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Re: An open letter to Iowa's hunters

Dear Hunters:

Like most of you, I use and enjoy Iowa's public lands. You might run across me out there sometime. I usually have my camera, and I will be taking lots of pictures of little things—butterflies, flowers, snails, and the other things that make up Iowa's biological diversity. I probably won't be out there so much during hunting season, but if you are fishing, hunting mushrooms, hiking, camping, or bird watching you might see me.

Many of us use Iowa's public lands for more than one outdoor activity. Usually those uses are compatible, but sometimes they are not.

About ten percent of the public lands managed by the Iowa DNR are in some form of agriculture lease. These lands usually have some kind of management requirements in order to benefit game animals—a certain percentage of the crop is left unharvested as a food plot, for example. Managing public lands with agricultural leases in order to benefit hunting has a long history in Iowa, and was probably a good practice in the past. I would argue, however, that it is time to critically examine that practice and change or eliminate it.

Agricultural practices and the habitat value of agricultural land have changed in lots of small ways over recent decades. The rows of corn and beans are closer together. The spaces between the rows are "cleaner", with less habitat for birds and other wildlife. Pheasant harvest and roadside survey numbers have dropped drastically, to about one fourth of those of the early 1960s. Has modern agriculture degraded the land's habitat value? Would some other kind of management of these acres produce better more pheasants or deer per acre, and a better hunting experience?

Agricultural practices have an adverse effect on Iowa's water quality, and in fact on the quality of waters all the way into the Gulf of Mexico. If you fish, wouldn't you rather fish in waters that are a little less green, and that don't have a bad odor? I know I would.

Besides the fertilizers that cause the algae growth, other agricultural chemicals have adverse effects on Iowa's waters and biological diversity. Neonicotinoids are blamed by scientists for causing bee deaths, and are banned by several countries. They are widely used in Iowa as seed coatings (an example is Poncho VOTIVO.) Herbicide resistant crops and the herbicides used with them are blamed for reducing monarch populations (by reducing the numbers of milkweeds). Broad spectrum fungicides (like Stratgo YLD) are now routinely used in crop fields to attack the dozen or so fungi species that can reduce yields of corn or beans. What effect do they have on other species of fungi (like the morel)? Maybe none, or maybe we will find out in a few years. The point is that agriculture, especially with today's intensive practices, has an adverse effect on the environment beside just the land being farmed.

Finally there is the issue of the "Beginning Farmer" program. A rule passed in 2013 directs the Iowa DNR to give priority to beginning farmers in its ag lease program. The rule is found in Chapter 456A.38 of the Iowa Code. On the face of it the program seems harmless enough. The Iowa DNR has a long history of accommodating the needs of various interest groups. But who does the land belong to? One particular farm advocacy group that also sells insurance has a long history of opposing the acquisition of any land for public outdoor recreational purposes. Is the land to be managed for them?

I plan to push for agricultural leases to be phased out. Hopefully others will push the idea as well.

How would you manage this land for hunting without the ag lease program? I think it can be done, and can be done better than it is now. I have a hard time believing that growing more corn and beans on public lands is the best use of this resource.

I would encourage you to contact people you know in the Iowa DNR with your concerns. Contact your state representatives. Contact the Governor. You know how to advocate. You can contact me if you want, but I will just pass your comments on to others.

I can be reached at: harlan.ratcliff@gmail.com. While I am not a hunter myself, I do think that the hunting community is the key to making this change happen.

Sincerely,

Harlan Ratcliff