Some alternatives for multiple use land management in southern Iowa

Abstract: Information was gathered by a conservation group to aid the Southern Iowa Development and Conservation Authority in creative planning for future land management.

Question & Answer

Q: How can agriculture and recreation interests find ways to cooperatively share or protect unique lands?

A: By moving beyond past practices and embracing new solutions and partnerships to manage Iowa landscapes.

Background

Competition exists between farm and recreation interests for ownership of southern Iowa forest, hunting, and riparian lands. The communities with the least farmable cropland have proved particularly attractive to land purchases by hunters, nature lovers, and public conservation agencies.

Public agencies have been buying land for public recreation since the 1930s. Sizable recreation areas are now owned and managed by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and by some county conservation boards. However, the government is much less likely to buy land today because of budget problems.

Private buyers of recreation land are the dominant force in the purchase of woodlands and marginal farmland. Such buyers usually are investors (with hunting interests) from outside the community and often from outside the state. Other buyers are more interested in year-round enjoyment of nature such as for day trips, weekend cabins, or future retirement use. A survey of Iowa forestland owners showed that recreation, wildlife habitat, and conservation have become the major reasons for ownership, rather than timber production or investment.

Southern Iowa still has some relatively cheap recreation land which is attracting buyers from greater distances. These buyers have an advantage over local residents whose per capita incomes run 11 to 38 percent below the Iowa average. As a result, 40 percent of southern Iowa farmland owners do not live in the area. Iowa in general now has more leased land and fewer owner-operated farms. The issue of how absentee owners will view recreation and conservation is a thorny one.

This study aims to creatively consider ways to preserve the agricultural and natural heritage of the area, while meeting the growing demand for outdoor recreation space. A landscape where farmers only produce commodities, where hunters buy land only to produce game, and where preservation interests buy land only for “nature to take its course” likely will disappoint all three groups. Cooperative approaches are needed to benefit all stakeholders.

Approach and methods

The project focused on Appanoose, Clarke, Davis, Decatur, Lucas, and Monroe counties. These counties were selected because they were most affected by the presence of public lands and most likely to have prairie and oak savanna remnants. They also had potential as...
sites for nature tourism that would boost rural economies. Similar situations also may be found in other southern Iowa counties.

Four main tasks of the project were to:

1. Document appropriate management methods for savanna and prairie ecosystems, based on interviews with researchers, public land managers, and private owners of managed resources;
2. Determine community attitudes and opportunities regarding recreation land and ownership trends, based on three focus group discussions;
3. Identify how government programs and the tax code may help accomplish community and conservation goals, based on numerous interviews with selected professionals; and
4. Sponsor meetings for selected agriculture and community leaders to discuss information collected, choose worthwhile ideas and prioritize those ideas for action plans.

**Results and discussion**

Public land and farmland occupy two opposites of the land use spectrum with privately held recreation land in the middle. The most common land use practice in southern Iowa is farmland owned and managed for agricultural production, with free hunting and fishing for family and guests. Another common practice has been the purchase of land by public agencies for the purpose of free hunting or other recreational use. The *Iowa Sportsman’s Atlas* shows more than 73,000 acres of public recreation land in southern Iowa counties, a substantial recreation resource for Iowans. There are no specific access fees for public land in Iowa. This is particularly valuable for sports enthusiasts who lack access to private lands and waters.

There are other possibilities for added economic and conservation benefits from recreational land use. Some of the alternatives might be:

**Hunting fees.** Only 4 percent of southern Iowa farmers earn income from hunting fees and leases. Marketing is difficult because few hunters are paying such fees in Iowa. In addition, various expenses may affect net income from hunting fees. Farmers may have to provide food plots, habitat plantings or other wildlife enhancements. Increased game populations may prey on crops. Liability insurance may need to be purchased by farmer-owners. Legal liability changes considerably when a landowner charges a fee for access to land because the owner has invited the person onto the property for the financial benefit of the landowner.

**Hunting leases.** Hunting fees and hunting leases pose similar liabilities. However, there is less exposure with leases because there is less exposure to the public. Hunting leases may require very little marketing, may involve only one other person, and may entail a relationship of trust lasting for several years. Leases also may be more attractive because landowners retain a great deal of control over who uses their farm and how they act when on the farm. Some leases specify what game may be harvested and set a specific hunting season.

Several factors affect the value of hunting leases. Among them are the

- size of the land holding,
- quality of wildlife habitat,
- ease of access,
- proximity to urban centers,
- proportion of public vs. private land in the area, and
- overall quality of the hunting experience.

**Purchase of hunting rights.** It is surprising that hunting leases carry so little market value compared to ownership of recreation lands. It is possible to identify small tracts of land that have zero net agricultural value. Farmers have scant economic reason to keep these lands, but hunters will pay competitive market prices for recreational use, plus speculation on future appreciation of recreation land values. A farmer could sell recreation opportunities using a long-term contract that exceeds the value and duration of a traditional hunting license. The farmer may consider several legal instruments (easements or covenants) to sell recreational rights while retaining ownership of the farm.

**Leasing from private recreation land owners.** The ownership and management of land are two distinct issues. Those interested in recreation may purchase land with no idea of the management needs and responsibilities involved. The farmer may see the land’s agricultural production potential but overlook the forestry, wildlife, and recreation opportunities.
There are fewer owner-operated farms than in the past. Tenants must work with owners to manage the land and help achieve the owner's goals. A further wrinkle occurs when absentee owners (especially urban owners) have different needs and interests than locally-based owners. It may be beneficial for a tenant to negotiate a lease that includes more than cropland or pasture rent. The more services a tenant provides, the greater the leverage available for negotiating a favorable lease. Good communication with the owner will help the tenant know what services are valued and suggest options of which the owner may not be aware.

Bartering with recreation land owners. Farmers often want additional land or labor and hunters often want more land on which to hunt. There is a good chance that farmers and recreation land owners can find something of value to trade or barter. Even hunters interested in creating wildlife habitat may find value in leasing food plots for corn production or rotating a livestock herd into grasslands at a strategic time to help manage vegetation.

Bartering is the exchange of property of services without the exchange of money. The value received from bartering is considered income (according to the I.R.S.) and is subject to taxation. Three examples of bartering opportunities are:
1. Recreational access,
2. Grazing or haying on recreation/conservation lands, and
3. Labor.

Conservation easements. These legal arrangements can maintain land under private ownership while protecting landscapes and natural areas from undesirable development or land uses. Often, easements are donated to conservation groups in anticipation of income tax deductions for the value of the gift. Sometimes easements are purchased by government agencies or conservation agencies. The Natural Resources Conservation Service has programs to purchase cropland converted to wetland and grassland.

Conservation easements may be especially useful for protecting prairie and oak savanna remnants, as well as outstanding tracts of hardwood forests. Owners who want to protect their natural areas from excessive future logging, overgrazing, land clearing or various kinds of development can do so by transferring a conservation easement to a government or non-profit conservation agency.

Policy makers may need to rely more on conservation easements to achieve wildlife, recreation, and water quality goals where there is significant landowner opposition to more publicly owned and agency managed land.

Cooperation on public land. The historic model of public land being acquired and managed using the general tax revenues of federal, state, and local government has not worked well in recent years. Conservation budgets have been shrinking relative to the rate of inflation. Even when funds exist to buy land, there is little new revenue to manage the land well over time.

Even where the user pays, there are problems. Hunting and fishing license revenue has not kept up with inflation. Camping fees and timber sales are returned to the state's general fund with no assurance that this revenue will benefit land management budgets. New uses such as hiking or equestrian trails may increase agency costs but produce little additional revenue. Conservation professionals are forced to let nature take its course on a lot of public land.

Public land managers will need to barter for services in an attempt to trade value rather than trading cash. Loggers could pay less for logs, but then improve habitat or manage timber stands and recreational access. Farmers leasing food plots could do more to control weeds and invasive species but pay less for their leases. Livestock producers using rotational grazing could help maintain grasslands for optimum plant diversity and wildlife habitat.

Conclusions
Four goals are suggested for further discussion by state and community leaders. These goals attempt to define the greatest opportunities for working with specific interests involved in southern Iowa.

1. Focus on public awareness: educate current and potential recreation buyers about being a good neighbor and a good steward of the land.
2. Focus on the farmer: design a program to help farmers develop conservation land management enterprises that provide services to recreation landowners.

3. Focus on recreation buyers and nature tourism: design a cooperative ownership approach that protects land, increases the tax base, and improves recreation experiences.

4. Focus on conservation lands: create conservation, recreation, and biodiversity plans in and around selected public lands.

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