

## People Used to Swim Here [Word Count 599]

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At the risk of sounding like an older guy with older ideas -- Iowa is no longer the place I grew up in. And, yes, in some ways that's a positive thing. As many have said, change is good. It often means improvement, and some of the advances I've witnessed in my nearly 60 years have certainly been for the better.

Yet when you talk about Iowa agriculture and its impact on our state's family farms and environment, the opposite is shamefully true. Iowa has not just changed; it has declined. Steeply. Catastrophically. Just take a look around or catch a whiff of the air and you'll know something is very wrong. The rampant growth of poorly regulated, polluting, unsustainable industrial agriculture is the problem. Our public health, our way of life and, alarmingly, our water quality are rolling downhill faster and faster.

To paraphrase that famous quote from a well-known movie, "Des Moines, we have a problem."

People used to swim here. Did you know that? Clean, clear public waters were once a proud characteristic of rural Iowa. These lakes, ponds, creeks and streams were also what we called swimming holes. They dotted the landscape. Not so long ago there was nothing better than a day in the sun with your family, friends and neighbors in local waters. I wonder if anyone has done that lately? Seems to me it would be hard to do since 80% of Iowa's waters are impaired. That means our Department of Natural Resources rates nearly 700 public waterways as unhealthy and unfit for use. Many of our once crystal clear blue swimming holes are now green, foul-smelling, algae-choked cesspools. That's how it looks -- and how it smells -- when your state is ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in water quality. And that's what Iowa has become.

How did this happen?

Maybe you've seen or smelled those sprawling, stinking CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations) as you drive with your windows up and your eyes watering along Iowa's roads. They would be hard to miss. Huge facilities housing millions of hogs and chickens are what dot our landscape now. Iowa is plagued with more than 8,000 CAFOs that produce more animal waste per day than the human waste from all of Iowa's cities combined multiple times over. And what do you think happens to all that chemical-laden, pharmaceutical-infested manure? Anyone gone swimming lately?

If you're wondering whose bright idea it was to cash-in our water quality for these monstrosities, then look no further than Des Moines. The trail stops at our laughably misnamed Environmental Protection Commission, an arm of our state government charged with preserving and protecting our natural world. The fact that only 20% of our waterways are safe should tell you everything you need to know about EPC. Its policies routinely turn a blind-eye to the basic needs of family farmers and the environment, while favoring actions that featherbed the multi-billion dollar agenda of polluting, unsustainable corporate farming. Captured by Big Ag, EPC is not protecting Iowa's future. It is presiding over our destruction -- one swimming hole at a time.

Iowa matters to me, and I'll bet how far this state has been degraded in the name of private profit and government inaction matters to you, too. Right now we have an opportunity to register our opinions to DNR, EPC and the politicians by providing public comments on proposed CAFO rule changes. The deadline is May 13.

Raise your voice, Iowa. The mindless rubberstamping of business objectives over our farms and environment is not only bad for family farmers; it's bad for all Iowans.

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