

Watershed Bragging Boards

Zion Gifford

“Bragging boards” give fishers a place to proudly display photographs of themselves alongside their catches and catalogue information such as date and location of catch. Visiting my local outdoor sports store and viewing their fishing bragging board, I was surprised to see that none of the photos indicated anything about the location where the fish was caught beyond state, and few of them were caught in Iowa. In fact, many of these fish were tropical ones caught nowhere near their place of display. In a place that seemed intent on fostering connection to local community and environment—posters for hunting-related charity events, advertisements for local-interest environmental documentaries, announcements of area waterfowl hunting—these majority out-of-place and even detached-from-place fish stood out as somewhat counterintuitive.

Throughout my work in Dr. Eric Gidal’s Bioregionalism course, the theme that has stuck out to me most has been the desire and need for a sense of “common-place.” Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, interviewing farmers involved in watershed-scale conservation efforts, observes that her

... fieldwork demonstrates that the commonplace of the watershed succeeds in its rhetorical work to prompt farmers and landowners to embrace conservation efforts based on their identification with the watershed. They consider themselves responsible members of a common-place: a shared material and symbolic site that mobilizes those who identify with it to make substantive changes on its behalf. (82)

Robert, a conservation staff member of the Clear Creek Project interviewed by Druschke, described this process of identification on a local level through making memories:

... people have their mental map, and I think that kind of allows us to take the creek [...] and, um, gives a little bit of a sense of ownership in the concern that we have for that creek. And I think out of that produces a lot of memories that people might have about the creek. Family-type connections. (87)

Thinking of the place-less fish on the local bragging board, I wondered how this tool of community-building could be used to foster not just attachments to fish, fishing, and fishers, but to specific smaller-scale place, all the other living creatures present in that place, and all the other connected watery places and all their other living creatures, thus moving people toward identification with and responsibility for their watershed.

In contrast to the shockingly-un-local local physical bragging board, [the Iowa Department of Natural Resources fishing page has multiple online bragging boards](#) that, alongside their photographs, include the specific body of water that the fish was caught in. While I felt a much more keen sense of these fishes' (and fishers') places in their environment/community when presented with this more specific (and local) location information, I still struggled to identify these places in connection to each other and their wider environment. Inspired by this more place-specific version of a bragging board, I looked to online "counter-mapping" projects for further guidance on how a more inter-connected sense of place could be developed.

Attempting to "digitally archiv[e] LGBTQ2IA+ experience in relation to physical space," [Queering the Map](#) allows visitors to anonymously drop pins on a global map and attach a written

account of their experience in that place to the dropped pin. Queering the Map's hyper-specificity of location and the inclusion of personal experience through text allows for rich senses of place to be conveyed, while the emphasis on these experiences happening within a larger context of other peoples' experiences as visible on a global map allows for inter-connected community narratives to materialize. Combining the strengths of Fish Iowa's online bragging boards, Queering the Map, and local physical bragging boards, my project aims to foster a sense of "common-place" in the watershed through location-specific on-site environmentally-educational community "bragging" boards.

Each board would follow a shared format. One section would display a map of the watershed with a pinpoint at the spot of the board, encouraging viewers to consider the watershed's existence, their place within it, and the water that connects all of the watershed's locations. One section would display fish, other animals, and plants that may be found in the area, tailored to the specific site's environmental composition. These lists would not be exhaustive but would serve as a starting point for community members to observe their surroundings with more care, paying attention to small details and the interplay between different facets of the environment (water, plants, animals, and themselves). Learning from Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, these fish, plants, and animals would be labelled with their common names as opposed to scientific classifications. Common names would allow for the average sign-reader to obtain more information that describes the animal or plant (in comparison to more obscured information within scientific classifications) and would be more memorable, encouraging the community members to form more intimate relationships with the creatures through knowing their names (208-209).

The other half would feature a bulletin board, allowing the community to display visual or written accounts of their experiences within the area, whether that be fishing, birdwatching, picnicking, dog-walking, etc. A pad of paper and a pen would be provided to ensure that most community members are able to contribute something without preparation. A good location for these displays may be near preexisting constructed recreational/shelter areas, such as gazebos, as these areas would likely have higher traffic. While the educational section of the board would be made to resist the natural elements long-term, it would be advisable to display the whole board under an awning to provide some form of shelter to protect the community section contributions from some level of weather before removal.

Provided with this proposal is a mock-up of one possible Watershed Bragging Board located within the Cedar River Crossing park. Choices of animals and plants were made using data from the [Iowa DNR's River and Stream Details](#), the [Cedar River Crossing website](#), and the [Johnson County Conservation Board Cedar River Crossing 2023 Floristic Inventory](#). Example community board photographs were taken from the Cedar River Crossing Google review images, [Johnson County Conservation – Nature Notes \(How to Explore Cedar River Crossing: South Half\)](#), and [Johnson County Conservation – Nature Notes \(How to Explore Cedar River Crossing: North Half\)](#).

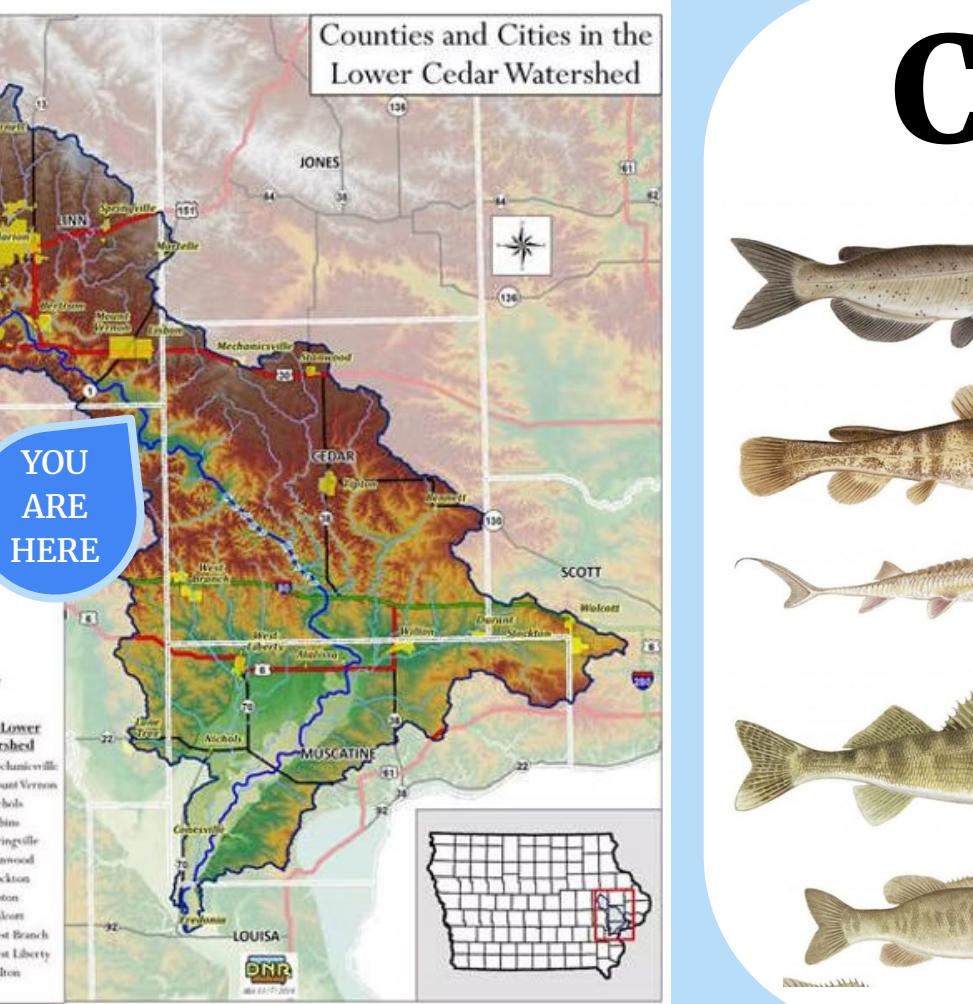
By sharing a variety of experiences within the area, community members would not only form their own emotional attachments to the location but also reinforce these attachments for others, contributing to a shared sense of and identification with place. By having these experiences be framed within the specific context of the watershed, community members would consider their and others' experiences within an environmental context and consider how their location's water is shared with other communities within the watershed. With this increased

identification with their part of the watershed, increased responsibility for and action on behalf of these bodies of water would follow.

Works Cited

Druschke, Caroline Gottschalk. "Watershed as Common-Place: Communicating for Conservation at the Watershed Scale." *Environmental Communication*, vol. 7, no. 1, Mar. 2013, pp. 80–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2012.749295>.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place." *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN, 2013, pp. 205–215.



Cedar River Crossing

