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Winneshiek County Conservation to collect ‘Stories of the Land’

Winneshiek County Conservation is launching *Common Ground: Stories of the Land* to record and gather stories, memories, and experiences relating to the natural world and the outdoors from across northeast Iowa.

Common Ground helps participants conduct and record short interviews with people they care about and respect, interviews focused on concrete experiences and memories that help participants explain their love for and connection to the natural world.

“For many of us,” says project coordinator Lilly Jensen, “our deepest connections to the outdoors come not from facts and statistics, but from personal experiences. This project is meant to help participants share that connection through stories, memories, and conversation.”

Finding Common Ground

The project is free and open to participants of all generations, ages, backgrounds, knowledge bases, and places of residence. In fact, says Jensen, the entire goal of the project is to build connections between different individuals and communities by helping them find the common ground they share in how they use, enjoy, and care for the outdoors.

“I may think I have nothing in common with another person,” says Jensen, “and then realize that we had similar experiences at an outdoor camp as a child, or both enjoy searching for spring woodland flowers, or both feel the same way about watching the stars come out at night. Suddenly, we have a starting point for a conversation about why we value the outdoors, the role it plays in our lives, and how we might continue to have meaningful outdoor experiences in the future.”

Authentic Conversations

Common Ground is meant to facilitate authentic conversations between people. “This isn’t sitting down for a formal interview with strangers,” says Jensen. Instead, participants have a focused conversation with someone they already know. “Think of it as a chance to learn something new about someone you care about or respect: listening to their memories and stories, asking questions, sharing laughs.”

“Of course, even that can be kind of intimidating,” adds Jensen, “so we have a full set of resources to help participants have a successful and, most importantly, enjoyable experience.”

Sharing the Stories

“Ultimately, we hope to share some of these conversations across the state to help us all recognize the common ground we share regarding our natural resources and the land,” says Jensen.

But, says Jensen, conversations can also remain private between conversation participants. “We are just happy encouraging folks to actually talk about and give value to their outdoor experiences.”

How to Join In

There are multiple ways to participate in *Common Ground* depending on your comfort level and experience, but the best way to start is to register with the project at www.winneshiekwild.com/commonground.

“Our goal is to support people in whatever way they need,” says Jensen, “so registering allows us to tailor our resources and assistance individually.”

Information and instructions are available on the website. Resource packets containing full instructions and guidance, as well as microphones for use with smartphones and laptops, are also available for check-out from the Decorah Public Library.

Jensen will also be hosting multiple “Recording Hours” throughout the fall in partnership with Decorah Public Library where “all you need to do is show up with your partner, ready to talk.” A full list of recording hours dates and times is available on the website, and additional opportunities may be added.

Organizations and groups from across the region are encouraged to contact Jensen if they are interested in hosting similar recording events at their facilities or with their communities. “You provide the participants, and we will provide everything else,” says Jensen.

Common Ground is a project of the Iowa Association of Naturalists and is brought to Winneshiek County and Northeast Iowa by Winneshiek County Conservation with the assistance of the Decorah Public Library and other partners. More information can be found at www.winneshiekwild.com/commonground.