

# Prairie Tales

Sydney Rayl

One of the biggest obstacles between our society and environmental awareness is education. People simply do not know what's happening to the land and water around them. Even people who know that something is wrong with the environment around them may not know about nitrates in the water, how individual practices contribute to degradation, the loss of local biodiversity, or how larger corporations are contributing to the issues. Simply encouraging better practices and awareness is not enough; environmental activists need to start at the source and inform community members why change is needed. The way I am proposing to do this is by getting young children outside, learning about the environment, and writing stories based on their experience. This is where Prairie Tales comes in.

Prairie Tales would be an outdoor educational outreach program working in conjunction with local businesses, local natural areas (namely the Herbert Hoover Historical Site), and nearby schools. Children and educators would travel to a local park and meet with an environmental expert who could tell them various things about the land and water of Iowa and the area they are in. After short demonstrations and exploration of the natural land, children would regroup and write about their experiences. This writing could come in many forms – short stories, poetry, songs, diary entries, or even drawings – as long as they are expressing creative interest in the area that they just learned about. Throughout the event I imagine that local businesses (grocery stores, restaurants) might provide snacks and refreshments in exchange for advertisements at the event. Additionally, the event could be hosted almost solely by volunteers. A possible location for volunteers that I have identified is Environmental Science students at the University of Iowa. Of course, other departments as well as any other individuals who would like to participate could volunteer or chaperone as well, but people studying the environment start with a certain level of connection to the land that I envision would be passed to participants in the event.

The effect of this day would be twofold. Ideally, children would both learn empirical facts about the land around them through the demonstration and develop an emotional investment in the land itself through creative exercises. This empathetic bond would hopefully encourage the kids to continue their interest in their local environment, leading them to pursue hobbies and careers that help preserve our natural areas.

## Past Precedents



Luckily, *Prairie Tales* is not a novel idea and is based on an event that has already successfully occurred. The Iowa Youth Writing Project (IYWP), an arts education outreach nonprofit that operated out of the Magid Center in the University of Iowa, has put on an event called *Writing on the Environment* in Johnson County, specifically involving schools in the Iowa City area. The IYWP has been housed in the Magid Center at the University of Iowa since 2012 and

works with over twenty schools in the area. As a nonprofit organization, they work primarily off of volunteer work, from undergraduates at the University of Iowa, and money from donors. The *Writing on the Environment* event is one workshop that they run alongside many, including various free summer camps. Paris Barraza, from *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, commented on the event in 2022: “The program is inherently interdisciplinary, connecting science to literature to [...] social studies.”<sup>1</sup> Their event had students from the Iowa City School District travel to a local, natural area, most recently in Kent Park, in collaboration with Johnson County Conservation.<sup>2</sup> JCC, in their May 2025 newsletter, had sent out a call for volunteers to help run the event.<sup>3</sup> After the children composed their writing samples, the Iowa Youth Writing Project collected them and formed an anthology to immortalize their work. In addition, the pieces were posted around Kent Park for visitors to view in the context of the land that inspired the creative work. A few years prior, the event occurred at Cangleska Waken, also in collaboration with Johnson County Conservation.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the IYWP has lost funding recently, so I propose this event as a continuation of their efforts to spread the craft of writing to younger generations.



---

<sup>1</sup> Paris Barraza, “‘Youth Have Stories to Tell’: Iowa City Fifth-Graders Write about the Environment in New Program,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.press-citizen.com/story/life/2022/05/22/iowa-youth-writing-projects-program-connects-students-environment-iowa-city-climate-change/9735562002/>.

<sup>2</sup> Iowa Youth Writing Project (@iywp), On Tuesday, along with @johnsoncountyconservation and @iowacityschools, we celebrated, Instagram photo, June 13, 2025, [https://www.instagram.com/p/DK2eTIO1mg/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DK2eTIO1mg/?img_index=1)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/Volunteer%20Newsletter%20May%202025\\_1.pdf](https://www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/Volunteer%20Newsletter%20May%202025_1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Iowa Youth Writing Project (@iywp), We had an absolute blast during today’s final *Writing on the Environment* series at Cangleska Wakan. Today’s session was hosted by Naturalists, May 6, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CdPMZD\\_Milr/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CdPMZD_Milr/?img_index=1)

Michelle Wiegand, a naturalist at the Johnson County Conservation Board, is one of the individuals who helped start IYWP's Writing on the Environment. In personal correspondence, she has outlined that the environmental field trips happen in late April and early May where they will then answer writing prompts. These answers will then be compiled into an anthology which is printed for the students. Any students chosen to be printed in the anthology are invited back to the field trip site, along with their families, to read their pieces out loud and share a meal. Michelle may be an ideal candidate for a contact and resource when attempting to launch Prairie Tales.

The first four images included in this document are images taken directly from the IYWP's Instagram posts, as cited below, from the event. From these images it is evident that the Writing on the Environment has not only brought students and families together, but it has brought them closer to the environment, a tradition I hope Prairie Tales can continue.

## Future Changes



Despite the precedent that IYWP has set with their wonderful program, there are some changes that I would suggest moving forward. One of them, namely, being the range of students invited to attend. I think one of the best things that IYWP did was work through the schools, getting their services out to a wide range of children. However, the schools did not mingle with each other often. To truly share the wonder of nature and get new ideas communicated and expressed among many people, the kids should all be together, meeting new students their age that they might not have met before. Everyone in the community should be invited to this event.

To achieve this, I recommend partnering not only with local schools, but also with community-oriented organizations and businesses like the public library. They may be able to organize readers and promote the event, spreading information about Prairie Tales through an accessible medium that will be often interacted with by the kinds of people who may be interested in writing and stories.





may not care much about what a creek looks like in the summer may be fascinated by the variety of life found in the same location in either spring or autumn.

Additionally, I would recommend a collaboration with the Cedar County Conservation Board. They have many educational programs, including day trips. They have opportunities to arrange field trips and programs, of which I believe Prairie Tales could begin to be a part of. Pictured to the right are images taken from their website<sup>5</sup> depicting education programs they have held in the past. These images are evident of Cedar County Conservation Board's dedication to the continued environmental education of young Iowans, not just in a classroom, but out in nature. This hands-on approach, allowing kids to not only learn about the environment around them, but allowing them to physically interact with it, is pivotal to an event like Prairie Tales. It will create in the students an emotional connection and true motivation to care about the land and water around them, a connection and motivation that is cemented through the creative writing about their experiences. Writing is not passionless, it is personal. Combining that emotional act with a first-person experience with the environment is key to cultivating passion and interest in our land and water for future generations.



## Goals

One of the main goals of Prairie Tales is to get people reconnected to the world that they live in. People only prioritize caring about the land and water around them if they are shown why they should care about them, and this demonstration does not come from scientific reports or textbooks that they encounter in the classroom. Instead, it comes from memorable experiences. There is a different, qualitative experience to knowing that nitrates are in the water and getting to read a water sensor while watching the water from the creek rush past, feeling the cool stream in your fingers. I want kids to go out and feel the stream. It creates a unique, personal experience that children will remember for the rest of their lives. Doubly, Prairie Tales will produce artistic expression invoking

---

<sup>5</sup> "Environmental Education - Conservation - Cedar County, Iowa," accessed December 9, 2025, [https://cedarcountry.iowa.gov/conservation/environmental\\_education/](https://cedarcountry.iowa.gov/conservation/environmental_education/).

passion for the environment, something that these children, and other participants, will be able to return to a reread for the rest of their lives, reminding them of that one day in the park where they truly understood the threat we posed to our environment.