



Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation: Land Stewardship on Protected Private Lands

Summary: The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is demonstrating, encouraging and providing land stewardship on protected lands with important native habitat. Activities occur on fee title property, land temporarily owned by the foundation before transfer to a public agency or private land with a permanent protection agreement.

Regional Setting: Much of Iowa was once covered with tall-grass prairie and is now characterized largely by its working agricultural landscape. Remnant native ecosystems are found throughout the state, including prairie and associated wetlands, oak savannas and oak woodlands.

Land Trust Mission: The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation protects Iowa's land, water and wildlife for future generations.

Service Area: State of Iowa.

Contact: Joe McGovern, Land Stewardship Program Director
Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation
505 Fifth Ave., Suite 444, Des Moines, IA 50309
Telephone: 515-288-1846 x16 E-mail: jmcgovern@inhf.org
Website: www.inhf.org

Biodiversity Values

Iowa was once the heart of America's tall-grass prairie region, with about 80% of the state covered by this diverse, resilient ecosystem. Today 99.9% of Iowa's native prairies are gone, along with most of its former wetlands, oak savannas and other natural ecosystems. Scattered remnants host numerous native plant and wildlife species. Many of these native habitats, and the native species they support, require periodic fires or removal of invasive species to remain healthy.



Conservation Strategy

Each year, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation helps landowners and other partners protect 20 to 40 sites, including numerous transfers to public ownership, several conservation easements and an occasional fee-title acquisition. A 2003 research grant allowed the foundation to revisit some past projects to evaluate their biological integrity. The results indicated that native ecosystems require periodic disturbance (prescribed fire, grazing, etc.) and removal of non-native invasive species.

To improve ecosystem functions on protected lands, the foundation is now working to:

- Increase the number of land stewardship staff and interns to manage and restore foundation lands and other privately owned lands;
- Expand good land stewardship practices on foundation properties as a teaching tool and model, with a focus on native prairie and oak savanna habitats;
- Offer land stewardship assistance to landowners, such as: prescribed fire, invasive species eradication (weed pulling, appropriate herbicide application, etc.) and introduction of appropriate grazing regimes;
- Use affirmative stewardship language in selected conservation easements, with willing landowners; and
- Include initial land management costs in selected public acquisition projects, sometimes conducting the first steps during the foundation's temporary ownership period.



Restoring Habitat - Why and Where?

Since its founding over 27 years ago, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation has gradually shifted its philosophy from "How much can we afford to invest in land stewardship?" to "How much can we afford *not* to invest?" Disappointment with the biological condition of some protected sites, coupled with increasing private landowner requests, led the foundation to place more emphasis on land stewardship for its fee properties and for land owned by other parties.

Private Landowners

About 98% of Iowa's land is privately owned. A growing number of private landowners are investing substantial time and money in restoring native ecosystems, especially prairie. Looking for a reliable partner to continue these efforts into the future, some have encouraged the Iowa Natural Heritage foundation to raise its land stewardship standards – and have backed this with significant donations to the foundation's Land Stewardship Fund. As a result, the foundation has expanded its land stewardship services for protected private lands:

- On-the-ground assistance is available, such as prescribed fire, seed collection, seed sowing and invasive species removal. While there is no charge for these services, donations are encouraged;
- A summer field crew began in 2000 with two part-time interns and grew to eight full-time interns in 2006, along with expanded training and equipment. The crew is funded by donations, grants from private foundations and proceeds from foundation-owned sites; and
- Additional technical assistance, such as choosing appropriate native seeds, is available to landowners. The foundation also advises landowners on how to apply for federal funding for habitat restoration and management, such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program or the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

The likelihood of long-term ecological benefits is increased by providing on-the-ground assistance only to landowners who permanently protect their land (e.g. with a conservation easement or bequest). In addition, affirmative language is included in some new conservation easement documents. This allows, but does not require, the foundation to implement land stewardship activities at landowner expense.

Future Public Lands

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation frequently purchases sites for future transfer to state or county conservation agencies and may own these lands for months or years while awaiting repurchase. In recent years, the foundation has implemented initial management efforts such as prescribed fire, invasive species removal or native seeding on select projects during its



Photo above: Iowa Natural Heritage staff and interns, when collecting seed for later replanting, often conduct stewardship efforts alongside private landowners. The process strengthens relationships and provides a broader education for future conservationists.

temporary ownership. Acquisition and initial stewardship costs are built into the project budget and fundraising efforts by the foundation or its partners. The foundation often applies for funding from federal conservation incentive programs.

Looking Ahead

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is updating some of its landowner publications, such as *The Landowner's Options*, to include more information about land stewardship and habitat restoration and management. This publication, along with the *Ecology College* series, is free and available to all Iowans.

The foundation's improved land stewardship efforts and growing reputation have generated increased private landowner requests for conservation easements, bequests and other protection efforts, as well as outright donations, especially from Iowans already engaged in conservation efforts of their own. Good land stewardship has proven to be a good investment in both the organization and the natural resources it protects.

For More Information

Current versions of Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation landowner educational materials are available by clicking the "for landowners" button at: www.inhf.org.

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and its public and private partners often use state and federal government programs that support habitat conservation. For links to federal habitat incentive programs, go to: www.biodiversitypartners.org/incentives/programfed.shtml