Protection Act created the Leopold Center at Iowa State University. The Leopold Center which researched farming practices that protected water and preserved soil and that also created income for farm families. A side benefit is improving Iowa's wildlife habitat. Unfortunately the Iowa legislature defunded the Leopold Center in 2017. The funding for the Leopold Center should be restored.
4. In 1988, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources created the "1988 Iowa Open Spaces Plan" that laid out goals to increase the public lands in Iowa, as required by Iowa §465A.1(2)(b). Unfortunately the goals to increase public spaces in Iowa to 10 percent by 2000 were not met and the Iowa Legislature removed the 10 percent goal in 2023. We need to re-establish and then work on that goal.
5. In 2017 the Iowa Department of Natural Resources dismantled the IOWATER program; it needs to be restored. IOWATER engaged citizens in testing the water in rivers, streams, and lakes in their neighborhoods. The program trained the volunteers, provided testing chemicals, and had a database for recording and tracking results.
6. In 2010 voters approved by 62% a constitutional amendment to create the Natural Resource Trust Fund (also referred to as I-Will) that would be funded with the next sales tax increase of 3/8 cent. The Iowa legislature should raise the sales tax while keeping the funding formulas currently in Iowa Code. The sales tax will be used to fund water quality initiatives as well as parks and recreation.
7. In 2017 Governor Terry Branstad vetoed legislation that would have closed the Iowa Flood Center. Improving the retention of water within a watershed through techniques such as stream buffers, grass waterways, and increased soil carbon has benefits beyond flood protection, including improving water quality and mitigating against climate change.
8. In 2023, the legislature rescinded the goal of having 10% of Iowa's land be in public open spaces by the year 2000, via bill number SF558. This was part of Iowa Code Chapter 465A.
9. The Resource Enhancement and Protection Act (REAP) was created. REAP funds have been used to enhance soil and water, to protect natural areas, and to improve roadside vegetation. Unfortunately REAP has never been fully funded. The legislature should fully fund REAP at \$20 million each year. REAP is set to expire in 2026; the legislature should extend the program.

²⁰ Tammie Krausman, "Iowa's Public Lands", Iowa Department of Natural Resources, January, 2018

²¹ Tammie Krausman, "Iowa's Public Lands", Iowa Department of Natural Resources, January, 2018

²² Iowa §465A.1 lays out the goal of 10% of Iowa land protected as public spaces by 2000