

Symposium on Wildness, Wilderness and the Creative Imagination
(2/20-22/05 – Iowa State University)

1. The Practice of the Wild: Imagining Wild(er)ness

(Panel presentation and discussion with audience)

Jack Decker – ISU Agronomy:

Weeds are a direct reflection of us. As we disturb the landscape we create opportunities for invasive species

Debra Marquart – ISU English:

Read from her in-progress memoirs of growing up in North Dakota
ISU in process of establishing a MFA in creative writing and environment

Mark Edwards – Iowa DNR

- Said he was really there representing his neighbors and speaking for the Little Green Frogs Foundation
- Iowa is the most biologically altered state in country
- Ecology – you're someone else's lunch
- Even with efforts expended, feels like they're losing the battle of trail restoration at Ledges... too many people – becoming a naturalist of our own species
- "Where do you live? – Most people don't have a clue"
- 90% of our time is spent indoors
- 64% of Iowa is corn and beans
- The amount of saved 'wilderness' in Iowa is about 13 square miles, roughly the size of Des Moines. (at least this is what I thought I heard him say—that's state parks and preserved areas minus the roads and cabins, etc)
- In 1937 Iowa led the nation in establishing state parks, following new federal legislation; today we're near the bottom.
- Transition from Conservation Commission to DNR has made it a political entity because head is appointed by governor.
- We use the language of machines instead of the language of ecosystem. Alternative: using language in Buddhist sense of humans as part of nature... not a part from nature. [Later audience comments: the three Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christian, Jew) teach human dominion; the Eastern and indigenous religions see humans as one part of whole nature. We have been taught that we are "special" so we find it shocking to be told that we aren't, that we are part of the whole; we need some connection]
- Each of us needs to recognize our place in life and deal with it on a personal level.
- Too many of us don't know wildness/wilderness/prairie; we don't experience it except by TV nature channel
- phrases: literary ecology, Environmental Imagination (*The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* by Lawrence Buel)

Audience/panel discussion:

- differing definitions of wildness/wilderness; Afghanistan warlords are also wildness

- we want to turn everything into morals; we have a spiritual crisis; society turning to organized religion as to opium, only worse; turning to symbols as most important instead of focusing on what the symbols represent (I found it ironic to hear this statement on the same day the Des Moines Register headline about Supreme Court looking at whether Ten Commandments can be posted in government buildings)
- political power of religious groups – we need to be able to talk to each other; - observation in one lifetime: farms used to be pastoral with woodlots, orchards, fencerows and fields that changed colors through the seasons; now farms are industrial agricultural operations seeking dollars
- New York has more state-owned land than any other state. Iowans tend to mistrust public ownership of everything (land, universities, TV stations, etc); Iowa also last in childcare... and yes that has a connection to topic – because kids are disconnected from nature; one of the speakers gave example of leading a field trip and child asked, “is that a tree?”
- follow your passion – all we can do: Does the fish know it’s wet? Do we know we have a role? We have to be part of the system. We have to be the adversary, but we also are the allies.
- “I think we’ve oversold wilderness as something to experience... we need to give wilderness a break.”