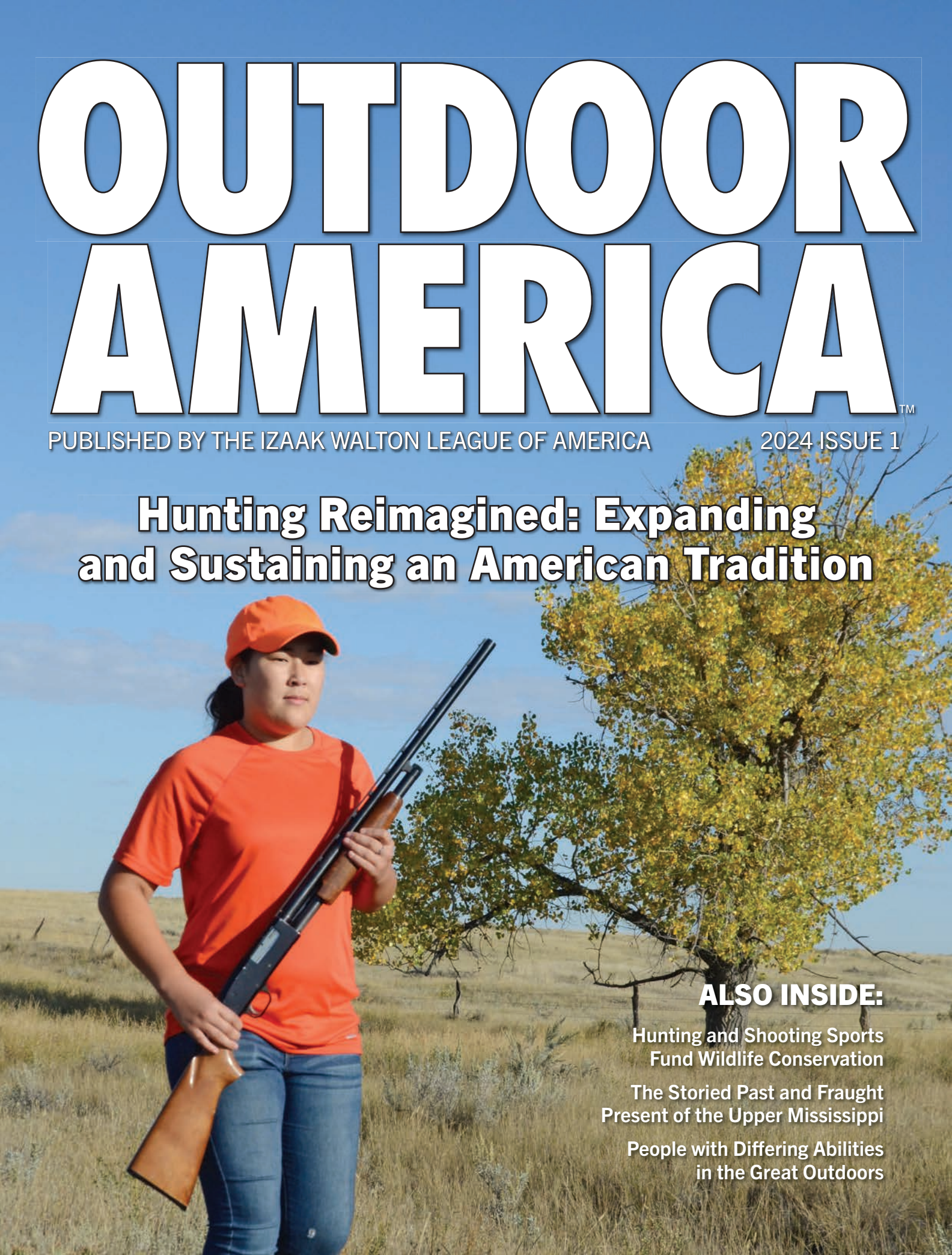
OUTDOOR AMERICA™

PUBLISHED BY THE IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA 2024 ISSUE 1

Hunting Reimagined: Expanding and Sustaining an American Tradition



ALSO INSIDE:

Hunting and Shooting Sports Fund Wildlife Conservation

The Storied Past and Fraught Present of the Upper Mississippi

People with Differing Abilities in the Great Outdoors

NATIONAL
★AWARDS★
2024

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OUTDOOR AMERICA™

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CONTENTS

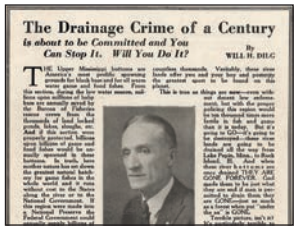
2024, ISSUE 1

Features

MATT LENTSCH

USFWS

CHRISTA LEGRANDE ROLLS



The Drainage Crime of a Century
is about to be Committed and You Can Stop It. Will You Do It?
By WILL H. DILG

IWLA

Departments

ON THE COVER▶ Teenager Zoe Ballard pheasant hunting near Malta, Mont.
Credit: Lisa Ballard

CONTENTS▶ Midwinter on the Potomac River.
Credit: Michael Reinemer

ABOUT THE IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA▶
Founded in 1922, the Izaak Walton League of America is a national conservation organization headquartered in Gaithersburg, MD. Our more than 40,000 members protect and enjoy America's soil, air, woods, waters and wildlife. For membership information, call (800) IKE-LINE (453-5463) or visit our website at www.iwla.org.

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Share Your Love for the Outdoors

JODI LABS | NATIONAL PRESIDENT

Many of us joined the Izaak Walton League due to the fact that we enjoy nature and being outdoors, whether it be fishing, hunting, hiking, camping or partaking in some other outdoor recreational activity. Many of us would even say nature is magical. After all, few other things have the same power to inspire, nurture, heal and connect us. I encourage you to share that magic and your love for the outdoors with others.

Having access to nature is beneficial to people of all ages, races, income groups and abilities. The League has worked hard over the last century to protect open spaces and create public lands so that everyone will have access to the benefits and joys of the outdoors for generations to come.

However, the outdoors, and many of the activities we take for granted, simply aren't accessible to everyone. Barriers to accessing the outdoors include financial obstacles, limited transit options and a lack of nearby green spaces. Other key barriers include accessibility, lack of information and safety (including perceived and actual dangers). To others, the barrier may be an embedded belief that they do not belong in the outdoors.

As Ikes, we have the ability to break down or eliminate many of these barriers to enjoying the outdoors. League chapters and divisions are well positioned and able to create opportunities for discovery and pleasure in the outdoors for everyone—including youth, women, communities of color and other minority groups, and people with differing abilities.

We can empower more people to participate in outdoor recreation and become informed advocates for conservation and protecting natural resources.

The means by which our members are able to get more people outdoors are unlimited. For example, League chapters create and protect places that bring people outside—hiking trails, parks, natural playgrounds, campgrounds and public lands—and make them available to everyone. Our chapters provide access to the great outdoors, close to home.

We are also fortunate to have skilled and determined volunteers that care for nature and inspire others. We need to share such knowledge and passion. You can bring a friend or two out to one of your volunteer events, providing an opportunity for your friends to learn and meet great people while giving back.

Ikes can create safe spaces in nature

Many outdoor recreational activities are intimidating for beginners. Our chapters can create a fun, inclusive, non-threatening and non-judgmental environment for participants to learn. And as we do that, we can strive to create equity and diversity as we attract volunteers and members into the League.

We can facilitate brand-new outdoor experiences for others.

Chapters can host youth fishing and archery days for local groups serving disadvantaged youth. Or they can host a shooting sports day for women, providing an opportunity for women to shoot a rifle for the first time. Or perhaps even a fly fishing class. The options are unlimited.

Another way for us to get more people into the great outdoors is to form partnerships with other organizations that are working to increase access to and diversity in the outdoors. For example, Outdoors Empowered Network (OEN) is a national network of community-led groups working together to increase youth access and diversity in the outdoors through gear libraries and outdoor leadership training.

OEN recognizes that access to gear is one of the biggest barriers to getting outside. Think about how easy it would be for chapters to curate and provide access to outdoor equipment libraries that would make it possible for organizations to take youth outdoors safely or for first-time hunters to try their hand at hunting.

We can collaborate with groups to create outdoor activities, events and recreational spaces that are welcoming and accessible for everyone. You could partner with a group such as Access Ability Wisconsin that provides opportunities for individuals with mobility challenges to access nature and outdoor recreational experiences.

Not only can we make outdoor recreation more accessible for people, we can empower more people to participate in outdoor recreation and become informed advocates for conservation and protecting natural resources.

Happy Anniversary

Congratulations to the Izaak Walton League chapters celebrating big milestone anniversaries in 2024.

100th Anniversary
Chartered in 1924

Austin Chapter *(Minnesota)*
Beloit Chapter *(Wisconsin)*
Fort Wayne Chapter *(Indiana)*
Fremont Chapter *(Nebraska)*
Hamilton Chapter *(Ohio)*
Howard County Chapter *(Indiana)*
Lincoln Chapter *(Nebraska)*
Rapid City Chapter *(South Dakota)*
Sioux Falls Chapter *(South Dakota)*
St. Joseph County Chapter *(Indiana)*
Will Dilg Chapter *(Minnesota)*

75th Anniversary
Chartered in 1949

Ames Chapter *(Iowa)*
Beadle County Chapter *(South Dakota)*
Garden of the Gods Chapter *(Colorado)*
Indian Creek Chapter *(Iowa)*
Lois Green-Sligo Chapter *(Maryland)*
Mid-Shore Chapter *(Maryland)*

Mississippi Celebration and Call to Action

SCOTT KOVAROVICS | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Throughout 2024, our members and many other Americans will celebrate one of the Izaak Walton League's earliest conservation victories—establishing the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. Marking this 100th anniversary is about more than reflecting on the past, it's a call to action to tackle the conservation challenges of our time and the years ahead.

There is much to celebrate. The campaign to create the refuge prevented the drainage of vital wetlands and loss of wildlife habitat along 300 miles of the river. This effort also transformed the League from a fledging organization in 1922 to the leader of a national, grassroots conservation movement only two years later. Members of Congress and others at the time gave this proposal no chance. They said it was impossible. Yet, in the first six months of 1924, Congress debated and passed, and President Calvin Coolidge signed the League's refuge bill into law.

One hundred years later, the refuge is an anchor for conservation, protecting 240,000 acres of wetland, marsh, forest and other critical habitat along the river in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin. It supports more than 500 species of fish and wildlife—from majestic bald eagles to large- and smallmouth bass and dozens of species of native mussels that naturally remove pollutants from the river. The refuge attracts nearly four million visits annually for hunting, fishing, paddling and hiking, which generates an estimated $125 million annually for the region's economy.

Need for action continues

The anniversary is also a call to action. As Barry Drazkowski highlights in his piece (see page 26), the refuge is not an island walled off from the outside world, but a part of the larger landscape. The refuge isn't immune from serious conservation challenges facing the region and the planet: soil erosion that pollutes our waters with dangerous chemicals, animal waste and sediment; rising water levels driven by climate change, tile drainage and silted backwaters; and the unrelenting march of invasive plants and animals.

The call to action for our founders and all of us today is the same: conserve natural resources for future generations. And the refuge campaign first showcased League strengths that would contribute to every major conservation victory over its first 100 years: policy advocacy, grassroots mobilization and a tenacious commitment to tackle the tough issues for as long as it takes.

Today, playing to those strengths is just as important to safeguard the refuge and natural resources more broadly. We need to advocate for a better Farm Bill that invests more to improve soil health, reduce erosion and conserve vital wetlands on private land. The League must marshal grassroots pressure on Congress to amend the Clean Water Act to protect small streams and wetlands. And it's more important than ever to leverage volunteer science to help reduce pollution at the source.

This year, we can proudly celebrate one of the League's most enduring achievements. As we reflect on this history, let us also redouble our commitment to conserving natural resources nationwide.

OUTDOOR AMERICA

THE IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA

MEMBERS WITH QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS ABOUT LEAGUE POLICIES CAN REACH OUT TO THEIR NATIONAL DIRECTOR. FOR CONTACT INFORMATION, CALL THE LEAGUE'S HEADQUARTERS AT (800) IKE-LINE.

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PHONE: (800) IKE-LINE

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IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA MISSION STATEMENT

To conserve, restore and promote the sustainable use and enjoyment of our natural resources, including soil, air, woods, waters and wildlife.

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MEET THE TEAM: Kate Hansen Leads the League's Agriculture Program

"Working with farmers and ranchers has been a source of inspiration to me over the years," says Kate Hansen.

"As important as the policy wins have been, just as important have been the times I've ridden shotgun in the combine during harvest, dirtied my boots at field days and developed relationships with producers to guide the work."

Kate joined the League staff in January as Agriculture Program Director. Advocating for conservation on agricultural lands at the federal level, Kate will lead the League's agriculture work in Congress through legislative priorities like the Farm Bill and also work with the USDA on farm programs and policies.

The work will entail collaborating with partners and coalitions as well as League members across the U.S.

Before joining the League, Kate managed agriculture policy at the Center for Rural Affairs where her team advocated for conservation, agriculture and rural development priorities at the state and federal level.

In that role, she worked with the Izaak Walton League's agriculture program staff. "Even before joining the team, I had confidence in the League's mission," she says.

In the course of her work, Kate has served as a technical advisor for multiple watershed projects in Iowa, and she currently chairs the state's Technical Conservation Stewardship Program Subcommittee.

Kate observes, "In the years ahead, U.S. agriculture will be shaped by transitions—who owns the land, who's farming it, what they're growing and what practices they use. It is critical that we prioritize conservation in the process.

"As the League kicks off its second century of conservation leadership, I am excited to join the team and focus on agriculture."

Kate earned a degree in Geosciences and American Studies from Wellesley College with a focus on rural communities. In her spare time, Kate enjoys doing volunteer work in her community, cooking new recipes and traveling. She is also training to be a medical volunteer in rural areas.

Describing herself as a proud Midwesterner and product of the "I-states," Kate says she "was born in Illinois, raised in Indiana and spent my adult life in Iowa. The majority of my family is based in northwest Indiana."

While Kate will work from her home in Ames, Iowa, she will also make regular visits to Capitol Hill and the League headquarters in Gaithersburg, Md.

Izaak Walton League of America

Member Pledge

To strive for
the purity of water,
the clarity of air,
and the wise stewardship of the land
and its resources;

To know
the beauty and understanding of nature,
and the value of wildlife,
woodlands,
and open space;

To the preservation of
this heritage
and to mankind's sharing in it.

I pledge myself
as a member of
the Izaak Walton League of America.

At the League's Midwinter Meeting, the Board of Directors discussed a wide range of topics, including proposed changes to the Member Pledge. The Board voted to delete the word "man's" and replace it with "mankind's" in the sentence, "To the preservation of this heritage and to mankind's sharing in it." The full text of the pledge is printed above. A printed copy, suitable for framing, will be mailed to each League chapter.

Hunting Reimagined: Expanding and Sustaining an Outdoor Tradition

By MICHAEL REINEMER, Editor

Providing venison to a local food bank is a key aspect of Young Hunters Care, a program created by Game Warden Matt Lentsch, based in Worland, Wyoming.

MATT LENTSCH

"I remember when I was too young to hunt sitting in the front window Friday night before the season, waiting for everyone to come up for opening weekend," Mike Fuge recalls.

"There was the annual deer hunt where my Grandpa Fuge, uncles and cousins would get together and hunt for deer. My dad took the time to always get us outdoors for hunting, fishing and camping."

Growing up with a family tradition helps explain a lifelong interest in hunting for people like Fuge. But many people don't have that connection.

So now Fuge, 61, volunteers a lot of his time introducing nonhunters to those traditions.

A member of the **Bill Cook Chapter** and president of the Wisconsin Division of the Izaak Walton League, Fuge runs a program at the chapter called Learn to Hunt. With guidance from game wardens in Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources and other groups, that program encourages people with little or no whitetail deer hunting experience to learn what it's all about—from safety protocols to wildlife management.

Hunting serves a vital ecological role.

Participants can be as young as 10, and each is paired with an experienced hunter as a mentor. The Bill Cook Chapter hosts the training clinic for new hunters at its property in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. The hunt occurs in nearby park land in partnership with the Portage County Parks Department.

Learn to Hunt has several goals, Fuge says. "We get to teach new hunters how to hunt deer, and we help the park reduce the population of deer on the landscape. If we get two or three participants to stay involved after their first experience—that's a success."

In 2023, the program at the Bill Cook Chapter hosted seven new hunters who harvested two antlerless deer and five bucks in the two-day hunt. "We limit the number of participants to seven so we can provide a safe learning experience."

The program requires that all harvested deer be tested for chronic wasting disease, a neurodegenerative disorder that is fatal to deer and elk. While there are no known cases of people becoming infected with the disease by eating venison, infected animals should not be processed as food.

Get the whole family involved.

Fitting ancient tradition into the 21st century

Hunting is one of our oldest traditions—a hard-wired trait. Over millennia, exponential advances in hunting skills and technology have contributed to human dominance and the disappearance of many species across the globe.

Very late in human history, we finally learned that some animals were being hunted to extinction or to the very brink. Thanks to enlightened hunters more than a century ago—and groups like the Boone and Crockett Club and the Izaak Walton League—we began to set aside forests, grasslands and wetlands to preserve wildlife, and we established rules to limit take and expand habitat.

Moreover, hunters and anglers championed passage of federal laws imposing excise taxes on firearms, ammunition and fishing equipment to fund wildlife restoration, habitat conservation and hunter education. The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act, passed in 1937, and the Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act, passed in 1950, have collected and invested billions of dollars in conservation benefitting all Americans.

Yet hunters and anglers rarely get any credit for their role in providing funds to conserve and restore wildlife populations for many decades. While most Americans support legal hunting, fewer actually go hunting compared to previous decades. Only about six percent hunt, according to a 2022 survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Wildlife out of balance

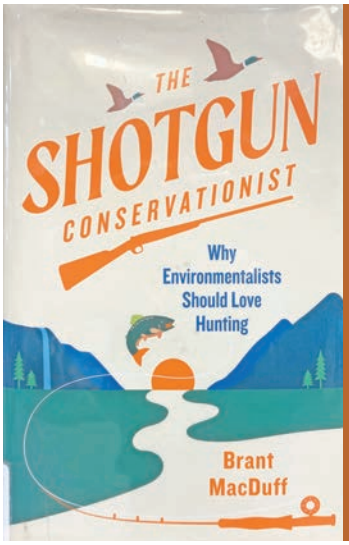
For much of recent human history, people have prioritized eliminating predators that killed livestock and competed for wild game. In the United States, most large predators—bear, wolves and mountain lions—were hunted nearly out of existence. This misguided pursuit helped fuel an imbalance on the landscape. So, for instance, in places where white-tailed deer exceed the land's carrying capacity, or ability to sustain the deer population, hunters serve an essential ecological role by keeping that population in check.

In 1944, conservationist Aldo Leopold was emmeshed in a debate about how to deal with starving deer herds in Wisconsin. Their northern forest habitat could not support the large population of deer. Leopold recommended more hunting and also a pause on the bounty that hunters were able to earn by shooting what he described as "the few remaining" wolves left in the state. At the time, Leopold was serving on the state's Conservation Commission (which he had helped establish as an Izaak Walton League leader in 1927). Some hunters believed that wolves should have been hunted out of existence in the state.

In the midst of that 1944 deer-wolf debate, Leopold wrote his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain," published in *A Sand County Almanac,* in which he pointed out the folly of eliminating wolves, which he had learned leads to an over-abundance of deer that will eat everything within their reach before dying of starvation. He wrote that "a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years," but a local ecosystem "pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades."

Leopold was criticized for the appearance that he was siding with the wolves. He confided to a colleague that managing wildlife is easy compared to managing humans.

Deer populations vary from year to year depending on the weather, predation, available food and other factors. In a number of states like Wisconsin and



Former non-hunter Brant MacDuff says hunting protects public lands, supports sustainable ecosystems and fosters biodiversity, so it should appeal to environmentalists.

Minnesota, some hunters are dismayed by fewer deer harvested in the past few years (for instance, 30 percent fewer in the northern forest region of Wisconsin).

In suburban areas or farmland regions, reducing deer populations may be a priority for local farmers and wildlife managers. Over-browsing deer severely stunt new forest growth in many parts of the U.S. Also, deer eat a variety of crops—from sweet corn in Pennsylvania to cotton and soybeans in Georgia. In Pennsylvania, state lawmakers will consider several bills this year to enhance hunting as a way of reducing crop damage. One bill would provide an online tool to connect hunters with farmers who want help reducing their deer populations.

Recruit, retain, reactivate. Reimagine?

The shorthand is R3. For years, hunting, angling and shooting sports groups have provided guidance on how best to recruit new participants, retain those currently engaged and reactivate those who have stopped or paused.

But maybe we should add another "R" for reimagine.

In his book *The Shotgun Conservationist,* former nonhunter Brant MacDuff writes, "It's not just new hunters that need to be brought into the community—it's new hunting allies. Frankly, they're even more important."

"Adopt a nonhunter," he advises. The list of attributes associated with hunting may establish some common ground with nonhunters. Hunting:

- supports habitat and conservation programs
- celebrates a healthy environment
- provides a healthy source of food.

MacDuff says eating deer or other game is the most environmentally friendly way to eat meat.

Like the farm-to-table trend of eating locally grown food, there is an equally compelling field-to-table idea that eating wild game is sustainable, responsible and healthy. The National Deer Association calls their venison version of that idea "field to fork."

"The money spent to hunt goes back to protect the environment," via the Pittman-Robertson tax that supports wildlife, "and the animal has gotten to live its most natural life," MacDuff writes.

What about those hunting photos? To the person in the photo, it depicts hunters and their quarry. To some nonhunters, the photos depict a person celebrating the needless death of a wild creature.

Adopt a nonhunter.

MacDuff makes an interesting point. Is that photo really the whole story? Aren't there other images that might capture the event? Images could focus on the journey through wild places, scouting the landscape, camaraderie, the garb and gear, a campfire or beverage at the end of the day. Or wildlife that are not dead.

Reboot a family tradition

Where there is an opportunity to get an individual interested in hunting, "get the whole family involved," Mike Fuge advises. Participation by kids from nonhunting families in the Learn to Hunt program typically does not provide a lasting connection—unless the parents also participate.

"If we get parents or young families involved, along with their child, they experience and learn how to hunt with their own mentor. We have had several families and also young adults participate and continue to hunt after going through the program.

"When the participant is able to spend time in the woods scouting, learning what to look for and spending time on the [shooting] range with their mentor, it is a big plus. In 2023, the mentors spent almost 400 hours in the woods and on the range

with their hunters. Without volunteers like this the program would not be as successful as it is."

Redefine success, cultivate confidence

In natural resource agencies in states throughout the U.S., managers are working to engage more people in outdoor traditions. Hunting and angling advocates are trying to eliminate barriers and make these activities more accessible across all demographic groups.

Consider gender. In Maine, the proportion of female hunters has grown by 30 percent since 2012. With that bump, about 17 percent of women in the Pine Tree State have a hunting license, according to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Hoping to get more women involved, the department is trying to reduce some of the barriers they have identified:

- low representation of women in advertising about outdoor adventure
- a culture that is not inclusive
- limited outdoor gear available for women.

So to invite more women into outdoor recreation broadly, the department tailors its messages and programs to that audience with:

- authentic photos across all media depicting women engaged in outdoor traditions
- women instructors and women-only hunter-education programs
- a podcast featuring women's experience learning hunting and outdoor skills
- goals for increasing confidence, comfort and competence.

Hunting for the perfect photo at Consumnes River Preserve, California.

BOB WICK-BLM.

How we define success for an outdoor experience also makes a difference. The Maine agency says the yardstick for a successful deer hunt should not be limited to bagging a 10-point buck. (The success rate for bagging a deer in Maine is about 13 percent.) Instead, they define a successful hunt broadly: spending more time connecting with nature, making memories and improving outdoor skills.

Hunting as a community service

What if you could attract young hunters motivated to help stock the local food bank? Hunting as a way to put food on the table for hungry families. That's the idea Matt Lentsch put to the test in 2007 in Worland, Wyoming, when he started Young Hunters Care, which focused on teens who were not hunters. His program had 10 participants who harvested a deer that year. Lentsch is a game warden for the state, and his program caught on.

Fast forward to 2021. To reduce some of the complications related to testing deer for chronic wasting disease and the required processing of venison at a federally inspected facility, Lentsch now takes advantage of the state's Food from the Field program, which oversees safe processing of venison, simplifying the meat donation process. This allowed him to expand his group of youth, which harvested two dozen deer and produced 650 pounds of venison for food banks in 2022.

Damage to corn crops by deer in Wyoming is another factor behind support for the program. Lentsch tells *Outdoor America* that Young Hunters Care focuses on harvesting does rather than bucks. Seeking licenses to take antlerless deer helps ensure that all the youth get an opportunity to hunt, he says. The Wyoming Game Wardens Association pays for the licenses for the young hunters, reducing one more barrier to getting involved.

At the end of our conversation, Lentsch reveals the perhaps surprising secret sauce. "If the kids can cut it up," that seals the deal. If the participants can see the process all the way through, from hunting to processing the meat and delivering food, that's a powerful experience for some of them.

Father and daughter hunt in the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

USFWS

In fact, that's what students do in Darin DeNeal's agriculture class. As a part of the class, he teaches kids how to safely process a deer at the high school in Carrier Mills, Illinois. Participation is not a requirement for the class, and as a precaution, he only uses deer he has personally harvested and the meat goes home with him.

But it's a popular activity. The activity literally touches on anatomy, biology and food science as well as sustainable use of natural resources.

Define success broadly: spending more time connecting with nature, making memories and improving outdoor skills.

"I hunt religiously now"

He's not from a hunting family, but after Andy Riesterer went through the Learn to Hunt program in Wisconsin with Mike Fuge as his mentor, he now hunts "religiously," he tells *Outdoor America.* He and his college roommate went through the program together in 2016, and they both continue to hunt.

Riesterer now also goes fishing, hunts turkey and takes his German short-haired pointer out to hunt upland birds in the Green Bay region. And he has a freezer full of food to prove it. He and his wife don't need to spend a lot of money on meat.

Riesterer has served in the National Guard, so using firearms was not a hurdle. But he has taken to bow and muzzleloader hunting as well as ice fishing to make weekends interesting.

THE FACE OF HUNTING AND SHOOTING SPORTS

The *2022 Special Report on Hunting and the Shooting Sports,* published by the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports, provides a snapshot of Americans ages six and older who participated at least once in a hunting or target shooting event with firearms or archery equipment in 2021. The report looks at trends in motivations, barriers and preferences. A few highlights follow:

Hunting:

- "For food" was the number-one motivation for hunting
- 68 percent of hunters were introduced to hunting by a family member
- 49 percent of hunters first participated before the age of 18
- 27 percent of participants were female, up from 16 percent a decade ago
- Share of hunters who were Black or Hispanic increased 4 percent and 1 percent, respectively, on average for the past 3 years

Firearms Target Shooting:

- "For recreation" was the number-one motivation for target shooting
- 32 percent of participants were female, up from 25 percent a decade ago
- Share of target shooters who were Black or Hispanic increased 5 percent and 4 percent, respectively, on average for the past 3 years
- "High cost" was the number-one barrier reported for target shooting

Archery Target Shooting:

- "For recreation" was the number-one motivation for target shooting
- 39 percent of participants were female, the highest since 2016
- Archers are slightly more diverse than firearms target shooters
- 19 percent of participants shot solely on public property/ranges

In recent years, he has introduced those outdoor activities to about a dozen other people.

Taking a cue from his mentor, he goes out of his way to make sure they have a good experience in the outdoors.

Bigger than any of us

Andrew McKean, Hunting Editor for *Outdoor Life*, describes the outdoors as "beautiful, generous, restorative and bigger than any of us." While it's not always easy to introduce people to America's outdoor traditions, McKean notes, "the infrastructure of American conservation—our state fish-and-game agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands and national parks, our college resource-management programs, accessible public parcels, campgrounds with fire rings and communities like the Ikes—is built and ready to inspire a new generation of participants."

Hunting and Shooting Sports Fund Wildlife Conservation

By EARL HOWER, Director of Chapter Relations

JOHN HAFNER, ARCHERY TRADE ASSOCIATION

Generous funding for state fish and wildlife agencies stems from a tax on hunting gear, including guns, ammunition and archery equipment.

Hunting in America is more than a hobby or family pastime. It's a critical part of conservation efforts—in dollars and cents and the people working to conserve our country's natural resources.

Combating decades of decline

The bountiful wildlife that sustained generations of Americans was driven to near extinction by the early 1900s. The slaughter of bison across the West and the disappearance of the passenger pigeon are well known. But the problem was much broader.

Hunting at that time was largely unregulated. Bird populations were decimated to supply feathers for hats, and many species of wildlife, including white-tailed deer, were hunted nearly out of existence. Habitat across much of the country was clear-cut, mined, or otherwise degraded in America's rush into the industrial age.

In response, hunters and anglers—including President Theodore Roosevelt and *Forest & Stream* editor George Bird Grinnell—led efforts to restore wildlife, manage game based on sound science and conserve lands and waters that provide essential habitat for fish and wildlife. Hunters devised a "user pay" system through which taxes, licenses and other fees would fund conservation. Their investment over many decades revived wildlife populations across the country—including wild turkeys, wood ducks and white-tailed deer—and protected millions of acres of land that is open today for public recreation.

Hunters provide essential conservation funding

Up to 75 percent of fish and wildlife agencies' budgets are funded by hunters, anglers and shooting sports enthusiasts. These investments provide incredible benefits to all Americans.

The most significant sources of conservation funding include:

Excise taxes: Under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 (also called the Pittman-Robertson Act), the federal government assesses excise taxes on rifles, shotguns, handguns, ammunition, bows, arrows and certain archery equipment. This law was backed by the Izaak Walton League, hunters and other conservation groups. The tax revenue from Pittman-Robertson is used to reimburse states for a wide range of conservation activities, including acquiring and improving habitat, reintroducing wildlife into historic ranges, wildlife-related research and hunter education.

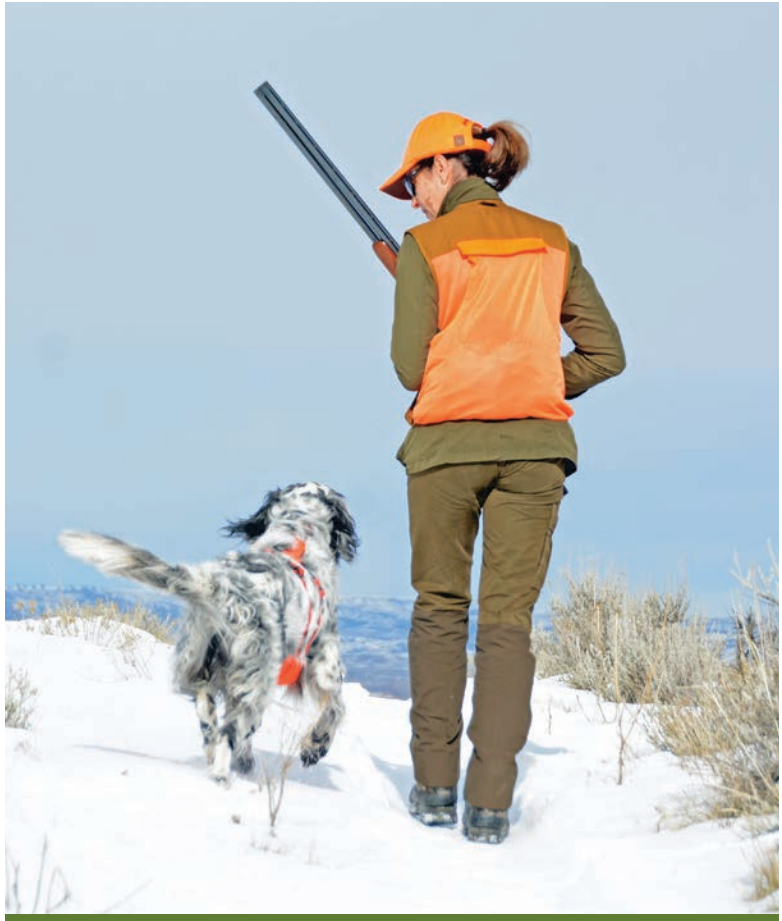
Today, funds may also be used to build and renovate public target shooting range facilities, as well as to help recruit, retain and reactivate new hunters and shooting sports enthusiasts.

Between 1939 and 2023, excise taxes paid on firearms, ammunition and archery gear generated $15 billion for wildlife restoration and habitat conservation.

Duck Stamps: Every year, migratory waterfowl hunters 16 years and older must purchase a Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp—known as a "Duck Stamp." Other wildlife enthusiasts can also purchase these stamps, which are both collectors' items and useful for the access they provide to national wildlife refuges.

Revenue from the sale of Duck Stamps is allocated to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to purchase or lease wetlands and other waterfowl

Revenue from the Duck Stamp has helped preserve six million acres of waterfowl habitat in the U.S. and spur competition among artists who want to see their art on a stamp.



Hunter-generated revenue promotes habitat for all wildlife, not just game species.

USFWS; JACK BALLARD

Shooting sports and target shooting contribute a large portion of the tax revenue that supports fish and wildlife agencies.

habitat for inclusion in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Since 1934, sales of these stamps have generated more than $1.1 billion, which has been used to buy or lease more than six million acres of waterfowl habitat.

Hunting licenses: In general, hunters are required to purchase one or more licenses each year, depending on what animals they hunt. For example, some states require one license to hunt deer and another for upland game birds such as grouse. Nationwide, recent annual sales of hunting licenses and related tags, permits and stamps—both resident and non-resident combined—exceed slightly over $1 billion. Along with excise taxes, hunting license revenue is a major source of funding for state fish and wildlife management agencies.

Conservation investments provide benefits for all Americans

People protect the things they value. For hunters, anglers and other people who enjoy the outdoors, that includes our natural resources. In addition to funding state fish and wildlife agencies, they contribute their own time, talent and hard-earned dollars to on-the-ground conservation. All of these conservation efforts benefit Americans across the country—whether or not they hunt or fish.

Open land for public recreation:

Land and waters purchased by state and federal governments are generally open to the public—and these purchases are made possible, in part, by taxes and fees paid by hunters and anglers. Americans who enjoy bird watching have incredible opportunities

IWLA

Since 1934, sales of Duck Stamps have generated more than $1.1 billion that has been used to buy or lease more than six million acres of waterfowl habitat.

to pursue their passion across millions of acres of National Wildlife Refuges. Hikers, campers and cross-country skiers share state lands with hunters.

Habitat improvements that support all wildlife:

Habitat that is conserved through funding generated by hunters and recreational shooters directly supports and benefits all wildlife—not just species that are hunted. Imperiled songbirds benefit from intact forests, amphibians and turtles thrive in wetlands and public land provides migratory corridors for a variety of wildlife.

Between 1939 and 2023, excise taxes paid on firearms, ammunition and archery gear generated $15 billion for wildlife restoration and habitat conservation.

Clean water, flood control and other public benefits:

Public lands also provide benefits to citizens in nearby communities and across the country. Undeveloped forests are critical sources of clean water that flows into our streams and reservoirs and ultimately our homes. Wetlands absorb flood waters and help recharge groundwater supplies that feed drinking wells of millions of Americans.

Get involved

Americans who enjoy hunting and shooting sports fund critical conservation efforts that simply could not be accomplished without the taxes and fees paid at the local, state and national levels.

The Izaak Walton League and our members proudly support these conservation efforts and encourage all Americans to enjoy our great outdoors and get involved in conserving natural resources for future generations.

CINDY SAMPLES, USFS

Nature for Everyone:
People with Differing Abilities in the Great Outdoors

By JANETTE ROSENBAUM, Strategic Communications Manager

Gus Franks waited patiently in the blind. It was deer season in Ohio, and he was looking for his opportunity.

Suddenly, an entire herd of deer appeared through the trees. As they moved through the woods, Franks shouldered his shotgun. The first shot missed. He tried two more times. The shotgun was empty. His three-shell limit was spent, and the deer had fled.

But that was okay. As most hunters have learned, it's not about bagging the game, it's about the experience. And Franks loves being in the woods. Which is why he has attended a hunting event for people with mobility impairments for a quarter century.

Reconnecting to the outdoors

As a teenager, Franks learned to hunt with his dad. Together, they pursued rabbits and pheasants. But that pursuit became more difficult when, as a young man, he lost a leg in an accident.

In the end, it was family that brought Franks back to hunting—with a little help from the Izaak Walton League. In the late 1990s, his family rented the **Tiffin-Seneca Chapter's** clubhouse for a reunion. A chapter member who was helping to host the event noticed Franks in his wheelchair and approached him to ask if he hunted. Franks enthusiastically said yes. That's how he learned about the Tiffin-Seneca Chapter's mobility-impaired event.

Over the years, he has attended the hunting event about 25 times, sitting it out only when he's gotten sick at inconvenient times. Sometimes he brings home a deer. Sometimes he doesn't. Either way, he values his friendships with the chapter volunteers and with the other hunters. And, of course, he enjoys carrying on a family tradition.

Like any other kid

Andrew Haiar is about to graduate from Mitchell High School. He's got impressive extracurriculars on his resumé. For the past four years, he's been competing in shooting sports with the USA Clay Target League (USACTL).

Andrew Haiar competes in the USA Clay Target League.

Haiar had barely arrived at Mitchell High in eastern South Dakota when he started seeing fliers about the USACTL. He already had experience shooting with his family, so it was an easy decision to get involved.

The clay target experience has been an important source of enjoyment and encouragement for Haiar.

"The most important thing I have learned from my involvement has been to try my best in everything I do," the 18-year-old said, "and to never give up when things don't go my way. I am grateful to have coaches who give me encouragement and help me improve." More than just a sporting achievement, Haiar sees shooting sports as a lifelong interest.

Like Franks, Haiar grew up hunting with his family. Unlike Franks, he's been in a wheelchair his entire life.

Grounding through nature

Deb Brisch always knew that she struggled to interact with other people. To recover from the stresses and challenges of social activity, she threw herself into physical work. She walked long distances to school, cared for horses and tackled camping trips in the north woods of Michigan.

At the age of 68, Brisch was diagnosed as autistic. Finally, she had validation for what she had already intuitively known for years: life is "too fast" for the processing capacity she had been given.

Now retired and living at the tip of Michigan's mitten, Brisch treasures being able to get out in the woods on the edge of Lake Huron. She hikes alone, four or five times a week, for up to four hours at a time. Nature moves at a speed that makes sense to her. She says it provides an "outlet for the anxiety and tension that builds" when she's with other people.

Recreating responsibly is important to Brisch. She always brings water and snacks, insect repellent and other hiking essentials. Her spouse knows where she is. These days, she stays in on icy days to reduce the risk of falling.

"I will continue to rely on outdoors hiking and solitude as the key to my sanity and physical health until I am no longer able to do so," she told us.

We all need nature

Freya McGregor thinks Brisch is exactly right about the benefits of being outdoors. As the owner of Access Birding, McGregor is eager to talk about the importance of nature and how to make recreation more welcoming for everyone.

"There are so many health and wellness benefits that we can get from being out in nature," McGregor said. More and more research shows that spending time outdoors lowers our blood pressure and improves our mood. Being in natural settings also helps to restore our attention, which is important for regulating our emotions, making good decisions, and focusing on important tasks.

Aside from the scientific studies McGregor mentions, Brisch explains her own experience of why nature matters. "Being outdoors and solitary is essential for me to 'change gears,'" she said, "and to keep myself functioning with minimal anxiety, giving me better health and helping clear my mind of distress of everyday living where my sensory experiences due to my neurology are overwhelming and stress-inducing."

One in four Americans has a disability—the only minority group you could join at any time.

"We all deserve to access [those benefits]," McGregor said—including people living with disabilities. One in four Americans has a disability,

Fishing events for children or adults with disabilities offer one way to share outdoors experiences.

JENNIFER SIMMS

she pointed out. Which makes them one of the largest "minority" groups in the country. And, as McGregor put it, "it's the only minority group you can join at any time."

Advancing the League's mission

The fact that you—or someone you love—could become disabled is a powerful argument for taking action now to make outdoor recreation more accessible. It's also true that connecting the largest possible number of people to outdoor recreation is simply part of the Izaak Walton League's mission.

Our shared vision, created as part of our centennial celebration in 2022, expresses our intent to ensure that "the conservation movement reflects the diversity of America" and that "traditions of hunting, fishing and target shooting endure through growing participation by people of all backgrounds."

Jennifer Simms understands exactly what we mean. As a nature educator with Montgomery County Parks in central Maryland, Simms is responsible for advancing a similar mission of making nature accessible to all.

When she arrived at the Meadowside Nature Center in 2020, Simms quickly realized her new workplace had some accessibility problems. "Meadowside is not near a bus stop," she observed. "You can't safely bike-ride here. So it's hard to get here. You have to have a car."

Simms also realized that people were coming to the park to enjoy the trails, but they weren't aware of the value-added programs offered by the naturalists. She worked hard to plan more inclusive events—and to communicate to target audiences about them. Over time, her efforts paid off.

"I had a student who came to my SENSE-sational Summer Camp," Simms recalled, referring to a free-range nature camp she started for special-needs kids. Before the camp began, the student's mom and dad met with her about their child's abilities and needs.

"He's anxious," the parents said. "He's never been to nature camp. He's never been to camp at all. He's very shy."

Jennifer assured the parents that the summer camp was a safe space, and the student thrived at camp.

"He came out of his shell. He loved it. And he has come back to almost every single program I have offered since then. He comes back all the time and does everything."

An end in itself

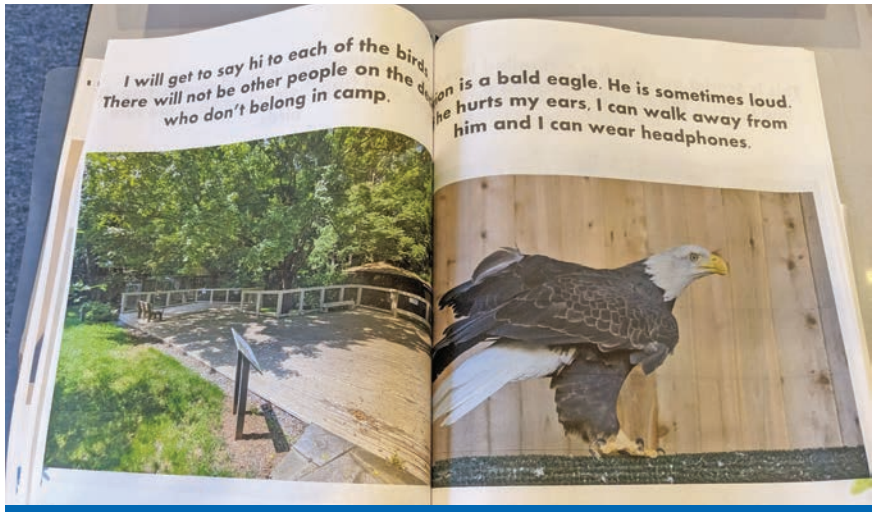
Andrew Haiar, the high school student from South Dakota, gets to the heart of the matter on why outdoor recreation is important. "It gives me the chance to get outside and do activities that I enjoy," he said simply.

Gus Franks, the hunter from Ohio, agrees that there doesn't need to be any complex explanation for why everyone should have access to time in nature. "It gets me out doing something," he said, about the deer hunting event. "That's the whole thing."

Already aware of the benefits

People with disabilities are already well aware that outdoor recreation is beneficial and just plain fun. They also know a lot about how to actually get outside and recreate.

Jennifer Simms, who was a special education teacher before she became a naturalist, underscores the importance of recognizing what people with physical, cognitive or sensory limitations are capable of doing for themselves. She encouraged event



A social story created by Jennifer Simms helps explain what a new outdoor experience will be like for people with special needs.

JANETTE ROSENBAUM

leaders to resist the urge to do things for attendees.

Instead, she said, teach these participants the same way you would teach anyone else, and let them try things for themselves. They will ask for help if they need it.

Franks easily recalled an example of event volunteers being too eager to help. At the Tiffin-Seneca deer hunting event, hunters gather at the chapterhouse for breakfast, then ride out to the blinds in carts meant to accommodate wheelchairs. One year, the cart didn't quite work as intended: while rolling up the ramp, Franks fell over backwards. The volunteers panicked, he recalled. But he was fine. When you're in a wheelchair, he pointed out, you learn how to fall.

It's important to understand what people with physical, cognitive or sensory limitations are capable of doing for themselves.

Steve Wright, an organizer of the Tiffin-Seneca event, had a similar story about the skills of wheelchair users. At one year's event, a young hunter was unable to get onto the cart. His track wheelchair, designed to drive over tough terrain, simply didn't fit.

This didn't turn out to be a problem. "He just took off and drove [the wheelchair] out there and backed it up in the blind like he'd done it every day," Steve said.

Freya McGregor, the disability expert currently based in Alabama, pointed out that traits that get labeled as disabilities can sometimes be advantages. While some neurodivergent people, like Deb Brisch, experience slow sensory processing, others report keen powers of visual and auditory observation. That's useful for an activity like birding, in which by definition participants want to detect the presence of birds, and where noticing details about birds is often considered part of the fun. This kind of sensory sensitivity "could be really disabling in another situation," McGregor said, "but in birding it's a real strength."

Hidden challenges

On the other hand, people with disabilities can get stuck on obstacles that are difficult for people without disabilities to anticipate.

For example, every angler knows it's important to stay quiet to avoid scaring off the fish. You would think that staying quiet comes easily for Deaf people. But in fact, Simms, the nature educator in Maryland, explained that "it's not uncommon for Deaf individuals to get each other's attention by stomping on the floor." When teaching Deaf kids to fish at a recent event, Simms reminded them to signal to their friends in other ways, like by waving, to avoid creating vibrations on the dock that would drive away their quarry.

McGregor identifies as disabled in addition to being an occupational therapist, accessibility educator, and researcher. She mentioned steps as an obstacle that allies can get better at spotting. It's easy to see that an entire flight of stairs is a barrier for a person with a mobility impairment. But other kinds of stairs can pass unnoticed as able-bodied people traverse them without thinking. If a trail includes a small bridge that visitors must step up onto in order to cross a stream, that trail is not accessible. Likewise, if a trail is completely flat in itself, but the only entry point is two steps leading down from the parking lot, that trail is not accessible.

Simple fixes

The good news is that obstacles that are easy to miss can also be easy to fix. Not every trail needs to be completely flat; there is value in more challenging hiking experiences. But every trail can be made more accessible through better information.

McGregor explains how to provide appropriate information for outdoor activities. She recommends providing specific, concrete information about the property, trails, parking and facilities available—on websites, event descriptions or kiosks on site. This helps people learn about recreation opportunities before they even travel to a park. It's easy, free and useful for everyone.

Another way to provide information is a "social story." Simms explained that a social story is a booklet that helps people understand what a new experience will be like. Built around photos, clear language and simple statements starting with "I," a social story can also be created on a website. By

reading the social story in advance, people can understand what they will do and how they will do it when visiting an unfamiliar place or trying a new activity. This is tremendously useful for people who may need accommodations and adaptations—or for anyone who feels more confident and comfortable when they know ahead of time what they are going to be doing.

Perhaps the simplest way to broaden participation in outdoor recreation is to simply expand the definition of outdoor recreation. McGregor criticized the term "birdwatching" as implying that "blind people can't enjoy birds, because you must WATCH a bird." She then challenged the emphasis among many birders on identifying birds in order to find the most, or most interesting, species.

"My definition of birding is the act of enjoying wild birds," she said. "So if you enjoyed a bird, you're a birder."

JANETTE ROSENBAUM

Visitors use an accessible trail to Glacier Point overlook in Yosemite National Park.

The next level

Beyond these simple fixes, disability allies—including League chapters—can plan whole events specifically designed for people with special challenges.

Simms did exactly that when she organized a kids' fishing event for the Deaf community. At the nature center where she works, it has always been possible for people with hearing impairments to attend programs by requesting a sign language interpreter in advance. But she noted that this required Deaf participants to plan ahead and make commitments in a way that hearing people didn't have to. She wanted to host an event where an interpreter would simply be present—no request necessary.

Having experience with special-needs education, it became obvious to Simms that event leaders with a background in nature should partner with educators. Organize the logistics of an outdoor event and ask a teacher to lead the program, she advised—or simply invite a teacher to use your chapter grounds for a nature education event they are already planning.

Build it and they will come

Starting with fishing trips for wounded World War II veterans, the Izaak Walton League of America has a long history of helping people with disabilities to enjoy the great outdoors. That tradition continues today at many chapters throughout the U.S.

Steve Wright, who has variously been the president, the vice president and the youth programs coordinator at the Izaak Walton League's Tiffin-Seneca Chapter, initially was simply a member who enjoyed using the shooting range at the Fremont Chapter, which is located in northwest Ohio.

Many years ago, he attended a festival where he met the then-president of Tiffin-Seneca, and before he knew it, he was agreeing to teach a hunter's education class at Tiffin-Seneca. From there, he also agreed to take on leadership for the

mobility-impaired deer hunting event that had been started by other chapter members.

In the late '90s, the chapter had partnered with a nearby farm that owned 60 acres and a handful of blinds. That provided the basic amenities that any hunter needs: access to land and a particular spot from which to watch for game. All the event leaders needed was a way of making those amenities usable for hunters who couldn't walk.

Host an event for people with disabilities. Any effort to include that community is better than doing nothing.

Larry Manecke solved the problem by building carts that could tow a hunter, wheelchair and hunting gear included, to a blind. Then, the event leaders built a new blind, repaired the aging original blinds, and began to advertise their event.

Pretty soon, the chapter had to implement a lottery system, as the number of wheelchair-using hunters exceeded the number of available hunting spots. Hunters came back year after year. Other organizations copied Tiffin-Seneca's playbook. The chapter formed a partnership with the Ohio Department of Wildlife and secured a grant that helped to pay for construction materials (for the carts and blinds) as well as breakfast and lunch for the hunters and other expenses. A growing number of volunteers chipped in as well.

For other League chapters interested in hosting similar events, Wright offers two pieces of advice and one justification. First, host an event for people with disabilities. Any effort to include that community is better than doing nothing. Second, engage your volunteers; expand beyond your core group to activate more chapter members and get them involved in advancing the mission.

As for the why, "it makes me feel really good," Wright said. "We just do it because we enjoy doing it and we like to see the hunters enjoying themselves."

Patience pays

Simms, the nature educator, had one additional piece of advice when it comes to working with this community: be patient. When you are planning an event for people with disabilities, think about where your target audience is getting information, and put your advertising or word of mouth there. And, she said, don't be discouraged if you don't get a lot of attendees on the first try. It can take a little time for a new audience to become aware of your events.

Outdoor recreation is an end in itself. Likewise, McGregor pointed out that accessibility is not about speeding to some measurable result. "Doing work that increases access and inclusion not only is the right thing to do," she said, "but it feels really good as well. Doing work that means more people can share [what gives them] joy feels really good. People will tell you, 'Thank you for doing that. That really mattered to me.'"

IMPROVING ACCESS: GETTING THE DETAILS RIGHT

When you think about accessible outdoor experiences, you probably don't think about Craters of the Moon National Park. For one, it's in a remote region of Idaho. For another, it encompasses an inhospitable jumbled landscape of volcanic craters and the rocks flung out of them in past eruptions. Water and shade are in limited supply.

Nonetheless, Craters of the Moon—a place so otherworldly it's the only national park named after something in space—has exactly the kind of informational signs recommended by Freya McGregor, owner of Access Birding. Posts at trailheads enumerate the length of the trail, the elevation change, the grade (both moving forward and from side to side) and the width of the trail (both average and minimum).

The same information is available on the park's website, so visitors can plan wisely. See this excellent example of trail descriptions in the park's website, linked at iwla.org/info-signs.

The Future Is Theirs!

The Izaak Walton League builds a brighter future through conservation and engaging Americans in outdoor traditions.

For generations, the League's tireless work and unprecedented success has protected our woods, waters and wildlife—and promoted outdoor recreation in every corner of the U.S.

Through your will, retirement plan, life insurance or trust, you can help continue this legacy.

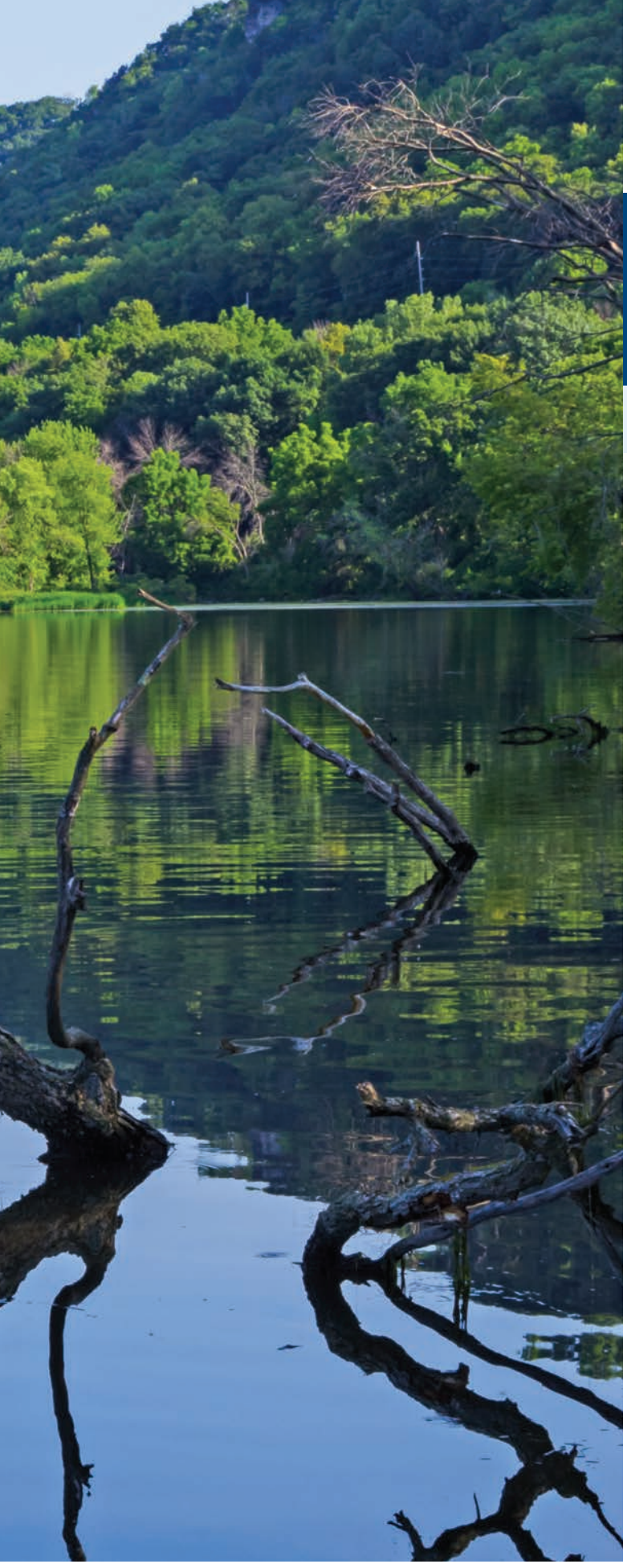
Plan your gift to the Izaak Walton League and pass along a lifetime of benefits.

Email develop@iwla.org or visit www.iwla.org/support to get started.

Izaak Walton League of America
707 Conservation Lane
Gaithersburg, MD 20878

Contact us today for information about including the Izaak Walton League in your will or naming the League as the beneficiary for insurance or other investments.

The Refuge established in 1924 preserved many scenic viewscapes along the River.



The Storied Past and Fraught Present of the Upper Mississippi

By BARRY DRAZKOWSKI

As I ponder the 100th anniversary of the Izaak Walton League's successful campaign to establish the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, I ask myself a few questions.

Why can't we let the river do what it does naturally, and manage itself? Why do people have to intervene? How do we find a balance between many competing interests and a healthy river?

In short, how do we take care of our old friend, the Mississippi?

Growing up on the river

It's funny how growing up on the Mississippi our relationship with the river is like family. We think of it like an aging friend—old, wise, a few wrinkles here and there, but a respected part of our lives. And we take it for granted. We know the river ages and changes. That's what rivers do.

But we also know, like many an aging friend, that a tuck around the eyes, a little botox here and there and a dose of that magical wrinkle cream gives the appearance of a being less worn.

Starting with the 1986 Water Resource Development Act, the Mississippi has received a great deal of tucks, prods and botox, all in the form of habitat restoration or rehabilitation projects. We The People—taxpayers—have spent over a billion dollars trying to save or restore our beloved, aging friend. We've spent additional millions to study and monitor our dear friend, to help understand its ways, its changes, its tantrums, all to help better ensure that it continues to serve in the same manner

STEVE MARKING

it has for the last couple hundred years. Our friend has done so much for all of us, and especially me.

Early uses and abuses

The native Americans valued the river. It was sacred. It gave life, it provided a foundation for their agriculture, it provided fish, furs and transportation. Our local native villages along the Upper Mississippi, if groups of 15,000 people can be called a village, had extensive marsh agriculture. They trapped and fished, and their children played along the banks. They traded along well-established routes up and down the river all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

I remember a neighbor found a plumet, a tear-drop-shaped piece of obsidian, used as a weight on a circular net, thrown into the water to catch fish. The plumet, I learned from local archaeologists, came from somewhere down along the Gulf. Wow, what it must have been like trading, canoeing, bringing goods to others and buying theirs to enrich life along the Upper River.

Then the Europeans came, and the world changed. We all know the stories. The native way of life was replaced by wagon trains, steam-driven paddle wheelers and the plow. I read an estimate that at the peak of steam boating there were 700 boats on the river from St. Louis to the Twin Cities. Each boat consumed an average of 30 cords of wood per day, or about the amount of wood from harvesting 2.5 acres of forest.

We can estimate that during that time approximately 1,750 acres of forest needed to be cut each day to meet the steamboat demand for wood. Or you can figure about 420,000 acres of forest were harvested between the April-to-November steamboat season. That's a lot of wood to cut from the river and its banks. It was big business and just one of the enterprises the river supported in its early years as a commercial corridor opening the Midwest to agriculture, industry and European settlement.

By the early 1900s the river was cluttered with the trash of civilization. It was the great sewer of the Twin Cities and every major city development all along its length.

Industry and human populations also took their toll as they dumped their waste and chemicals into our dear friend. By the early 1900s the river was cluttered with the trash of civilization. It was the great sewer of the Twin Cities and every major city

Pool 7 of the Upper Mississippi River near Trempealeau, Wisc. Wing dams are evidenced by the rippling water in the river channel as they direct the flow to the main channel.

USGS

development all along its length.

Growing up in Winona, Minnesota, was a blessing. Our section of the Mississippi was one of the cleanest reaches along the entire upper river, thanks to Lake Pepin. The lake slowed the water, turning it more into a lake than river. All the upstream sewage and most chemicals settled in the lake, returning our river to a clean, or at least swimmable, friend.

Thankfully, cities and industry cleaned up their act with the construction of the Pigs Eye treatment plant in St. Paul back in 1938. Large-scale clean-up started after the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972 as point sources and municipal sewage were managed, and the river began to clean itself.

However, the plow was not so easily managed.

The plow was the great nemesis

Swiss, Germans, Scandinavians and a few Poles got off the steamboats at places like Holmes' Landing, today's Fountain City, Wisconsin. They moved into the steep valleys of the Driftless region, that area glaciers did not scrape flat in western Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, northeastern Iowa and northwestern Illinois. The area was and still is beautiful and dramatic: huge bluffs, limestone cliffs, forest and prairie, fresh spring water bubbling from the ground everywhere. It was heaven.

The new arrivals settled, built cabins and began to plow. In the early days, a team of horses and a plow could work far up a steep hillside. Even today we can walk in the woods and see the line where the plow once had turned our rich soil into river bottom following heavy rains or the spring thaw.

Yes, the great agricultural invasion not only tamed the land and the people, but it also converted the landscape from prairie, forest and wetlands, to plowed field and pastured hillsides. And the river began to suffer. During the 1930s, following massive erosion across our landscapes and accompanying flooding, the great agriculture conservation movement began. The people farming the land saw the need for change and they met that challenge. They started working with federal, state and county conservation programs, changing how they farmed, implementing contour plowing and building small runoff dams to mitigate flooding. They began to keep cattle from grazing the sensitive hillsides.

Our river responded. It improved, cleaned up, and it began to store away all that farmland sediment in its backwaters and marshes. But the plow and municipal growth had another impact on our friend. It became a major commercial corridor, shipping goods up and down the river to the growing cities, industries and farms. Coal and fertilizers moved up the river while agricultural products like grains, corn and beans moved down the river.

Slowly our old friend began to change as it lost its natural dynamics to move, erode, build and generally maintain itself as a great natural river system.

But river navigation on our old friend was a dangerous business, with the average life expectancy of river steamboats only four or five years. Boats running aground and fires were common. The government responded and began to manage our old friend.

Managing a force of nature

In 1829, the Department of the Army (through the Army Corps of Engineers) started its first river management program. They sent steamboats up the river plucking out trees and snags from the channel, removing obstacles that were threats to commercial traffic. But it wasn't enough.

In the late 1800s, the government began maintaining first a four-foot navigation channel to improve navigation, and then a six-foot channel. They did this by building rock and willow "wing dams" and "closing dams." Wing dams are rock structures built by piling rocks on willow mats, building the structure up so it rises just above the water level. They were built perpendicular to the shore into the river, forcing the water into the navigation channel, scouring and maintaining a four-foot depth. The closing dams were the same type of construction, but they were built across side channels to force more of the river flow into the main channel to maintain the depth.

Over time, they built more and more of these structures pushing more water down the main channel. This had a great impact on our old friend.

The League, led by Will Dilg, convinced Congress to establish the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge in 1924.

STEVE MARKING

Reduced backwater flows changed floodplain dynamics. It isolated backwaters and marshes where sediment from agricultural runoff began to accumulate. And slowly our old friend began to change as it lost its natural dynamics to move, erode, build and generally maintain itself as a great natural river system.

Then came the big change.

What spurred the League to act

In the early 1920s, the government proposed converting the river from Lake Pepin to the Quad Cities into a series of agricultural levee districts. The idea was to build levees along the main channel and drain the wetlands behind the levees to create massive new agricultural areas. The maps were made, and they began talking easements.

In 1986, Congress responded to a call from the public and river resource management agencies by creating the Environmental Management program, a $33 million annual program to begin restoring our old friend.

The first proposal was drainage of the Trempealeau River bottoms, which was a failure as remembered in the poem by Mr. O.F. Immel, "The Voice of Trempealeau Marsh." This was a devastating concept that rang the warning bells for those who loved our dear friend, the Mississippi. It led Will Dilg to write "The Drainage Crime of a Century" in *Outdoor America* when the next project, the drainage of the Winneshiek bottoms, was proposed.

That warning motivated Will Dilg, one of the Izaak Walton League's founders, into action. Dilg and his friends had spent summers on houseboats in the Winona, Minnesota and Lansing, Iowa areas, cultivating their love for the outdoors, the river and fishing for black bass. And tragically, Dilg's young son drowned in the

river during one of those trips.

Alerted about the development proposal, Dilg realized the government's plan would forever change the Mississippi from a diverse floodplain habitat to a channelized river with massive agricultural developments. He made the Izaak Walton League the voice to protect the river.

Then in 1924, unbelievably, after the League's fierce campaign, its vision was realized. The drainage project was stopped, and Congress created the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, protecting the river, its wildlife and especially its fish like the bass. In the 1950s the League erected a monument to Dilg, commemorating his epic battle, the creation of the League and the loss of his son.

Locks and dams

As navigation and agriculture expanded, the demand for larger and deeper vessels increased. The government responded with a plan to build a series of locks and dams to establish a nine-foot navigation channel. Major Charles L. Hall, working in the Army Corps of Engineers chief's office, was assigned to assess the feasibility of the nine-foot project.

Hall, to the shock of all the project supporters, recommended against the project in a report to the Chief of Engineers in August, 1928. He believed the project was economically inadvisable. Moreover, Hall concluded that the project would have disastrous environmental impacts, stating the project would transform the free-flowing river into a series of interconnected lakes.

Echoing the concerns of Midwestern conservationists, Hall feared that these "slack-water pools would create vast swamps of stagnant and polluted water." But the locks and dams were built, and the river responded (at least initially) to the new habitats in a wonderful way. Habitat became diverse with a mix of backwater lakes, marshes, deep and shallow water. Wildlife responded and the migration corridor for waterfowl and other migrants also flourished. It was wonderful to see everyone, including our old friend seem so happy.

By the mid-1970s, several things began to change. Sand from the main channel dredging began to fill in the backwaters. Islands, which were part of the river landscape for 5,000 to 10,000 years, were eroding away. The deep parts of the lower river pools behind the dams were filling in, and backwater marshes and lakes began to change. The lower pools, which for millennia were typified by channels, lakes, islands, and marshes, changed to large, shallow, open lakes.

A group of researchers from several universities—Saint Mary's, Winona State and University of Wisconsin-La Crosse—received contracts from the Corps and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to study the river and document what was happening. The government also funded the first-ever color aerial photography survey of the Upper Mississippi to create a vegetation and landcover map of the river in 1975.

As a young new Saint Mary's graduate student, I was so excited to be working and leading studies on my family's old friend. I remember measuring fish in Weaver Bottoms, mapping vegetation with the new aerial photography and working with many other teams from our partner universities to study flow, fisheries, productivity, wildlife and generally documenting how our old friend was doing.

Massive amounts of sediment, nutrients and chemicals continue to dump into our river.

But alarm bells began sounding. The researchers told the Corps in 1975 that they were witnessing a major change in the river's ecological health, based on the aerial photography and river research. They petitioned the Corps for major changes.

At the same time, the federal and state agencies implemented a series of studies and changes to river management. They began putting dredged material in large containment sites on the river. But our old friend continued to decline.

In 1986, Congress responded to a call from the public and river resource management agencies by creating the Environmental Management program, a $33 million annual program to begin restoring our old friend.

Where we are today

Here we are more than 35 years later, having spent over $1.3 billion. We've increased the budget for the Environmental Management program to $55

Milkweed blooms on the bottomlands along the Mississippi.

STEVE MARKING

million annually, and starting in 2021 the government appropriated funds to launch the multi-billion dollar Navigation and Environmental Sustainability Program. Many organizations cheered. They waved the flag of restoration, touting all the great things being done to save our old friend.

How is our overreliance on restoration as the primary response working? Wetland drainage and agriculture development continue to negatively affect much of the river's land use. These uses eliminate the land's ability to hold and store water, and the soil's resilience to store carbon and provide a healthy foundation to grow crops. Massive amounts of sediment, nutrients and chemicals continue to dump into our river, impacting not only the Mississippi, but also the Gulf of Mexico. Due to agricultural nutrients coming down the river and into the Gulf, large areas of coastal habitat are dead zones, with low oxygen levels that kill aquatic life.

The river faces huge challenges that will require bold steps and new generations of stewardship.

We also witness continued backwater sedimentation. Many sloughs, marshes and lake complexes are no longer navigable in a small motorboat. River levels have increased due to rising river bottoms and changing precipitation patterns that deliver more rain in the watershed.

This has resulted in massive floodplain forest die-offs across multiple pools in the Upper Mississippi. You can drive the river road from Minnesota to Iowa and witness massive expanses of dead forest, their roots flooded as sediment raises backwater

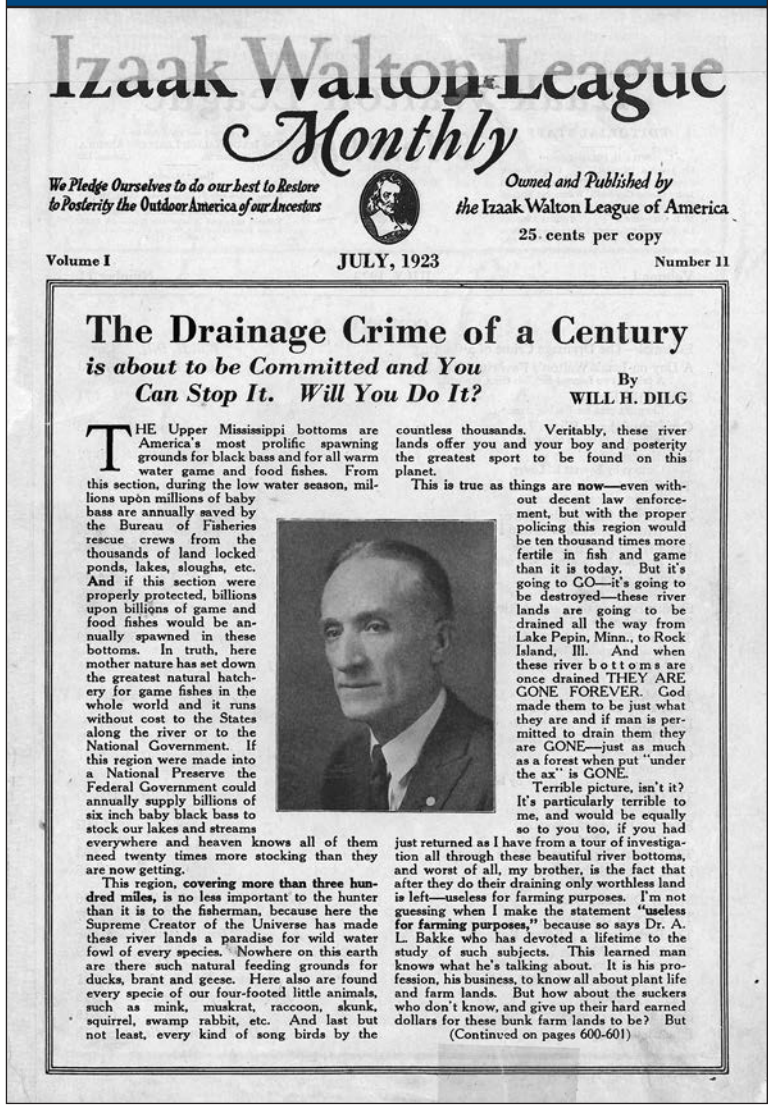
bottoms and increased runoff from heavy rainfall and ever improving agricultural drainage raise water levels. The Corps proposal is to use river dredged material to raise the islands then replant the forest to "restore" the ancient islands. You see, the large disposal sites created up and down the river in the late 1970s are full, they were planned for a 50 year life.

So, what do we do? During the '70s river biologists, friends of our dear River, rallied to stop backwater filling from river dredging. Now, the Corps and many of the river managers embrace dumping dredged river sand into the backwaters to "restore" our dear friend. Have we embraced amputation to solve a simple disease?

Today, much of the natural floodplain forest has died or is dying. The plan is to use dredged main channel sand to raise the floodplain islands one or two feet. Barges will deliver sand and fine organic slough material as "top dressing" on the raised islands. Trees will be planted to "restore" the forest. I wonder how well trees will grow on sand, and what would our friend think?

Barry Drazkowski, raised on the river in Winona, Minn., is past president of the Minnesota Division and current chapter president of the League's Will Dilg Chapter. He served as a biologist and GIS specialist for the Corps of Engineers, Fish and Wildlife Service and river program manager for USGS. He was director of St. Mary's Geospatial Services for 20 years and retired in 2015.

Will Dilg published his call to action in Drainage Crime of a Century in the League's magazine in July 1923.



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We Pledge Ourselves to do our best to Restore to Posterity the Outdoor America of our Ancestors

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The Drainage Crime of a Century

is about to be Committed and You Can Stop It. Will You Do It?

By WILL H. DILG

THE Upper Mississippi bottoms are America's most prolific spawning grounds for black bass and for all warm water game and food fishes. From this section, during the low water season, millions upon millions of baby bass are annually saved by the Bureau of Fisheries rescue crews from the thousands of land locked ponds, lakes, sloughs, etc. And if this section were properly protected, billions upon billions of game and food fishes would be annually spawned in these bottoms. In truth, here mother nature has set down the greatest natural hatchery for game fishes in the whole world and it runs without cost to the States along the river or to the National Government. If this region were made into a National Preserve the Federal Government could annually supply billions of six inch baby black bass to stock our lakes and streams everywhere and heaven knows all of them need twenty times more stocking than they are now getting.

This region, **covering more than three hundred miles,** is no less important to the hunter than it is to the fisherman, because here the Supreme Creator of the Universe has made these river lands a paradise for wild water fowl of every species. Nowhere on this earth are there such natural feeding grounds for ducks, brant and geese. Here also are found every specie of our four-footed little animals, such as mink, muskrat, raccoon, skunk, squirrel, swamp rabbit, etc. And last but not least, every kind of song birds by the countless thousands. Veritably, these river lands offer you and your boy and posterity the greatest sport to be found on this planet.

This is true as things are **now**—even without decent law enforcement, but with the proper policing this region would be ten thousand times more fertile in fish and game than it is today. But it's going to GO—it's going to be destroyed—these river lands are going to be drained all the way from Lake Pepin, Minn., to Rock Island, Ill. And when these river bottoms are once drained THEY ARE GONE FOREVER. God made them to be just what they are and if man is permitted to drain them they are GONE—just as much as a forest when put "under the ax" is GONE.

Terrible picture, isn't it? It's particularly terrible to me, and would be equally so to you too, if you had just returned as I have from a tour of investigation all through these beautiful river bottoms, and worst of all, my brother, is the fact that after they do their draining only worthless land is left—useless for farming purposes. I'm not guessing when I make the statement **"useless for farming purposes,"** because so says Dr. A. L. Bakke who has devoted a lifetime to the study of such subjects. This learned man knows what he's talking about. It is his profession, his business, to know all about plant life and farm lands. But how about the suckers who don't know, and give up their hard earned dollars for these bunk farm lands to be? But

(Continued on pages 600-601)

BOLD ACTION IS REQUIRED

The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge is an enduring example of how we can and must take action to save the nation's waterways and ensure a future with clean water. We will need bold steps and new generations of stewardship to address a range of problems—pollution, sedimentation and invasive species to name a few. Immediate steps we can take to help the Mississippi include improving the soil and water conservation practices in the Farm Bill, which Congress is looking at now.

IWLA

POLICY PULSE

League Backs Bills to Curb Pollution from Abandoned Mines and Improve Health of the Mississippi

By JARED MOTT, Conservation Director

A settling pond near the 2015 Gold King Mine spill in Colorado captures some of the toxic materials that leaked from the old mine.

USGS

Across the country, tens of thousands of abandoned mine sites have been polluting our rivers and streams with millions of gallons of water containing toxic metals, sulfuric acid and radioactive material. Because these sites are abandoned with no operator on record that can be held responsible for cleaning them up, they continue to flush pollution downstream.

Senate bill tackles water pollution from abandoned mines

In January, the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee passed the Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act of 2024 (S. 2781) with overwhelming bipartisan support. Advancing this legislation is a critical first step toward solving a water pollution problem that has been building for decades.

State agencies and private entities that have no legal responsibility for or connection to these abandoned mines—true Good Samaritans—want to help tackle some of these cleanup projects. Unfortunately, under federal law, those agencies and entities with good intentions are treated as if they were polluters themselves, posing significant liability risks that prevent projects from moving forward.

Consequently, these mines go on polluting the environment with no end in sight, degrading fish and wildlife habitat and drinking water sources. To address this conundrum, a bipartisan coalition of U.S. Senators introduced the Good Samaritan bill. This legislation offers a practical solution by extending a targeted, conditional liability shield for qualified Good Samaritans to conduct cleanup projects at abandoned mine sites where there is no party to be held responsible for remediation.

S. 2781 would establish a new pilot program administered by the EPA to permit up to 15 Good Samaritan abandoned mine cleanups. The bill requires that those remediation projects pose a low risk to the environment and produce improvements in environmental conditions. The bill also requires public involvement and environmental review. Additionally, the bill strictly prohibits mining activities at these sites. Finally, in the unlikely event that a Good Samaritan causes additional water pollution, their liability shield would be lost.

If the full Congress passes this legislation, abandoned mine remediation experts at state

agencies, conservation groups and other qualified volunteers will be able to move forward with mine cleanups that otherwise will not happen, halting pollution, improving drinking water and restoring fish and wildlife habitat along the way.

House bill aims to restore the Mississippi

The Izaak Walton League also strongly supports the Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Initiative Act introduced in February by U.S. Representative Betty McCollum (D-Minn.). The bill aims to improve the ecological health of the Mississippi River while supporting the communities and economy along the river's 2,300 miles.

Abandoned mines with no operator who can be held responsible for cleaning them up continue to flush pollution downstream.

In a statement, McCollum noted, "Because people who cared stepped up in the past to protect it, the Mississippi is a place for families to enjoy, an important flyway for migratory birds, and a source of jobs and economic growth. But there is more work to be done, with decades of pollution having damaged the river's ecosystem, and new challenges are emerging for communities up and down the corridor."

A companion bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate by Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.).

This effort comes at a critical time as flooding increasingly plagues communities throughout the Mississippi basin and Americans confront the compounding threats of polluted runoff, invasive species in the river and degraded habitat for fish and wildlife. The Mississippi flows through 10 states and provides drinking water for more than 20 million people. The river's 30-million-acre floodplain supports 780 species of fish and wildlife and is a migration corridor for about two-thirds of all North American birds.

But habitat loss and invasive species threaten fisheries and recreation on the river and the nearly 700,000 jobs that these natural resources support. Excess agricultural nutrients, such as nitrate, flow into the river and its tributaries, which results in a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. This pollution also strains water utilities up and down the river, even as we continue to learn about the potentially devastating human health impacts of prolonged exposure to nitrate in drinking water.

Building just one mid-sized water treatment plant to reduce nitrate pollution costs $10 to 15 million. And without major investments, flooding and wetland loss along the Mississippi will make riverfront communities more vulnerable to climate change and severe storms. Damages from historic 2019 floods alone cost $6.2 billion.

Modeled on the successful Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Act would create an initiative at the EPA designed to protect and restore the river. It offers a framework for collaboration among government agencies and partners up and down the river.

The bill calls for action to:

- Coordinate efforts across federal, state, local and Tribal agencies to restore the Mississippi River and make its communities more resilient.
- Develop a comprehensive action plan to: improve water quality, restore fish and wildlife habitat, strengthen floodplain resilience and address invasive species.
- Develop a detailed science plan, led by the U.S. Geological Survey, to help ensure that restoration activities are based on the best possible science, and establish four Mississippi River-focused scientific research centers.
- Redress environmental injustices in economically disadvantaged communities in rural and urban areas, as well as communities of color, by directing at least a third of its funding to projects and activities in these communities.

TAKE ACTION

You can learn more and urge policymakers to support these bills by visiting: iwla.org/advocacy.

Can We Balance Clean Energy Transitions with Preserving Farmland?

By DELILAH SEAMAN, Guest Opinion

Solar farm in Port Murray, Mansfield Township, New Jersey.

ISTOCK

In July of 2019, the Maryland Legislature passed a law that gives the state until 2030 to achieve 50 percent renewable energy. In 2020, the Virginia Clean Economy Act was signed into law, making Virginia the first Southern state to commit to 100 percent clean energy and a zero-carbon electricity grid. The state will phase out coal and gas and will require 60 percent of electricity to come from renewable sources by 2036.

These conditions are driving a rapid increase in solar development in the region, as states push to meet new clean energy goals. Many state legislators and citizens see the boom in solar projects as a good thing—large-scale solar "farms" can generate a lot of renewable energy. However, it has become a topic of debate between solar developers and rural communities whether these solar farms are doing more harm than good.

Solar developments have been eating up local farmland.

Over the past few years, these solar developments have been eating up local farmland. According to the Department of Energy, in order to achieve the Biden Administration's goals to eliminate emissions by 2050, solar could constitute up to 45 percent of the country's energy demands. In the DOE's Solar

Futures Study, it's projected that the solar industry will need up to 10.3 million acres of land (around 16,000 square miles) to meet these goals, and about 90 percent of this is expected to occur on rural land.

Many of the qualities that make good farmland— stable soil, sunny climate, flat topography— also make good spots for solar fields. As a result, solar companies often aim for permits to build on areas zoned for agriculture. This puts them at odds with many rural farming communities, who are growing increasingly concerned about how much farmland Maryland and Virginia might lose to these projects.

I expect that many of the people I know would say that they are in support of developing this source of clean power without a second thought. From an emissions perspective, it is obviously preferable to coal and natural gas power. However, there are plenty of effects, both immediate and future, that need to be considered before we hand land over to solar developers.

The impact of lost farmlands

The burden of solar expansion is not evenly distributed. Energy-intensive urban centers are creating the demand for solar power, but they are not the ones that must pay the costs. It is rural, agricultural communities who must take on the burden of land loss and significant changes in their towns and counties. This has understandably created resentment, as a lot of farming communities see more drawbacks than benefits. Adding to this bruise is the fact that many people feel that their local government has little say over large-scale solar projects; in Maryland, the counties have some input, but the state Public Service Commission has the final say. Some local governments have even been sued by large developers for denying permits.

What is the significance of losing farmland? Isn't a clean energy transition more important? Well, we are all seeing more and more conditions that are demonstrating why it might be sensible to preserve as much arable land as possible. President Biden has stated that there is likely a food shortage in the near future for the U.S., and we have been suffering from supply chain issues for the last few years. Between international conflicts creating shocks to the food system and increasing pressures from worsening climate conditions, it is becoming more important to make sure local food systems are robust enough to support our population.

On solar farms, large amounts of topsoil are likely to be lost, and the rest gets severely compacted.

In addition, the rapid loss of topsoil in the U.S. means that farmland that is in production right now may, sooner or later, become unusable. On solar farms, large amounts of topsoil are likely to be lost, and the rest gets

severely compacted. Even if not all our arable land is currently in use, it is wise to make sure that we don't so quickly give up our ability to grow food in certain areas. Preserving local agricultural land can also contribute to shortening the food supply chain, especially if the land is used for growing produce, which means lower environmental impact and fresher produce.

Steps toward a better balance

There are a lot of things that can be done about this dispute to safeguard our resources and continue towards statewide clean energy goals. Some local officials have begun to discuss best practices for regulating solar development.

In Maryland, Washington County Planning Commission members have proposed steering developers away from prime farmland by providing a tax discount to companies for moving projects off usable farmland, or taxing solar farms that are built on usable farmland to discourage it.

Delilah Seaman

Virginia's Nature Conservancy organization studied whether the state's energy goals could be met without developing good farmland or wildlife habitats, and the study suggested that Virginia has much more potentially suitable land outside of those categories than needed. A Virginia law enacted in 2022, HB 206, is also a step in the right direction; it requires that if the Department of Environmental Quality determines that an energy project of up to 150 MW will have a significant adverse impact on wildlife, historic resources, prime agricultural soils or forest lands, then they must also submit mitigation plans.

There are better places to start—rooftops, lower-grade fields, lots, roads, and more—than on our best soil that has other important uses.

Another good approach is the American Farmland Trust's Smart Solar principles, which balance solar energy development with safeguarding agriculture by prioritizing solar siting on buildings and areas not suited for agriculture, encouraging agrovoltaic projects where certain types of agricultural production occur underneath or between solar panels, and emphasizing equity in farming access and solar energy benefits.

State governments must do a better job of directing solar developers towards non-productive land that can still be used for solar farms. Just because farmland may be less expensive and more convenient doesn't mean that we shouldn't be looking further down the line, past the short-term benefits of getting closer to state energy goals.

There are better places to start—rooftops, lower-grade fields, lots, roads, and more—than on our best soil that has other important uses.

Delilah Seaman is a student at Dickinson College majoring in environmental studies. A resident of Bethesda, Maryland, she is a member of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chapter of the Izaak Walton League.

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CLEAN WATER CORNER

Successes for Salt Watch

By SAM PUCKETT, Clean Water Program Director, ABBY HILEMAN, Salt Watch Coordinator

JARED MOTT

League staff spotted and reported this salt pile in Reston, Va. Left uncovered, piles of road salt leach harmful levels of chloride into local waterways during a rain or snow melt.

Preventing pollution from entering waterways is one of the League's most basic missions. So preventing overuse of road salt by private salt applicators and homeowners is a vital goal.

After months where many parts of the U.S. saw serious winter weather with ice and snow, the Clean Water Team is working to incorporate recent experiences, data and lessons learned to help keep chloride pollution out of our streams, pipes and drinking water. A major unchecked source of excess salt is typically private contractors tasked with treating pavement with deicers.

Toward the end of this cold, wet winter, we were seeing many examples of excessive oversalting, and our data from Salt Watch volunteers backs that up. Shocking amounts in Salt Watch readings exceeded levels that are considered safe for wildlife or drinking water.

In spite of dangerously high salt readings in some places, we can point to progress and success in several areas.

Virginia salt spills reported—and cleaned up!

In December of 2023, Jared Mott, the League's Conservation Director, noticed a large, uncovered salt pile in a parking lot outside a fitness center in Reston, Va. In Virginia, salt piles are required to be covered to prevent excess salt washing to storm drains and waterways. The League provided photos to our partners at the Reston Association who immediately viewed the salt piles and scoped out the drainage point in the parking lot and nearby stream for monitoring.

The Association also contacted Fairfax County for guidance. As a result of these actions, the fitness

center's snow removal company completely removed the uncovered salt about one week after the initial report. The chloride levels in the nearby stream did increase, but due to the lack of wet weather, the increase was minimal.

If you see uncovered salt piles or salt spills in your community, report it! Many counties or townships have a non-emergency 311 number to report issues like this. Alternatively you may be able to report spills to your local department of natural resources or department of transportation.

Toward the end of this cold, wet winter, we were seeing many examples of excessive oversalting, and our data from volunteers backs that up: Shocking amounts in Salt Watch readings exceeded levels that are considered safe for wildlife or drinking water.

Minnesota chapter tackles oversalting

In 2023, Abby Hileman, the League's Salt Watch Coordinator, gave a presentation to the **W.J. McCabe Chapter** in Duluth, Minn. The chapter had invited members from the League of Women Voters to attend that presentation, as road salt pollution was on their mind. At that time, there was a bill pending in the state legislature that offered limited liability protection to contracted road salt applicators who pass a voluntary smart salt applicator training course and maintain best practices for treating roads. That bill was pulled but now the Izaak Walton League and our partner groups are advocating for a similar bill that was just introduced in Minnesota.

In January, to increase awareness and momentum, the chapter along with the League of Women Voters recently hosted a webinar with representatives from the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services to discuss that state's Green SnowPro program. New Hampshire is currently the only state with limited liability protection for salt applicators who pass the state's certification program and maintain best practices.

Maryland pilots statewide applicator training

In late 2023 and into early 2024, the Maryland Department of the Environment piloted a statewide salt applicator training to give private snow removal

The Clean Water Hub database shows Salt Watch datapoints from January 1 to January 31, 2024. Red dots depict readings over 230 ppm of chloride, which is chronically toxic to aquatic life.

contractors the tools and information they need to treat roadways, parking lots and sidewalks with the minimum amount of salt needed to keep the public safe. Clean Water Program staff Sam Puckett and Abby Hileman both weighed in on the initial training materials and outline, and they also took the training course to ensure it is effective, accurate and scalable for the larger applicator community. Promising practices in Maryland, which the League supports, continue to provide an inspiring model for other states.

Chesapeake Monitoring Cooperative prioritizes Salt Watch

In late 2023, the Chesapeake Monitoring Cooperative (CMC) published a new Prioritization Report to document data gaps that the CMC intends to fill to ensure there is a clear understanding of water quality in the Bay watershed.

In this report, the CMC highlighted the League's Salt Watch program as a priority moving forward, stating "Salt Watch is a natural fit for the CMC to explore crowd-sourced monitoring models that can engage a large audience, shine a spotlight on specific pollution issues, and drive policy and restoration decisions within the watershed… Integrating Salt Watch data into the CMC will widen the geographic and temporal dataset collected within the program and increase access by federal, state and local agencies who are concerned about the impacts to their community."

We hope that this prioritization of Salt Watch will help the program grow in the numbers of volunteers gathering data and number of state agencies using Salt Watch data to drive environmental and transportation policy. To read the report, visit https://www.chesapeakemonitoringcoop.org/resources/publications/

Clean Water Hub updates encourage data use

The Clean Water Hub www.cleanwaterhub.org has undergone some serious transformation. We have moved all Salt Watch data submission to the Clean Water Hub itself, which allows data to be accessible to monitors and the public immediately upon submission, rather than after data has been organized and reuploaded by Clean Water Program staff.

New this year, Hub visitors are also able to view all Salt Watch data on the Clean Water Hub map (simply go to www.cleanwaterhub.org and click on "Salt Watch" under the "Explore Data" tab), filter by specific dates, and zoom in to any region of the country, including your ZIP code. Check it out and use the data to raise awareness in your community.

Salt Watch is a program of the Izaak Walton League of America that aims to reduce chloride pollution by equipping volunteers with free test kits to monitor the impact of road salt and advocating for solutions that protect the health of our waterways, drinking water and infrastructure. To request a kit visit www.saltwatch.org.

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SOIL MATTERS

A cover crop in central Iowa reduces runoff from farm land.

KATE HANSEN

Springing into Action

By KATE HANSEN, Agriculture Program Director

Spring is always an exciting time, especially when it comes to agriculture. Farmers will soon begin planting their crops, hopeful for the year to come.

One might also consider this a springtime for the League's Agriculture Program. I stepped into the role of Agriculture Program Director in January and have enjoyed getting started. Past League staff have set a strong precedent, sowing the seeds for improvements in how millions of acres of agricultural lands are managed across the U.S.

With the new growing season, we will also see evidence of those who have implemented beneficial conservation practices, such as planting cover crops to protect land while it isn't in production. Their soils will be better for it. Our shared natural resources will be too.

The list of conservation practices that a farmer or rancher can choose from is long. Many can be integrated into the regular management of growing a crop, livestock, or both. For example, reducing or eliminating tillage between crops can help protect soil from erosion, improve water retention, and feed soil microbes. Other practices take a modest piece of land out of production for an outsized benefit, like a buffer along a stream bank.

The benefits of conservation practices on agricultural lands pay off many times over when we consider their wider reach. Many will help improve water quality, fight climate change by sequestering carbon and provide more nutritious food by building healthier soils.

For years, voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture have been key to helping agricultural

producers implement such practices. Programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) have provided financial and technical assistance to producers to help them make the right choices for their operations.

This spring presents a critically important opportunity to protect and improve conservation programs—through the Farm Bill.

All eyes on Congress…

Last September, Congress allowed the existing Farm Bill to expire without passing a new one. The League and many of our partners urged leaders to pass a one-year extension, so that vital conservation programs could continue. Lawmakers eventually passed that extension and now face another September deadline.

Due to a tight congressional calendar, their best chance to pass a new Farm Bill is this spring, which means members of Congress need to hear from us now.

Key issues need to be resolved. One of the debates pertains to a nearly $20 billion investment made in conservation programs by the Inflation Reduction Act. These dollars were intended to substantially increase implementation of conservation practices that can help mitigate climate change by storing more carbon in the soil, conserving wetlands and reducing excess nutrients in our waterways. Now, some in Congress want to redirect these funds to programs that are unrelated to conservation.

This spring presents a critically important opportunity to protect and improve conservation programs—through the Farm Bill.

League staff will work with lawmakers, their staff and our partners to do everything we can to protect this funding for its original intent.

We will also continue our steady effort to tell Congress that the new Farm Bill should:

- protect clean water by reducing agricultural runoff
- fight climate change by sequestering carbon in wetlands, grasslands, and working lands and
- ensure human health by providing more nutritious food and cleaner drinking water.

All these opportunities and many others will sit idle if Congress doesn't act. And this can't wait. I encourage you to contact your members of Congress and urge them to pass a Farm Bill that supports conservation, soil health, clean water, healthy food, and a stable climate.

Visit iwla.org/advocacy to contact Congress about the Farm Bill.

…and on the ground

In the coming months, we will lay the groundwork for a pilot program to educate non-operator landowners (farm owners who don't do the farming) on how to collaborate with their tenants to implement conservation. A series of trainings will take place with landowners in Illinois, and we will evaluate the effort's feasibility at a larger scale.

If you are a landowner—in Illinois or elsewhere—and would like to learn more, please reach out to me at khansen@iwla.org.

I took this photo of a cover crop in central Iowa last year. If you find yourself driving on country roads this spring, I encourage you to keep an eye out. Some fields, like this one, will be green because they were planted with a "winter hardy" species that can survive the cold. Other cover crops, called "winter kill," will appear less vibrant but are just as beneficial.

There are exciting discussions about the future of the Agriculture Program and the League's role in advancing conservation on the ground. I look forward to springing into action and invite you to join us.

NITRATE WATCH:
ONE YEAR DOWN

Excess nitrate in water can pose serious problems for the health of humans and the environment. In 2023, the League launched Nitrate Watch, a community science program that empowers volunteers across the nation to monitor nitrate pollution in their local waterways and drinking water.

Nitrate Watch has made an impressive splash in just one year! See below for the 2023 program highlights.

1,035 kits sent to volunteers

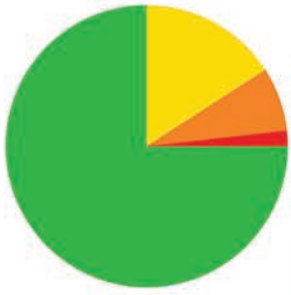
4,085 nitrate readings reported

$17,900 contributed by individual donors

700+ people reached via presentations and tabling

6 fact sheets created

33 states reporting data



Nationwide results:

- 0-3 mg/L: **75.0%**
- >3-5 mg/L: **15.9%**
- >5-10 mg/L: **7.3%**
- >10 mg/L: **1.8%**

NITRATE WATCH℠
IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA

Find the complete Nitrate Watch 2023 report at **www.nitratewatch.org**

LOOKING AHEAD

We are already excitedly making plans to build upon the momentum we've created in Nitrate Watch's first year. Keep an eye out for the following activities (and more) in 2024!

- ***Building partnerships and increasing engagement in underrepresented regions with a known nitrate pollution problem, including Minnesota and Oregon***
- ***Developing an educational campaign highlighting the connection between land-use practices, soil health, and nitrate pollution***
- ***Tracking EPA's risk assessment for nitrate in drinking water***

GET INVOLVED!

Nitrate Watch needs more dedicated volunteers and advocates to collect data and spread awareness about the effects of nitrate pollution.

There are many ways to get involved! Here are a few examples:

- **Request a free kit** and start monitoring waterways or drinking water
- **Share Nitrate Watch fact sheets** outlining the effect of nitrate pollution on human health, the environment, the economy, and more
- **Distribute Nitrate Watch postcards** at chapter and outreach events
- **Talk to neighbors and community leaders** about reducing fertilizer application

Visit **www.nitratewatch.org** to request a kit and find educational and advocacy resources.

Questions? Email **nitratewatch@iwla.org**

EPA

Renew for 2024!

Your Membership Makes All the Difference

Don’t miss this opportunity

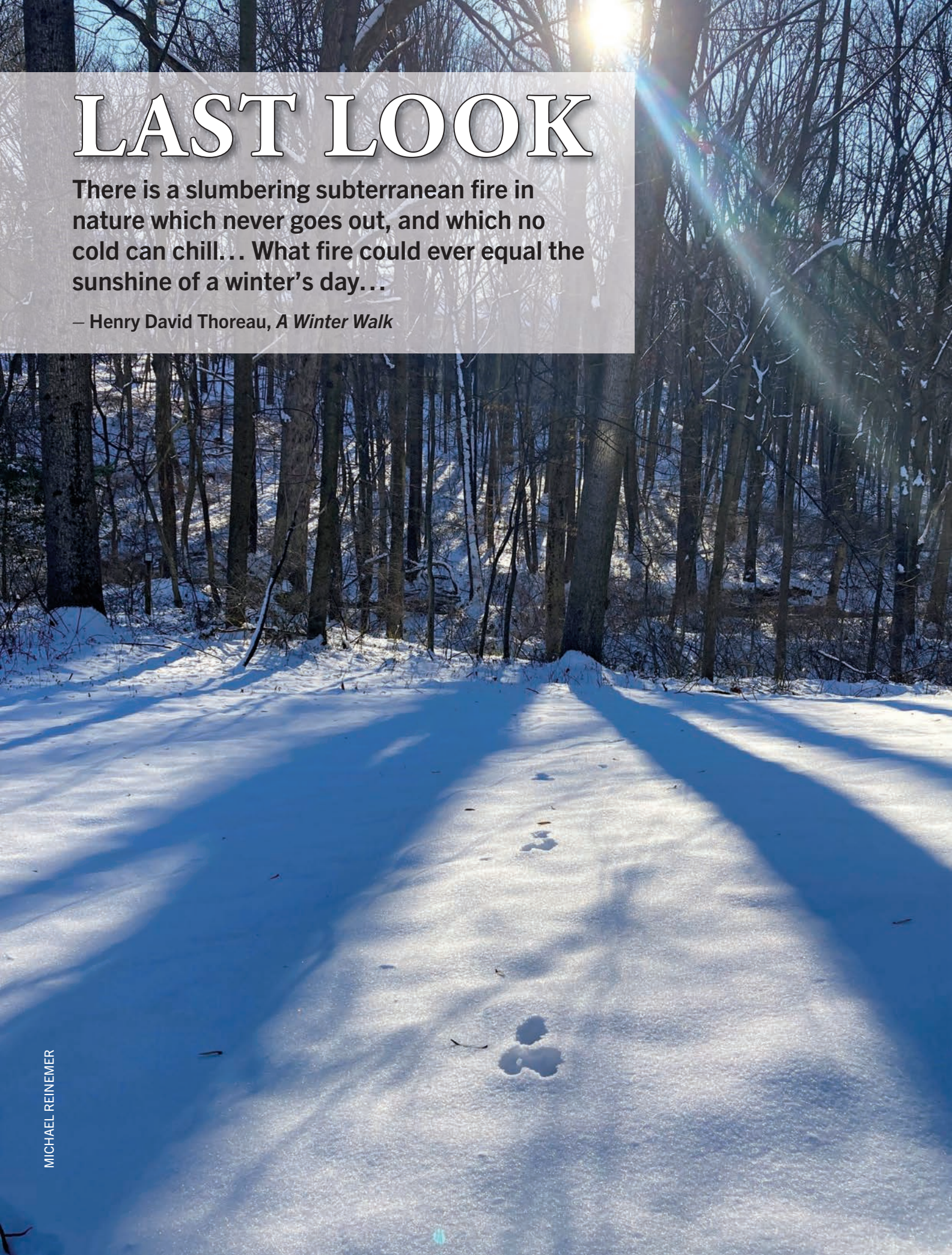
With your membership, the Izaak Walton League and its chapters bring you programs to enjoy and help conserve our nation’s woods, waters and wildlife for the next generation.

Please return your dues payment today!

LAST LOOK

There is a slumbering subterranean fire in nature which never goes out, and which no cold can chill… What fire could ever equal the sunshine of a winter's day…

– Henry David Thoreau, ***A Winter Walk***



MICHAEL REINEMER

THE IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA
707 CONSERVATION LANE | GAITHERSBURG, MD 20878

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2024 National Convention

July 14-16 Cambridge, Md.

Restoring Our Great Waters:

Taking Action Today to Secure a Better Future

At the Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay Golf Resort, Spa and Marina

At our 2024 convention, the League will focus on our historic mission to protect the nation's great waterways, including the Chesapeake Bay, and discuss how we can take action today to secure a better future. We will also host a special event to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the League's 1924 achievement of establishing the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Everyone is invited. Meet fellow Ikes, learn about conservation priorities and how to participate in League activities. The scenic Choptank River, Chesapeake Bay and Maryland's Eastern Shore offer many places to explore and opportunities for recreation.

The early bird reception is Sunday evening, July 14. Wednesday July 17 is an optional day for field trips and group activities. This schedule reduces hotel room rates and ensures attendees can travel to the Eastern Shore during off-peak summer hours.

Reserve your hotel room and see more convention details at iwla.org/events.