



60
YEARS



The Nature
Conservancy  *in Iowa*

Iowa

IMPACT REPORT 2023

FROM THE DIRECTOR



The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

ON THE COVER: Bison on TNC preserve © Chris Helzer; **NEXT PAGE:** Water ripples © Getty Images

I am pleased to share with you our 2023 Impact Report. I hope you enjoy the stories of conservation innovation, determination and success that your support of The Nature Conservancy in Iowa has made possible!

As I write this, I am closing in on five months as the Iowa state director and my 12th year with the Conservancy. I have spent much of this past year visiting people and places in all parts of the state, but really, I've spent my whole life doing just that—hiking in the Loess Hills, exploring the woods of eastern Iowa and traveling wherever else a bike or canoe might take me.

As we mark the 60th anniversary of The Nature Conservancy's Iowa Chapter, it dawns on me that the Conservancy has been hard at work conserving Iowa's lands and waters my entire life. And through the support and encouragement of thousands of members; our community, agency and business partners; and our dedicated staff, volunteers and trustees—the Conservancy has built an extraordinary conservation legacy.

There is more to do, of course.

We are facing the biggest, most complex environmental challenges in our lifetimes as the dual crises of climate change and biodiversity loss threaten the planet. Addressing both is crucial. We are doing our part in Iowa—across the state's prairies, forests, rivers, farmlands and communities. The three themes in this report—**Thriving Lands and Waters**, **Collaborative Conservation Actions** and **Climate Resilient Communities**—underpin our conservation vision for Iowa: a place where healthy, functioning lands and waters allow the people and nature of our state to thrive.

This report celebrates just some of the efforts—and the people—laying the foundation for our future conservation success. I hope you enjoy reading about them, and I hope you will contact me if you would like to learn more!

Graham McGaffin,
State Director



Iowa Leadership Team

Graham McGaffin, State Director
Chelsea Carter-Kern, People Services Manager
Amber Markham, Director of External Affairs & Climate
Scott Moats, Director of Lands/Fire Manager (IA&MO)
Josh Spies, Director of Freshwater Projects
Carrie Walkiewicz, Director of Development

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REFLECTIONS FROM OUR VOLUNTEER LEADERS

Our volunteer Board of Trustees in Iowa brings together thought leadership from a variety of fields and backgrounds, as well as diverse parts of the state and our communities, to help shape our work and support our mission. The Iowa board is part of a larger group of 1,500 individuals from every state who, along with a 25-member global Board of Directors, help craft and implement our conservation strategies around the world. The Nature Conservancy is deeply grateful for the generosity, vision and talent of these community leaders who have helped us make our dreams bigger, successes greater, and aspirations higher. Below are personal reflections from just a few of these extraordinary individuals.

1 LOREE MILES | 2019-present

The resilience and persistence of nature has always fascinated me. As a trustee for The Nature Conservancy in Iowa, I have witnessed a bison herd naturally restoring prairie, Topeka shiners reappearing in a restored oxbow, a reconnected floodplain providing new habitat *and* protection for valuable crop land and much more. Through science, innovation and on-the-ground examples, TNC is showing Iowans ways to help restore and regenerate our soil, water and wildlife. Our voice for nature is terribly important and I like being a part of that.

2 LARRY WEBER | 2015-present

Growing up on my grandparents' dairy farm here in Iowa drove home the importance of water to agriculture, our communities, and the natural world that sustains us all. My lifelong passion and career have been about finding practical solutions to enhance water resources throughout Iowa and across the country. The Conservancy is a natural fit for me; an organization committed to improved quality of life for Iowans through the application of science-based solutions, while improving water systems across the nation and beyond. When I visit projects like the Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve, I experience first-hand TNC's impact on our understanding of Iowa's unique freshwater systems and the biodiversity they support.

3 ROB MANATT | 2023-present

While studying Forestry at Iowa State, I came to realize that so many of the environmental impacts created by our modern lifestyles appear as externalities to the market economy. But if we wish to preserve or enhance the ecosystem services that our landscape can provide, conservation organizations need to work together with industry and government to create sustainable economic solutions. I have always admired the Conservancy for having this ability to bring together stakeholder groups with varied interests, build mutual trust and respect, and achieve conservation goals. This is the collaborative and innovative spirit of the Conservancy that inspired me to get involved and join the board.

4 DOUG PALMER | 2012-present

I was originally introduced to The Nature Conservancy in the early 2000s. The first thing that impressed me was the scientific rigor that goes into the Conservancy's approach. Since joining the board, it has been my pleasure to work with the dedicated TNC staff and other Trustees. The Conservancy is unique in that it is a non-partisan organization working on large-scale, connected habitat conservation projects. Learning and seeing the impact of conservation "at scale" has been an eye-opening experience! The Conservancy is making a real difference in Iowa, preserving the unique biological diversity that makes Iowa so special for future generations.



Camp Joy Hollow expands preserve

Partnership with Girl Scouts connects 7,500 acres of key habitats

THIS PAGE: Newly acquired Camp Joy Hollow © Claire Hamilton/TNC; **NEXT PAGE:** Broken Kettle Preserve is home to bison that play a vital role in restoration. © MORGAN HEIM/TNC

ON A VERY HUMID, 95-DEGREE DAY IN AUGUST, Graham McGaffin sweated and hiked five hours over rough terrain—and admittedly got a little lost—working on a required assessment of the Camp Joy Hollow property. There should be a Girl Scout badge for that.

The hard work paid off. In December of 2022, The Nature Conservancy closed on the purchase of the Girl Scouts’ Camp Joy Hollow—a 356-acre parcel of woodlands, hills, creek and tallgrass prairie. The camp sits at the heart of Iowa’s largest and most pristine tallgrass prairie—the most endangered ecosystem in the world.

The \$1.4-million purchase expands the Conservancy’s iconic Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve and helps connect about 7,500 acres of publicly and privately protected areas, including important wildlife and bird migration corridors. A critical addition to the Conservancy’s portfolio of natural areas in the state, the acquisition is a key part of TNC’s efforts to address the twin threats of biodiversity loss and climate change.



BETH SHELTON
Chief Executive Officer,
Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa

“Girl Scouts love to spend time outdoors and by partnering with The Nature Conservancy, we’re setting Girl Scouts up for even more opportunities.”

“A project like this is a dream come true,” says McGaffin, the new Iowa state director and previous Loess Hills project director. “Not every acre is created equal and this place is incredible—for nature and for people.”

Camp Joy Hollow is, as the name suggests, a camp. There are cabins, a lodge and miles of trails. The Conservancy will use the infrastructure for conservation trainings and as meeting space for regional fire programs and more. And they’ll continue and grow a close partnership with the Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa—hosting them at Camp Joy Hollow and across other Conservancy preserves.

Those ridgeline trails will also be put to good use as part of Iowa’s first “Community Forest.” Opened in early 2023, the Joy Hollow Community Forest trails are now available to the public for outdoor recreation, including hiking, birding, and photography.

Broken Kettle’s Camp Joy Hollow acquisition partners include the Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa, U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with generous funding from the Gilchrist Foundation, Missouri River Historical Development, the Gleeson Family, The Reuben and Muriel Savin Foundation, and many others.



Impacts Include

Connecting rare prairie habitat

Growing new community partnerships

Establishing Iowa’s first “Community Forest” for recreation

A living laboratory

Experts conduct turtle study at The
Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve

THIS PAGE: Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve © Chelsea Carter-Kern/TNC; **NEXT PAGE-TOP RIGHT:** Dale Maxson surveys for all turtles at Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve. © Chelsea Carter-Kern; **NEXT PAGE-BOTTOM RIGHT:** Adult Blanding's Turtle © Dale Maxson/TNC



HOW DO YOU CATCH A TURTLE?

“Well, you go out there with a handful of folks who are just really good at catching stuff,” Dale Maxson says.

Maxson, the Eastern Iowa land steward for The Nature Conservancy in Iowa, is one of those people. Give him a bucket and before long, he will have grabbed a swimming turtle from underwater and have it safely in hand for careful assessment. In 2022, Maxson, with Assistant Land Steward Elizabeth Owens and partners, wrapped up a two-year scientific study on Blanding’s turtles in the Conservancy’s Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve.

Blanding’s turtles are far from bland. Found across the Midwest, they’re small, semi-aquatic creatures that can live long lives (into their 80s!). These turtles are listed as Endangered under the IUCN Red List and are a Species of Concern for the State of Iowa. Maxson, Owens, and the team studied the preserve population, fitting 10 turtles with radio telemetry antennas to track their whereabouts. They gained insight into behavior, home ranges and nesting—and how that information can inform better land stewardship at the preserve and beyond.

“These turtles travel far and it really drives home the importance of landscape-scale conservation,” Maxson says. **“And we’re not just here for the turtles. It’s also the sandhill cranes and the 200-year-old oak trees. And we want a landscape that has the resiliency to bounce back from stressors like flood, fire and a changing climate—knowing we’re helping make sure it’s all here for generations down the line.”**

The Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve is a gem—a rich floodplain home to frogs, prairie crabapple trees, birds, flowers and slow-moving streams, and a place where the Conservancy has worked for 38 years. It’s the perfect living laboratory. Conservancy scientists and volunteers conduct wildlife research like the Blanding’s turtles study, manage invasive species, test the seasonality of prescribed fire and are currently testing virtual fence technology for conservation grazing.

Recently, Maxson took out a team in the early morning sun to help catch the turtles one last time and remove the study antennas. “This place is a great opportunity to continue learning, and we’re lucky to work with talented volunteers and biologists,” he says.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve is home to **five federally threatened or endangered species.**



Impacts Include

Restoring key lands and water

Better protecting endangered wildlife

Building relationships with researchers, neighbors and partners

Thanks to generous funding from the Roy J. Carver Foundation and expertise from Terry VanDewalle and Ryan Rasmussen of Stantec Inc. for supporting the Blanding’s turtle radio telemetry study. Thanks also to the incredible donors, whose private gifts support the ongoing stewardship and expansion of the preserve.

RESTORING OLD

RIVER BENDS

Expanding conservation tools for everyone



THIS PAGE: Oxbow restoration along the Boone River © Eileen Bader/TNC; **INSET LEFT TO RIGHT:** Boone Project Director Karen Wilke works with landowners across the state on oxbow restorations. © Elizabeth M. Juchems; Monitoring oxbows in the Boone River watershed © Karen Wilke/TNC; A completed oxbow restoration © Karen Wilke/TNC; **NEXT PAGE:** The Topeka shiner is a threatened species in Iowa © Karen Wilke/TNC



ERIK BUTLER
Civil Engineering Technician, USDA—
Natural Resources Conservation Service

“I recently finished up an oxbow restoration project and used the new toolkit. It was really helpful! While I have a fair amount of restoration experience, working in riverine wetlands—like oxbows—is new to me and I appreciated having this resource on hand.”



ONLINE | Visit the online oxbow toolkit at: nature.org/iaoxbow

Impacts Include

Expanding conservation work on the ground and empowering communities

Keeping drinking water cleaner

Providing habitat for ~56 fish species and ~81 bird species

LOOKING AT OLD BLACK-AND-WHITE AERIAL PHOTOS, Karen Wilke can see the ghosts of rivers past—big swooping curves of Iowa’s rivers and creeks. Sadly, it’s not like that now. Wilke, The Nature Conservancy’s freshwater specialist and Boone River project director, is working to fix that.

“Every stream meanders, but so many were straightened to make it easier for farming,” Wilke says. **“But if there’s not agriculture there now, we can give them a little love and restore those oxbows. Fish, birds, beavers, plants and people all benefit when we do.”**

An oxbow is a big natural bend in the river that provides benefits for fish and wildlife, flooding and water quality. A few years ago, Wilke was fielding lots of calls from folks wanting to restore the oxbows on their property. She does restoration work as part of her job, and she’s comfortable in rubber boots and directing big machinery. At the same time, conservation estimates show that as many as 15,000 oxbows need restoration in Iowa and the oxbow team is only three people. So Wilke and partners created a “how-to” guide to help folks restore oxbows themselves.

The Oxbow Restoration Toolkit is now available online, for free. It’s beautifully designed and includes user checklists for surveys and funding, as well as links to more information. Wilke and partners have hosted online and in-person trainings on how to use it. Thousands of conservation professionals have seen the guide, and hundreds of people have downloaded it.

So far, the Conservancy and partners have restored ~150 oxbows, with 26 new projects slated for this year.

One driver for the work is a federally endangered little fish, the Topeka shiner. The fish—and other wildlife—need the structure and habitats of oxbows in order to survive. River bends create cool pockets, different water speeds, spots for plants to grow and safe habitat where newly hatched fish can hide from predators. Oxbows also make for better filters in waterways and help keep drinking water clean.

“We see Topeka shiners in at least half of the oxbows we’ve restored, which is really cool,” Wilke says. “It feels really good to see progress and to provide tools for more people to get more conservation done on the ground.”



Oxbow Restoration Toolkit partners include the Iowa Soybean Association, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, with generous funding from REAP CEP (Resource Enhancement and Protection Conservation Education Program) and donors.



Blazing trails and **RESTORING LANDS**

Expanding fire training for women

SCOTT MOATS IS A MORNING PERSON—usually up at 4:30 a.m. listening to owls and sipping a green tea (or Coke) on the front porch swing at Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve. Moats, the director of lands and fire manager for The Nature Conservancy in Iowa and Missouri, knows that porch well. He’s been living there, working for the Conservancy, for 30 years. And for the last 25, he’s been a burn boss. (There are about 75 burn bosses in the Conservancy nationwide and two in the Iowa program.)

A qualified burn boss plans and manages controlled burns, with a crew. The Conservancy conducts prescribed fires on 11 preserves and project areas in Iowa. Every year we aim to burn about 2,000 acres of Conservancy property, with another 3,000–5,000 acres on partner lands, all to steward healthy, fire-adapted ecosystems.

“It’s easy to turn the land black with a match,” Moats says. **“Restoring ecosystem function and conservation successes—better landscapes for**

the bison grazing, managing invasive species, providing homes for the birds and insects and the flowers—is fire management. At TNC, that’s what we do.”

But that’s just the start. Moats and the fire team work alongside local partner organizations. They host fire school exercises across Iowa, with some of the staff serving as a cadre for training across the United States—and even once in Ethiopia—for professionals and landowners alike. In June this year, the Conservancy is hosting the first-ever “Trailblazers Academy” in Iowa—a training for 30 women fire practitioners.

At a recent conference, Moats heard a panel on women in conservation, and their lament that they were often tasked in less-active fire crew positions. Women make up about 20 percent of the wildland fire workforce, according to the Department of the Interior. (It’s closer to 40 percent for the TNC Iowa fire team.)

Overall, women said they wanted more opportunities to gain more skills on the line—in active ignition and water delivery, for example. So Moats and partners are making it happen.

“The Trailblazers Academy will help women gain skills and empower them on the fire line, which I’m really excited about,” Moats says.

PREVIOUS PAGE: A fire crew holds an after-action review to improve controlled burn operations at the Loess Hills Cooperative Burn Week. © Renny Grilz; **THIS PAGE:** Bobolinks require open prairie for breeding habitat. © Kent Mason



AMY CROUCH
Little Sioux Project Director,
The Nature Conservancy in Iowa

“I’m really excited to host the Trailblazers Academy! We’ve assembled an amazing group of women working in fire. This isn’t a women’s retreat—we’ll work long, hard days and get dirty. But it is a place where we try to remove some of the barriers, and help women grow more skills as fire practitioners.”

Impacts Include

Helping the landscape endure a changing climate

Providing training and education

Creating better habitat for plants and wildlife

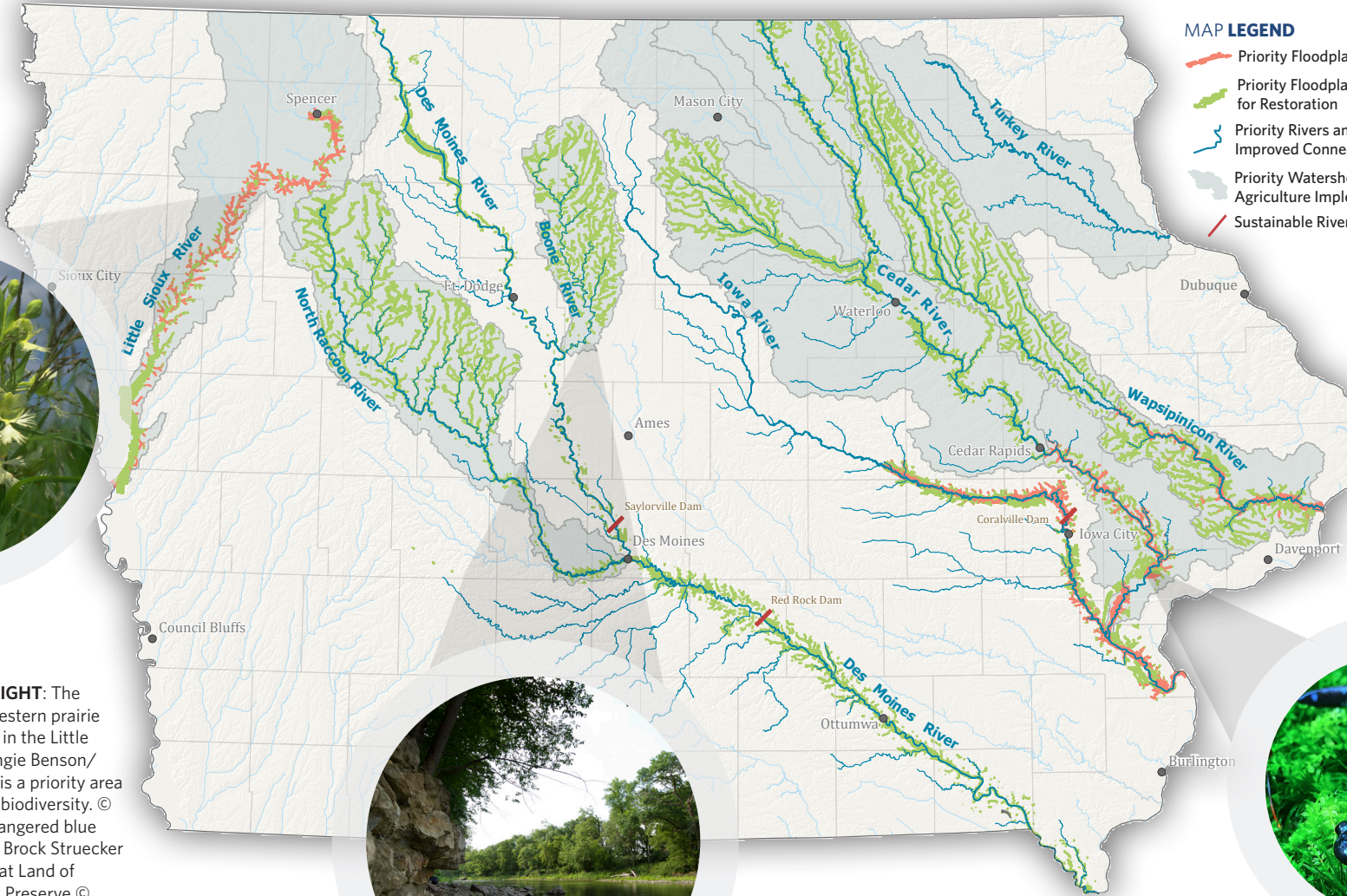
Leading the way

Blueprint unveiled for Iowa's freshwater conservation efforts

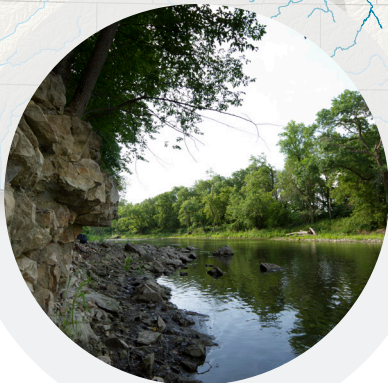
PRIORITY STRATEGIES FOR FRESHWATER ACTION

MAP LEGEND

-  Priority Floodplains for Protection
-  Priority Floodplain-Wetland Systems for Restoration
-  Priority Rivers and Streams for Improved Connectivity and Flow
-  Priority Watersheds for Regenerative Agriculture Implementation
-  Sustainable Rivers Program Dam



THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT: The federally threatened western prairie fringed orchid is found in the Little Sioux watershed. © Angie Benson/TNC; The Boone River is a priority area due to its high aquatic biodiversity. © Jorge Ribas; State-endangered blue spotted salamander © Brock Struecker
NEXT PAGE: Flooding at Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve © Filipiak/TNC



DURING THE HISTORIC 2008 FLOOD, the waters were rising in Davenport, Iowa, but at game time the baseball field was, surprisingly, still intact. So the Quad Cities River Bandits minor league game went on as scheduled. Officials laid down a temporary plywood bridge to allow fans to get to the stadium.

“It was almost biblical to see it at that scale,” remembers Josh Spies, director of freshwater projects for The Nature Conservancy in Iowa, who was a ballpark usher at the time. “The field was completely surrounded by water. Everything was. There was flooding across farms and neighborhoods and downtowns. It was the sixth most expensive federal emergency declaration in history.”

Major flood events in Iowa are becoming more common as the climate changes. Spies recently helped design a new Freshwater Action Map as a blueprint for statewide water conservation priorities and investment in Iowa—based on science—that will help address things like extreme flooding.

The mapping team identified opportunities for protecting and restoring Iowa’s waterways to help keep drinking water clean, create natural floodwater storage and secure habitat for plants and animals.

Now they’ll use the new information to take action—like working with partners, buying and protecting key parcels of land, addressing barriers to fish passage in streams and more.

“It was a rapid and intensive process to step back and look at the whole picture and understand where we can really move the needle on outcomes for biodiversity, while benefiting people in Iowa and beyond,” Spies says.



Understanding where—and how—to work is a hallmark of the Conservancy’s conservation approach. The Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve, for example, was identified as a key conservation area through previous planning efforts. Over the last 12 years it has quadrupled in size. Now it’s over 4,500 acres (which is about 1,000 baseball fields).

Working with landowners and local leaders, the Conservancy has protected floodplain areas, helped maintain natural areas that hold more water when floods happen, and restored vital habitats for species in need of conservation.

“The Land of the Swamp White Oak is a great example of strategic vision for on-the-ground results, which can now be applied statewide,” Spies says.

DID YOU KNOW?

Major flood events are increasing. There have been **6 major floods** in Iowa in just the past decade, whereas we had 8 major floods in the previous **8 decades combined.**



Impacts Include

Keeping drinking water clean

Providing natural areas to hold more floodwaters

Providing key habitat for fish, birds and plants



Grow Solar program continues to expand

Community organizing expands affordable, sustainable energy solutions



PATRICK SNELL SPENT HIS CHILDHOOD

biking around on a red, lightly rusted, 1980s Schwinn 10-speed Le Tour, a gift from his aunt. Now he's the Climate and External Affairs Associate at The Nature Conservancy in Iowa—and he's still biking around. Sometimes he goes out of his way to cycle through neighborhoods with rooftop solar panels: ones he's helped make happen.

Grow Solar is a nonprofit initiative of the Midwest Renewable Energy Association, with work across six states, including Iowa. Among other things, they coordinate lower-cost, bulk-buys of solar panels. Snell connected with them in 2017 and so began a Conservancy partnership for getting more rooftop solar in local communities in Iowa. It's been wildly successful and continues to grow.

Snell engages elected officials, local governments, and nonprofits to host solar education community trainings, and over 100 events have been held so far. He also helps streamline permitting and zoning issues, and makes sure solar vendors are the right fit for a project. He's kind of like a talent scout and stage manager for a Broadway play—getting the right folks in the right role, and helping turn on the lights on opening night.

The Nature Conservancy has helped facilitate over 350 solar panel installations for homeowners, nonprofits and businesses. All told, that's about a \$7-million investment and a win for clean energy and reducing the use of carbon-emitting fossil fuels like coal. Neighborhoods, churches, an auto dealership and HEAL House, an organization that supports people experiencing homelessness in Warren County, all have solar arrays thanks to the program.



In Polk County, the solar systems installed through the Grow Solar program will avoid greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to 871,449 pounds of CO₂ every year. That's like keeping 15,916 trash bags out of a landfill.

“Farmers, rural businesses and homeowners really are leading the way in solar energy innovation,” Snell says. “Solar’s effective for cutting the cost of energy, reducing our carbon footprint and creating jobs.”

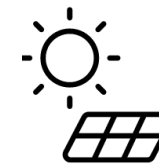
The Conservancy's community organizing approach—and advocacy for good public policy around clean energy—has left a lasting impact in the fight against climate change. “The program is such a huge success and it's so satisfying to see people in the community so happy,” says Snell.

Since 2017, the Conservancy has partnered with 24 cities, 7 counties and over 30 community organizations in support of the Grow Solar program.

PREVIOUS PAGE TOP: After the ribbon cutting at HEAL house © McKinley Conover; **BOTTOM LEFT:** Monarch butterfly © Dac Lee/TNC Photo Contest 2021; **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Black-eyed susan flowers © iStock; **THIS PAGE:** Solar Tour © Graham McGaffin/TNC

DID YOU KNOW?

The Inflation Reduction Act—federal legislation passed in 2022—invests in clean energy



like solar. Qualifying nonprofits and businesses in Iowa can use these recently extended

tax credits and join our Grow Solar program! Contact us for more.

Impacts Include

Expanding clean energy solar in Iowa

Connecting more people to climate actions

Reducing the reliance on coal and other fossil fuels



TOP: © Nick Walkers/TNC; BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT: © Getty Images; © Dale Hanson/TNC; © Moose Henderson



DONOR VOICES



FOR OUR FUTURE

“We give to The Nature Conservancy because protecting Iowa’s biodiversity at a landscape scale is so important to me and my family. It’s something we feel honored to do—not just for ourselves but for future generations and the natural world they will inherit.”

JASON ANDRINGA
President & CEO, Vermeer Corporation
Iowa Advisor/Trustee; 2005-2022

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

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At **The Nature Conservancy in Iowa**,
we envision an Iowa where healthy, functioning lands and waters allow
biodiversity to thrive and where we embrace transformative climate action
for the **benefit of all people and nature.**