



Interview Guide

www.iowanaturalists.org/commonground

Selecting a Partner

Asking someone to participate in an interview is a way of honoring their experiences, knowledge, and feelings. There is no "right" person to ask. Select someone you are comfortable talking to, whose life you are curious about, and whose stories you would like to hear, preserve, and share. Make sure they know that their stories could become public, if you both wish.

Creating your Interview Space

Sound quality is essential to a successful interview. Most of us don't have access to professional recording studios, but you can "sound proof" many spaces with a few adjustments. The main goal is to eliminate background noises and use a space that absorbs sounds, rather than bouncing sounds around.

- Ideal rooms are **small, soft, quiet, and full**. Carpet, rugs, blankets, and closed windows and drapes all soften the room and prevent sound bouncing.
- Avoid rooms with tall ceilings, hard floor and counter surfaces, bare walls, empty bookcases, lots of street noise, and **noisy appliances**.
- Use **comfortable seating** close to each other that doesn't move, rock, or creak.
- Set your phones or other devices to **airplane mode** so you are not interrupted by calls or texts.
- Always hold the microphone of your recording device toward the person speaking, ideally **6-10 inches from their mouth**.
- Record carefully. Stay focused on your conversation and **your partner**.
- Have water available for you both, but not snacks.



Preparing for and Conducting your Interview

Preparing ahead of time will help settle your nerves and keep your interview moving more naturally. Because *Common Ground* is meant to explore our shared experiences with our land and natural resources, the interview should be centered around your partner's experience in "the outdoors," but modify your language as needed (on the farm, in nature, etc.) to fit their experiences.

- **Plan your questions.** Thinking ahead of time about what you will ask allows you to focus on listening to your partner. Share your questions with your partner before the interview, so they can reflect on them too. Aim for a **45 minute interview** to ensure that your partner has enough time to tell their story, without getting fatigued.
- Remember this is a **conversation**. Your questions are a guide, not a script. There are no right or wrong topics, as long as the conversation is meaningful. Know which questions are most important for you to ask, but be present and engaged with your partner, not your question list. **Look at your partner**, not your questions or device.
- Start by introducing yourselves, including your names, ages, your relationship, and the date and location of the interview.
- Keep it **about your partner**. You are giving them the chance to tell their story, not telling yours. Don't interrupt in the middle of story. Keep a notepad to jot down follow up questions if needed.
- **Keep questions open-ended.** Open-ended questions start with phrases like "describe," "tell me about," "explain how," "what kind of," etc.
- Don't feel the need to fill every silence. Gaps in conversation can be edited out. **Give your partner time to think and reflect.**
- Vivid, personal, concrete, meaningful, and emotional experiences make the best interviews. Tell stories. Bring up favorite memories. Be yourself. Laugh and cry with each other. Don't be afraid to use the time to **express your feelings toward the outdoors and each other.**
- Your goal is to help your partner **paint a picture with words**. Ask questions that allow them to focus on experiential details. People don't connect with facts and stats. We connect with shared experiences, memories, and feelings.
- Save time to **thank your partner**. Tell them what the sharing of their experiences has meant to you and what their influence in your life has been.



Sample Questions to Get You Thinking

There is no specific list of questions you should ask, because your interview should be guided by what you want to learn about the other person and the flow of your conversation. Use these sample questions as a springboard for your preparations.

Questions to Get Conversation Flowing

- Where are you from? Describe your home or hometown.
- What is your family like?
- Describe the first time we met.

Questions about the Outdoors

- What is your earliest memory of the outdoors? Your favorite memory?
- Describe the most profound experience you've had outdoors, or the most fun.
- What was the hardest thing you've ever done outdoors? The dumbest thing?
- Describe an important outdoor place for you. Why is it so important to you?
- Tell me about a time that you experienced love/joy/doubt/anger/peace/frustration/fear/etc. in or about the outdoors.
- Is there someone with whom you disagree in regards to the outdoors but still respect or love?

Questions to Help Create Detailed and Vivid Stories

- And then what happened? (Good stories have a beginning, middle, and end.)
- How did that make you feel?
- What were you thinking in that moment?
- What was that place like? How did it smell? feel? sound?
- Why did that place have such an influence on you?

Reflective Questions to Bring the Interview to a Close

- What legacy would you like to leave?
- What advice would you give another person about enjoying the outdoors?
- What do you hope for the future of this place?
- What are your hopes and wishes for me or my children?
- When you think about the future of our outdoor spaces, what are you most scared of? What are you most hopeful for?



How to Record Your Interview

You can easily record your interview using a computer, smartphone, or tablet you already have, or you can use a portable digital recorder. Sound files need to be in .mp3, .mp4, .wav, or a comparable digital audio file. *Common Ground* is not able to use files recorded on cassette tapes.

Smartphones and Tablets

Apps make recording easy. Search "audio recorder" in your app store to find one that works for you. It doesn't have to be complicated, just make sure it has the capacity to export your recording as a sound file so you can submit it to *Common Ground* if you wish. Voice Memos, which is pre-installed on iPhones, works great.

No one knows how to facilitate community interviews better than the expert team of National Public Radio's StoryCorps program. The StoryCorps App provides even more information than this guide. It also allows you to publish your interview to the national StoryCorps archive if you wish.

External microphones that plug in to phones or tablets will improve your sound quality, but are not necessary if you take care to make sure you are keeping the phone pointed toward the person speaking.

Computers

A wide variety of computer software exists to help record sound on computers and quite a bit of it is free. Apple computers often come with Garageband pre-loaded. Computer recordings generally need external microphones.

Portable Digital Recorders

Portable digital recorders are what radio and other reporters use. High quality ones are becoming more available at lower prices, but using a digital recorder is best for those with previous experience, tech experience, or a high interest in using the recorder beyond the scope of *Common Ground*.

Your recorded interview will likely use a lot of storage space.
Make sure you have at least 500 MB of available storage.



Document with a Photo

Photos can provide a tangible image to complement the stories and memories shared throughout your interview.

What you and your partner choose to document is up to you. You can:

- Take a selfie with or without your partner, or have someone take a photo of you together
- Document the place, animal, or landscape discussed in your interview
- Make it abstract or realistic, macro or landscape, light-hearted or serious, with or without people

Some photos may be used in a traveling art exhibit, so please take and submit your photos with the highest resolution possible.

Your Community Facilitator:

To Submit Your Interview and Photo:

Visit www.iowanaturalists.org/commonground
for a link to submit your files.

Contact your community facilitator
or the project coordinator if you need assistance.

Common Ground is a project of the Iowa Association of Naturalists and is inspired by the StoryCorps project of National Public Radio. Much of this guide is based on resource materials provided by StoryCorps.

www.iowanaturalists.org/commonground

