Iowa Water Center

*Spirit of the Water*

Essay Contest

2020
About the Spirit of the Water Essay Contest

Without water, there would be no life. Water serves as a medium in which we can grow healthy plants, innovate in industry, and play in the outdoors. From supporting our natural habitats to running through our kitchen faucets, it allows us to flourish as a community of living beings. It not only sustains us but inspires us.

In fall 2020, we invited high school students in Iowa to respond to the following prompt:

As the old adage goes, a picture is worth a thousand words - even the complexity of an active ecosystem can be captured within a single snapshot. Scientific discovery and an emotional connection to the landscape often comes to be by seeing the splendor of nature and the devastation of negative impacts, such as soil erosion or flooding.

Through this essay contest, we seek to challenge Iowa high school students to take a deep understanding of a snapshot of nature and explore how a single moment in time can inform our understanding of water resources.

This anthology includes the submissions for the prize-winning essays that expressed creativity and engagement with this year’s prompt.

This essay contest was made possible by a generous donation from Betty and Dennis Keeney.

2020 Essay Contest Judges

Linda Shenk
Associate Professor
Department of English
Iowa State University

Richard Cruse
Director
Iowa Water Center

Melissa Miller
Associate Director
Iowa Water Center
About the Iowa Water Center

Established in 1964, the Iowa Water Center is one of 54 federally funded Water Resources Research Institutes: one institute located in each state and four U.S. territories. These institutes are part of the National Institutes for Water Resources (NIWR) that serves the public by supporting research and providing community outreach. Since its inception, the Iowa Water Center has been located on the Iowa State University campus. This land grant university provides the ideal environment for the Iowa Water Center to assist researchers in their pursuit of cutting-edge research and to inform the public about water resource issues.

The Iowa Water Center uses diverse expertise from researchers, communicators, and policymakers to address water-related issues. Our purpose is to identify research needs, fund water-related research, and connect research results to the public through outreach and education. We support building statewide research capacity and education services while serving as an incubator for water-related research projects. We inform decision-makers to help Iowans better manage their water resources. Although our work centers on issues of local importance, the outcomes we produce have regional and national implications.
**Table of Contents**

Foreword.................................................................................................................. 1

Statement from Dennis and Betty Keeney......................................................... 4

2020 Spirit of the Water Essays................................................................. 5

  First Place: Madelyn Rose................................................................. 5
  Second Place: Heidi Du................................................................. 8
  Third Place: Samantha Roth.......................................................... 12
Foreword by Linda Shenk

This year’s Spirit of the Water essay contest challenged Iowa’s high school students to explore the way a single moment captured through one of these award-winning visual images informs their understanding of water resources:

The essays that were submitted engaged the complexity of the role water plays in Iowa—water as a powerful force that uproots, ravages, renews, repurposes life; a play-space where we race flowers downstream, feel worms wiggle underfoot, and marvel at wildlife; a place that demands collaborative, creative responsibility.

Each essay in the collection explores its own questions and connections, but all put forward the need for bringing together diverse ways of knowing, which is what both storytelling and, I would add, collaborative research do at their best. Storytelling has long been celebrated as a means to integrate multiple ways of knowing—emotional, experiential, relational, and scientific. These essays capture such diversity, emphasizing the need to listen for, and to, the wisdom of scientists, conservationists, artists, residents, other species, and water itself. Likewise, university researchers are increasingly collaborating across disciplines and directly with communities so that we use our different expertise to produce knowledge together.

In this collection of essays, I see the same emphasis on collaboration and multiple ways of knowing, as the writers bring together the role of researchers, the practice of conservationists, and the imagination of artists. In addition, these writers create space for other sources of knowledge embedded in our relationships and in our everyday lives. These writers let me experience and learn much in their essays. In Heidi’s narrative, I followed its integrations across seemingly disparate spaces and ecosystems—watched her bring together the role of the beloved family cat with the cycles of life around the pond in the urban setting of S. T. Morrison Park and then connect those worlds with Cardinal Marsh Wildlife Area that scientists and conservationists are working to protect. Heidi reminded me of how our urban and home settings are part of the same cycles as those protected wildlife places. In Samantha’s piece, I joined her characters in hushed admiration as the two sisters watched birds alighting on the water and noticed the reminders of recent flooding that had uprooted trees and damaged homes. Throughout this story, Samantha’s narrator playfully shared her knowledge and—with such grace—gave her younger sister the space to use that knowledge to make her own discoveries. That profound wisdom reminds us that allowing others to discover and take ownership of the story is just as powerful as sharing our own knowledge. In Madelyn’s (Missy’s) piece, I saw the way she took the image of the dancing water of the riffles and wove together years of personal experiences that ranged from charming tales of flower races and befriending wildlife to the stark realities and respect for water’s powerful flooding. Missy placed these experiences not only with her own individual growth but also as an expansion that goes beyond “wisened words” to an awareness of what water itself teaches. Missy’s work places her personal story within the larger frame of water and all the other stories that she and others downstream and upstream have and are creating. A story of water is a spirit of multiplicity that cannot be contained, and, as Missy reminds us, it expands outward.
I, too, am drawn to the myriad of stories of water that cannot be contained and to how the knowledges of our stories and experiences with water expand the knowledge needed to celebrate, protect, and prepare for the potentially destructive power of water. As part of my work, I have collaborated with geoscientists to create a simple computer simulation model designed to have groups tell their stories, recognize how those stories contain crucial knowledge, set group goals for action, and conduct a collaborative project with researchers and community partners. This work is about the power of combining local and personal stories with the stories of research. By training, I am Shakespeare professor who applies my background in performance and storytelling to collaborative community engagement and action. Working with communities in Iowa and their stories has emphasized for me that a great story is measured not only by its artistic beauty but also by how it leaves space to inspire stories in others.

With this idea in mind, the stories in this collection are exciting and provocative, and, I hope, they will inspire you to tell your story. How might your story of water and your ways of knowing contribute to the way we understand—and act on—the spirit of water in Iowa?

With sincere thanks to our essay writers for sharing their wisdom with us.

Linda Shenk
Associate Professor
Department of English, Iowa State University

1st Place: Madelyn (Missy) Rose
2nd Place: Heidi Du
3rd Place: Samantha Roth
Welcome to the Spirit of the Water Essay

Betty and Dennis Keeney

April, 2020. Madison, Wisconsin

This is the third essay contest we have sponsored and each one seems to be better and more creative. We were delighted with this set of essays and hope you will enjoy them as much as we did. Thanks to the contest organizers, Melissa Miller and Rick Cruse, and to Hanna Bates for putting this anthology together. The essays fit together beautifully with photo contest entries.

It is so important that the young people of Iowa become vested in water resource issues. They are inheriting landscapes that have challenging water issues: quantity which varies as affected by climate change, and quality as affected by soil erosion, concentrated animal feeding facilities and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers, and urban encroachment.

We are proud to continue this wonderful program. Thank you, Linda Shenk, for devoting your time and talent to the essay contest. Betty and I have plans to continue our support of this activity. We can hardly wait to see the submissions next year.

Dennis Keeney, Emeritus Professor, Agronomy, Iowa State University

Betty Keeney, Home Economics Education
So Flows Knowledge From Water and Dreams From Streams

Madelyn Rose

12th Grade, Dalla Center Grimes Community High School

Dallas Center, Iowa
So Flows Knowledge From Water and Dreams From Streams

Churning, gurgling, racing water dances at my side. At my side, foam bursts in a frothy ballroom dance across endless deep blue water, pounding back and forth, in swirls and lines, jumping around the river. Here I witness the return of a stream from a winter’s frozen fingered sleep. The water awakens with a surge, melting rapidly to become rapids. Rushing across Iowa, freezing cold water breathes new life into a quivering ecosystem. As spring encompasses the land, so return the animals from their slumber. Sluggish trout and walleye warm up to pace; squirrels emerge from hidey holes in trees; and robins line the skies in their flights home. With the warmth, with the water, I watch the world awaken.

I adore this river. I’ve watched it grow, adapt, and change in my years, cutting through hills and valleys, eroding the land to form a new picture. Racing waters of this river in the past have seen me learn to play, dare to dream, and grow into myself. Like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, I built stick shelters and big dreams. My mind swirled with the waters and I danced with the stream. With friends I raced flowers, any dandelion or violet we could find, down the river. We met deer and befriended squirrels. These waters have taught me a great deal about life and not just childhood wonder or wisened thoughts. These waters have taught me about them, about their power, water’s power.

Water is an essential building block to life, science tells me this, I remember; I learned. With water, life follows, until it saturates fields and towns. Science states: water is an essential building block to life; But it forgets to mention that water can also destroy life.

In 2008, Cedar Rapids, Iowa faced devastating flooding. Muddied brown water surged through the city, my city, carrying with it waste, parts of buildings and houses, garbage, and sickness. And when those waters left, when the tides fell, destruction was all that was left for us, destruction and respect. Water, we had learned, is unpredictable, a force of its own, and it
takes in everything in its path. We gained an awed sort of respect following the disaster, but we did not fully respect water until we realized, while it holds great power, we can hurt it too.

Pollution has run through this stream before. Runoff from fields and hills, chemicals and human waste have littered its waters. I try not to remember such times, not with a future so bright. We have laws now, and rules. Our practices have improved. Farmers plant cover crops in an effort to reduce runoff and they use sustainable farming practices to retain the beauty of our river. Strict fines accompany polluters. We want the magic of water, our water, of our river, to last.

I could write stories about the millions of ways we use this river; Downstream a few miles is a dam we use to power our town and control the raging waters; Beneath my feet groundwater streams are fed by the revived river; Upstream is a spot the fishermen share with the canoers; Downstream farmers use this river to irrigate their fields; and all along this river animals drink, live, and swim. All along this river animals thrive, kids play, and people work. It’s a stream out of time, ever and endlessly loved.

Churning, gurgling, rushing water, what a sight. I hope to see the world awaken in a dance of crashing waves and breaking ice, again and again, for the rest of my life, each time with mind and eyes anew.
Meandering Ashes
Heidi Du
9th Grade, West High School
Iowa City, Iowa
Meandering Ashes

My cat liked to go to the little pond at Saint Morrison Park on the Coralville Strip. He would sit there very still, eyes fixed patiently on the ducks that quack and meander around during the sunset as swaths of creamy orange and flamingo pink blend with the hues of blue on the misty horizon. When we were told by the nice doctor in Tiffin that he was very sick and had only two more weeks to live, my parents and I drove back down to that little pond where the ducks swim and let him out of the car.

He slowly made his way to the shore, paws gently leaving indents in the soft brown soil atop wiggling worms. He crouched by the rocks and the waving water grass. His ears twitched at each sound that emerged through the whispering fog and cricket chirps, a singing cardinal, an occasional quack breaking the muted murmur of soft waves lapping rhythmically at the rocks.

We watched him sit there patiently until stars began to tumble through the black cascade of night, painted across the landscape in sweeping strokes by the moon’s nimble fingers. Then, we drove back home in silence.

Soon after, my cat’s life ended. He was cremated and sent back home in a carved wooden box. Later, we took the ashes and went back to the duck pond as the sun said goodbye, scattering pinches of flaky white dust over the clouds of rosy water vapor that steamed up from the silky surface of the water in the hot summer breeze. Still, the ducks dawdled along in the water, a splash there, a quack here, aimlessly continuing their plight.

My cat is still alive. And so are all the ducks that no longer quack, and the fish in their stomachs, the crickets, the tall grasses, even the earthworms and the singing birds, and all the other living organisms that are all once again part of the Earth. They are returned to nature, their
tissues and organs and bones decomposed into the soft brown soil, feeding new plants that strain towards the painted sky, fueled by the water and nutrients that rush through their veins.

This delicate cycle is nothing short of a wonder. For millennia, it has been ongoing and constant for all the organisms on Earth. In every ecosystem on this planet, water is vitally present. In our own bodies, it makes up sixty percent, and on the Earth’s surface, seventy-one. Water is part of what allows us to breathe, sleep, move, function. Without it, all living things would cease to be alive. Water is precious, and we must begin treating as so.

For example, the nearly twelve hundred acres of land that is the Cardinal Marsh Wildlife Area consists of hardwood trees, marshes, a river, and native prairies. The water level in the marshes is carefully managed by the caretakers in order to preserve a dynamic environment that allows animals like pheasants, Canada geese, waterfowl, deer, turkeys, and rabbits to migrate and reproduce in the spring, as well as help vegetation grow in the fall. If not for this careful assessment by the scientists and workers in the Area, the organisms would likely fare badly.

Easy access through concrete walkways allows visitors to explore and achieve a deeper understanding of the connections in nature, as well as enjoy the vast landscape. Currently, the wildlife staff is focusing on how to better help the prairies flourish and manage new plots of land.

Cardinal Marsh is one of many areas where dedicated scientists and wildlife workers alike recognize the importance of preserving natural ecosystems and the powerful connections it has with humans. The devastation of other ecosystems that have been greatly affected by pollution, flooding, deforestation, soil erosion, overpopulation, overuse of natural resources, and quite plainly, the reckless, largely uncontained hands of the human, needs to be halted.
immediately. When one realizes how much we depend on nature’s cycle and all its wonders, one can finally begin to appreciate and care for it correctly and in a sustainable fashion.

I like to think that my cat is alive. I like to think that his ashes are dancing in the rolling waves, swept up in currents and weaving through the waving water grass. He’s alive, meandering around the pond where the ducks still float, gliding through the water, snapping at fish, an occasional conversational quack as the trees etch their silhouette into the reflected atmosphere of nature’s color palette, lazily looping in a circle that continues its curves in an everlasting cycle of life.

Still, the ducks dawdle along in the water, a splash there, a quack here, aimlessly continuing their plight.
The Life-Sustaining Treasure

Samantha Roth

10th Grade, Earlham High School

Earlham, Iowa
The Life-Sustaining Treasure

A duck dove under the water, the light of the sun turning the droplets it kicked up into diamonds as my camera quietly captured the moment.

“This lake is so beautiful,” my young assistant whispered next to me, drawing her knees up to her chin.

I sighed, looking out over the lake that was reflecting the fire kindled in the sky by the rising sun. I felt like the luckiest person in the world to be a wildlife photographer right now. I looked down at my little sister, talking softly to avoid startling the ducks. “You got up pretty early to come out here. Are you still sleepy?”

“No,” she shook her head before a yawn betrayed her.

I smiled, and both of us directed our attention back to the lake.

We watched the ducks drift along, the hoarse, persistent sound of quacking reverberating in the air.

“I wish all lakes could be like this,” my little sister looked up at me, her braids glinting back the rays of the sunrise.

“Me too,” I sighed, thinking of other lakes that I had visited that were no where near this pleasant. “This lake has been protected as a place for wildlife to live and as a place for those who love nature and being outside to enjoy. People have work hard to try to keep the lake free of trash
and other pollutants, so the ecosystem is healthy. Look!” I pointed to the shore further along the lake where a small herd of does had stepped out from the woods.

A half-grown fawn followed behind its mother, twitching its tail back and forth and stretching it’s neck out in anticipation of a drink. It stopped at the lake next to its mother, and I quickly took a picture before watching it bend delicately toward the lake, which was rippling from the slight breeze. Both me and my sister held our breaths. A moment later the fawn lifted its head, snout dripping. It flicked its ears back and forth. Once they had drunk, the deer began to slowly make their way down the shore further away from us until they disappeared back into the tree line.

“Do you see those logs tossed way up on the bank up there?” I asked my sister after a moment.

She nodded.

“That’s from the floods that happened last spring,” I explained. “The river that this lake connects to overflowed, and it wiped away everything that was on the flatter land down here. I came to take a few pictures for the wildlife newsletter that I help to work on, and huge logs were being tossed around like toothpicks. The water covered several bridges further upriver.”

“I remember that flood,” her brow wrinkled. “Mom drove over a bridge on the way to my soccer practice, and the river was out of its banks. It was scary.”

“Look!” I exclaimed, pointing out over the lake at a large bird flying low. “A herring!” I whipped out my camera and took several pictures.
The herring landed near the far bank of the lake, startling a flock of ducks that went flapping away, protesting loudly, to another spot on the lake a little way off.

“That’s a beautiful bird,” my sister commented.

“Yes,” I agreed. “What type of herring do you think it is?”

“A Blue Herring.”

“Correct,” I said, and she grinned.

The herring waddled quietly through the water, looking down.

“It’s fishing,” my sister said, squinting against the sun which was now shining into our eyes after rising over the top of the tree line on the opposite shore.

I focused my camera on the bird, zooming in, and we both watched the herring through the screen as it stood in the water, its long legs and beak making it look gangly. Suddenly, it dove downward, and came up with a struggling, silvery fish in its beak.

I snapped the photo, and looked at my sister. “What did you think of that?”

“Incredible,” she went on staring at the herring.

I looked up at the sky, and took my breath in sharply. “What?” my sister asked and followed my gaze.

“They’re back,” I breathed as we watched a small flock of pelicans fly in and land awkwardly on the lake, their huge, orange bills contrasting with their white feathers and black wingtips.
I stared, watching the huge birds float along on the surface of the lake like large ducks. I had almost forgotten about the camera in my hand by the time my sister breathed that I should take a picture.

I took a few shots before lifting my gaze from the camera screen to the pelicans. “They are migrating. This lake is a place that I’ve heard pelicans like to come to sometimes, but I’ve only seen them here twice myself, and one of the times I couldn’t get any good photos.”

“Does this lake help them since they stop here during migration?” my sister asked.

“Yes. They’re very shy birds, so having a place that is usually pretty quiet like this is perfect for them,” I said.

“The whole ecosystem of the lake is incredible,” my little sister said, resting her chin in her hands. “The environment is perfect for the creatures that live in it, whether permanently or only when migrating.” She stared out over the lake at the pelicans. “I want to help to preserve places like this for the animals who live in them and the people who enjoy them. The lake is kind of like the foundation of it all: if it weren’t for it, these animals wouldn’t live here,” she gestured towards the flock of ducks that had been slowly drifting further away from us.

“Which is why it is such a treasure,” I said.

My sister grinned. “A wet, life-sustaining treasure for everyone to enjoy.”
Learn more about the Iowa Water Center and the *Spirit of the Water* Contest at water.iastate.edu

© Iowa Water Center, 2020. All rights reserved.