

Woven in the River

EMILY MARTIN





What do you do when you can't stay in the fight anymore? It's a question I hear often working in conservation in Iowa. It's a question I hear often being a queer person in a state that is doing its best to alienate LGBTQ+ people. To most Americans, Iowa is known as a flyover state that produces hogs and corn. We've become the testing ground for presidential elections and national campaigns as politicians like former Vice President Mike Pence and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis come to Iowa to hold events (Pfannenstiel and Gehr 2022; Bidar 2023; Gutierrez 2023). Pence has even gone so far as to make Iowa the target of ads against gender-affirming school policies, led by his group Advancing American Freedom (Beaumont 2023). We have no mountains or oceans, but neither are we as one-dimensional as we are made out to be. We are known for being "Iowa Nice," but there is something foul happening beneath the veneer.

THE SOURCE

In 175 years, Iowa has gone from rolling plains of blooming prairies, sunny oak savannas, and interconnected wetlands to a demolished, eroding landscape that is begging us for a chance to catch its breath. Since 1850, Iowa has lost 57 billion metric tons of soil, a loss visible when driving across the state between farmed fields and remnant prairies (Thaler et al. 2022). Besides pervasive soil erosion, nitrogen and phosphorus pollution from agriculture continues to dominate Iowa's environmental issues. Iowa contributes 11–52% of the nitrate that creates the Gulf of Mexico dead zone, making us one of the main contributors (Jones et al. 2018). Our actions have contributed to communities being relocated as the climate crisis worsens (Louisiana Office of Community Development n.d.).

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Our issues are intensely local, too. From 2006 to 2017, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources shut down 39 beaches a collective 190 times due to harmful algal blooms producing dangerous levels of microcystin (Iowa Environmental Council 2022). Iowa ranks 49 out of 50 states for access to public land (Natural Resources Council of Main N.d.). Between 1988 and 2016, Iowa had 951 presidential flood declarations (Eller 2018). Iowa's 1993 flood still ranks as the tenth most expensive natural disaster in the history of the United States at \$44.2 billion (adjusted for inflation) and is one of only two events in the top ten that is not a hurricane (NOAA 2023). Iowa's largest city and capital, Des Moines, is facing the unrelenting reality of not knowing where its drinking water will come from as the Raccoon and Des Moines Rivers dry up during extended droughts and carry excess loads of nitrate and microcystin when they can flow from source to mouth. These problems are only deepening with climate change.

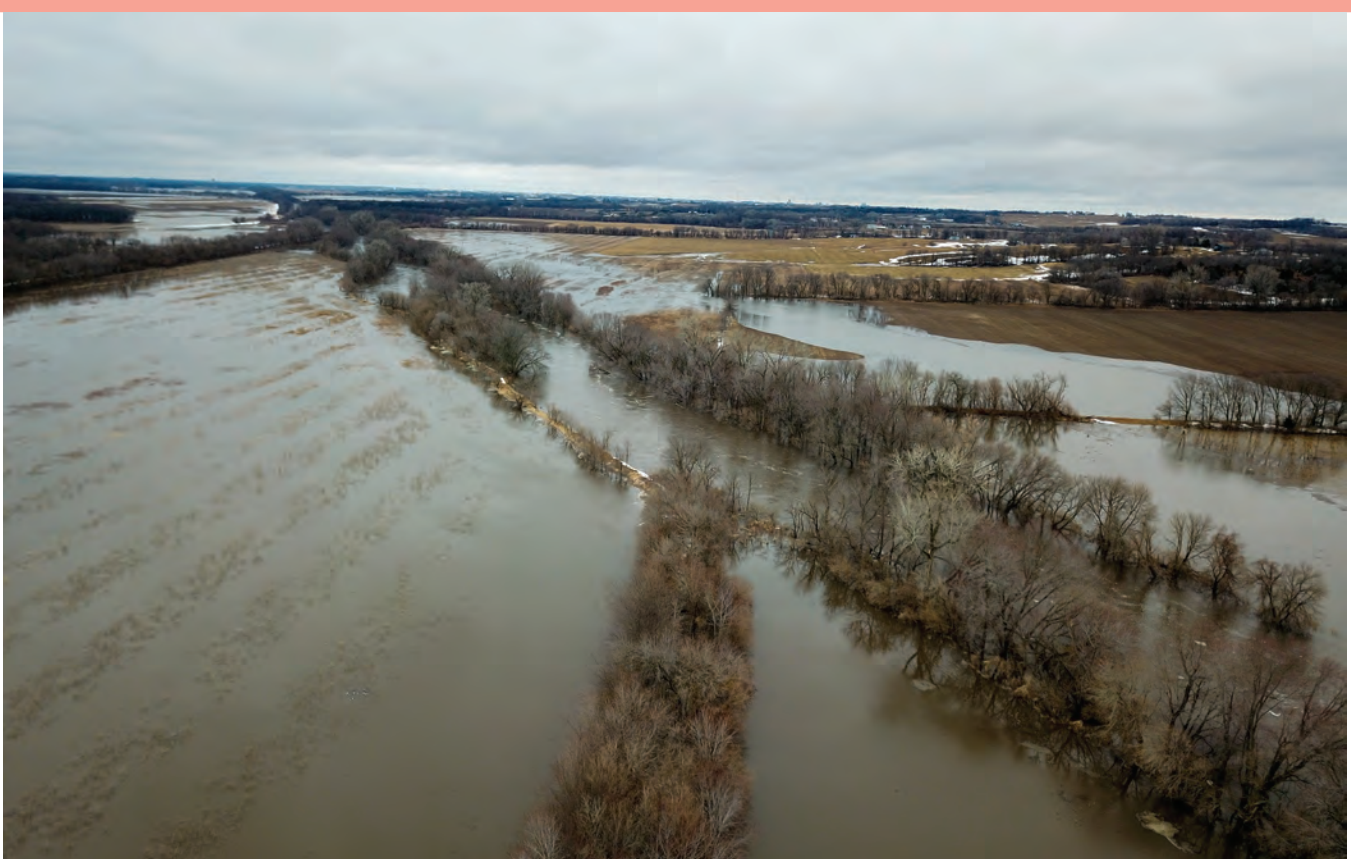
We are the land between the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, but our rivers are degraded beyond recognition. In five generations, we have forgotten what it was like to see our streams run clear and full of life. We have forgotten what it was like for our rivers to swell a week after a rain, the prairie roots holding tight to every drop of water until they were quenched, then releasing what they did not need with gratitude. Iowa has lost touch with nature in favor of unsustainable systems of agriculture.

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Iowa's environmental issues are human-caused and preventable, but like so many issues in our country, we are forced to choose constantly increasing production over the well-being of nature and human beings. Farmers are locked into a system that does not support change or innovation, at least not without heavy upfront investment they often cannot afford.

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◀ OVERLEAF The Des Moines River as it flows by the 1,011-acre 4-H Camp property protected by Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources in Boone County. EMILY MARTIN



The South Skunk River flows through central Iowa and floods frequently due to straightening and human development. This photo was taken during a March 2019 flood in Story County. EMILY MARTIN

Conservation is underfunded if funded at all. In 2010, 63% of Iowans voted to create the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, a constitutionally protected source of permanent funding for Iowa's natural resources. The amendment to the state constitution stipulates that the next time Iowa's sales tax increases, the first three-eighths of one-cent will go to the Trust Fund; however, Iowa has failed to raise its sales tax in the last 13 years, leaving conservation to be funded by other sources like the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Resource Enhancement and Protection Program, which is supposed to be funded at \$20 million every year but has never reached that level. In comparison, Missouri passed similar legislation establishing a permanent conservation fund in 1976 and has generated \$100 million annually for the Missouri Department of Conservation. By failing to raise the sales tax, Iowa has missed out on roughly \$1.6 billion for conservation efforts since 2010.

Iowa's health is measured by the price of a bushel of corn, not by how we take care of our people. Governor Kim Reynolds has rejected more than \$200 million in federal money that would have helped Iowa pay for pollution reduction, COVID-19 testing, and child care services, seemingly to spite the Biden Administration (Clayworth 2023). The health of our people and the health of nature are inextricably linked. Given the state of our nature, it's no surprise we aren't taking care of our people, either.

In 2022, the Iowa legislature introduced 28 anti-LGBTQ+ bills, among the most in the country. One bill was signed into law that bans transgender women and girls from participating in school sports from kindergarten through college. Another excludes transition-related medical services for transgender and intersex Iowans from certain public insurance policies. Within two days of Iowa's 2023 legislative session starting, two bills were introduced, one that would force teachers to out transgender students and one that is Iowa's equivalent of the "don't say gay" bill.

The recent attacks on LGBTQ+ Iowans stand in stark contrast to another list Iowa tops. We were the third state in the country to legalize gay marriage. Back in 2009, Iowa was ahead of the pack in treating its queer citizens with basic dignity, but even our path to that was fraught with controversy, and only 28% of Iowans claimed they were proud of the Iowa Supreme Court Ruling (Calvin 2019).

What do you do when you can't stay in the fight anymore?



A compass plant stands tall above the restored prairie at Snyder Heritage Farm, a property in Polk County protected for over 30 years by Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

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Crawford Creek from above as it flows from Crawford Creek Recreation Area in Ida County.

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THE MEANDERS

Iowa's largest interior river cuts across the state from the northwest until it meets the Mississippi in the southeast corner. The Des Moines River is a remnant of the last Midwestern glaciers that carved their way over the Des Moines Lobe 12,000 years ago. A new drainage system formed as the ice receded, giving way to the Des Moines River with its "disordered drainage," as defined by a 1916 report (Lees 1916). With these same glaciers, millions of acres of wetlands formed across northern and central Iowa. Today, north of the capital, named for the river, its valleys become more rugged, unlike anything else found in Iowa. These valleys stretch from Boone up to Fort Dodge and are perhaps the best-kept secret in the state. In just one short hike, blufftop views of the river valley come into view as the remarkable Des Moines flows by. This river has provided life to humans for centuries and has been called many names—River of the Otoe by the French, Ke-o-shaw-qua by the Meskwaki and Sauk, Inyan Shasha and Eah-sha-wa-pa-ta by the Dakota.

Once upon a time, this river flowed clear and wide, with spiny softshell turtles and lake sturgeon plentiful enough to be seen by passersby. Today, the water is brown, smelly, and full of chemicals like nitrate and phosphorus, which contribute to harmful algal blooms. Many fish and wildlife species once found in the river are extinct or extirpated. Despite the known pollution, this river is expected to provide water for over 600,000 Iowans. From source to mouth, the Des Moines River does not get a reprieve from being altered by humans.

It is along the Des Moines River, in its disordered valleys, that I grew up and where I still live. I've always known it as the big brown river that flowed through my hometown of Fort Dodge, scarred by low-head dams where people have lost their lives to the inescapable currents the dams create. Playing in the Des Moines River is the touchstone of my love story with nature. It is one of the reasons I dedicated my life to solving Iowa's water quality issues and helping this state come to terms with climate change.

It is along the Des Moines River where I embraced my queerness. I was lucky to be raised in a larger town in Iowa where I found my people who not only accepted but celebrated my coming out in high school. Before then, my path was scarred by people who sought to crush my spirit for being queer. When I felt outcast by the community I was raised in, I could always turn to the river. Despite nearly two centuries of severe alteration by modern agriculture and urban development, the Des Moines River flowed. I explored crooked ravines and overturned rocks to watch insects scatter out into the sunlight. I traced colors along limestone bluffs and watched painted turtles bask in the warmth of the day. I knew in my heart that this river, and all rivers, hold secrets unknowable by humans, no matter how hard we try. The river always flexed its power just as it seemed humans forgot who was in charge.

My queerness and my passion for conservation are not a coincidence. They directly inform one another. This connection has been strong among many communities for decades, as evidenced by environmental justice movements like the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, which recognized that environmental justice must "encompass mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias" (Berndt 2021). Today, more and more organizations and community groups have brought a focus to the interconnectedness of Queer Liberation and environmental justice as climate change continues to disproportionately impact marginalized communities (Pradhan 2021).

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The Little Sioux River just below where it drains the Okoboji Lakes system in Dickinson County. EMILY MARTIN

It is impossible to grow up in a state with very little nature or recreational land and not learn how to find beauty in every small patch. The day I learned Iowa used to be covered with wetlands so interconnected you could paddle for 80 miles without setting foot on land, I felt incredible sorrow. Five percent of Iowa's original wetlands remain (Iowa Department of Natural Resources n.d.). It is impossible to grow up in a culture that openly hates LGBTQ+ people and not develop the ability to find joy in any small win. When you grow up in a land sacrificed for agriculture, a land where you're hated for who you do or don't love, how can you not feel rage? How can you not want to fight back? I learned how to fight for unheard voices because of my queerness. And now I get to use my drive to help protect Iowa because, in the end, we are all the underdog when it comes to climate change.

THE MOUTH

There are solutions to the issues we are facing. The same legislature attacking LGBTQ+ Iowans is the same one passing laws limiting conservation resources. I won't pretend to know what is in their hearts or behind their political agendas, but I know the outcome of their actions. For every person spreading hate, there are more people and organizations here standing against them.

In the summer of 2021, Queer Hikers was born out of a need to build an LGBTQ+ community in Iowa that connects around our love for the outdoors. Queer Hikers explores Iowa's outdoor spaces with members of the LGBTQ+ community to build friendships, learn about nature, and be our full selves. We hold free events once a month around the state, from Walnut Woods State Park in Des Moines to F.W. Kent Park in Johnson County.

The importance of having a dedicated space for queer folks in Iowa’s outdoors quickly became apparent after our first hike in 2021. It can be difficult to show up as your whole self when there is a fear of how you will be perceived and treated. When we hike as a group, there is safety. In turn, the more queer people we see in the outdoors, the more confident we feel. Our events are filled with joy and connection that has been missing for some queer Iowans.

Queer Hikers is part of a growing community across the country. Other groups and people based around getting the LGBTQ+ community outdoors have existed for years—The Venture Out Project, Unlikely Hikers, Wild Diversity, Queer Nature, Pattie Gonia, OUT There Adventures, OutVentures, and many more. Smaller local groups have formed, too, from queer climbing groups in California to queer angling groups in Colorado. Now, Queer Hikers is queering the outdoors in Iowa, one hike at a time.

Queer Hikers is one small piece of the puzzle fighting for LGBTQ+ Iowans. One Iowa, a non-profit, is fighting bills that attack the LGBTQ+ community. Their work has been invaluable in protecting our rights in the legislature and in the workplace. Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund is providing community-sourced funding for transgender and non-binary

Queer Hikers was founded in 2021 and has coordinated 15 hikes, camping trips, and community gatherings for over 100 LGBTQ+ Iowans. EMILY MARTIN



Iowans to access gender-affirming care. Iowa Safe Schools, another non-profit, provides learning environments and communities for LGBTQ+ and allied youth through education, outreach, advocacy, and direct services. These are just some of the many people and groups organizing and pushing back against hate.

Likewise, there are many organizations fighting to protect and restore Iowa's land, water, and wildlife. Hundreds of people across the state are working every single day to restore the land and water to what it once was, or at least as close as we can get. Every spring and fall, conservationists treat lands with prescribed fire to remove invasive species and encourage native species to flourish. Seeds are collected meticulously by hand to reconstruct prairie species composition as close to the local ecotype as possible. Wetlands are carefully designed to function as they did before they were drained, while accommodating modern drainage issues. Every year, we gain ground in our efforts to reconnect Iowa to its natural roots in the face of a changing climate.

The paths to justice for both nature and the LGBTQ+ community are like the branches of a free-flowing river, spreading far and wide, nourishing the landscape. Our fates are woven together, just as rivers must eventually converge and become one. What's being done to queer Iowans now has been done many times over to Iowa's rivers: divide, alter, destroy. We cannot save nature without including every voice and diverse approach to protecting our land and water. We cannot protect and empower LGBTQ+ Iowans without coming to grips with the destruction on which

A prescribed burn taking place on
Sylvan Runkel State Preserve in western Iowa.
Prescribed fire is a key land stewardship tool
for Iowa's native ecosystems.
EMILY MARTIN





Ten Mile Creek, located in Winneshiek County, is one of Iowa's few coldwater streams.

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modern-day Iowa was founded. Like the confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers, we are stronger and undeniable together. It becomes easier to stay in the fight when the current around you swiftly flows in the same direction. The hate, destruction, and greed that fight against us cannot withstand the current of a powerful river full of life.

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This article is published in Volume 39, Number 2 of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, 2023.

Parks Stewardship Forum explores innovative thinking and offers enduring perspectives on critical issues of place-based heritage management and stewardship. Interdisciplinary in nature, the journal gathers insights from all fields related to parks, protected/conserved areas, cultural sites, and other place-based forms of conservation. The scope of the journal is international. It is dedicated to the legacy of **George Meléndez Wright**, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and pioneer in conservation of national parks.

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The journal continues *The George Wright Forum*, published 1981–2018 by the George Wright Society.

PSF is designed by Laurie Frasier • lauriefrasier.com



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“Strength,” a Tarot illustration representing a radiation of power coupled with inner understanding and love. | [HENRY CRAWFORD ADAMS](#)