

## MNRA WORKING GROUP

### President Report

May 1, 2025

Over the past year, a University of Iowa review committee has consulted with the community concerning the management of Macbride Nature Recreation Area (MNRA).

The review is part of a standard process whereby the university regularly evaluates programming and centers. The goal of such reviews is to ensure fiscal sustainability and alignment with the university's mission of excellent education and research opportunities for a broad array of students.

The committee included shared governance, collegiate, and administration representation. Following their charge from the President the committee organized into three subcommittees focused on:

- Finance and History
- Academics
- External Groups

This report represents a synopsis of the information received by each group.

### Executive Summary

- The University of Iowa has leased the Macbride Nature Recreation Area (MNRA) from the United States Army Corps of Engineers for the past 60 years. During this time, the MNRA has provided a physical connection between the community and the university.
- Additionally, the MNRA supports the UI's academic mission by hosting, on average, 33 courses that educate 592 students per academic year in the colleges of Education, Law, Liberal Arts & Sciences, and University College.
- To maintain the MNRA in a safe and reliable manner, the university will need to invest approximately \$14.8 million in the first year and at least \$900,000 in recurring funding.
- The key programs identified with MNRA (School of the Wild, Iowa Raptor Project, and Iowa Wildlife Camps) will continue to operate through the University of Iowa's College of Education regardless of the decision made on MNRA's management.
- If the UI ends the lease, the site will revert to Corps of Engineers property and remain in its natural, undeveloped state, like other areas around Lake Macbride managed by the Corps.

- The committee engaged multiple external community organizations to seek partnerships to support MNRA operations. While the external groups were receptive to the engagement, none of them could support a partnership.
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## Finance and History Subcommittee

Rod Lehnertz, David Kieft, and Josie Welker

To maintain the MNRA lease with the Corp of Engineers for UI and public use, two costs must be addressed:

- **One-time costs:** To fix current conditions and site/facility shortcomings that affect safety and operation.
- **Ongoing costs:** Annual UI investments for site and building maintenance, repairs, utilities, and services.

These investments are required to ensure the site remains safe and operational as a UI-managed location, that welcomes and hosts the public and hundreds of school-aged children.

The committee identified the following safety and conditional/operations needs that would require UI funding:

### Roadway and walkway conditions:

MNRA features 2.2 miles of asphalt paving that has been in place since the UI began the lease in the 1960s. After approximately 60 years of use and exposure to various weather conditions, a significant portion of the MNRA roadway system requires full replacement.

- An alternative to replacement, gravel or wood chips, were deemed not feasible due to snow removal and maintenance requirements.

UI Parking & Transportation (UI P&T) maintains and repairs all main campus/institutional roads and possesses substantial experience in basic roadway maintenance. Through inspection of MNRA, UI P&T provided the following assessment and preliminary cost estimate:

- The total estimated project cost for appropriate road/walk repair and repaving - \$6,633,000.

### Cellular and data reception:

UI Information Technology Services (UI ITS) and UI Public Safety have noted the lack of reliable cellular service at the remote MNRA site. Of particular concern are unregistered public visitors who may need to call for help in an emergency.

Additionally, the absence of data, phone, and internet service has been identified as a challenge for potential UI student use of MNRA. To enhance safety and provide public data access at the MNRA site, UI ITS provided the following preliminary scope and estimate:

- Site-wide cellular coverage (500 acres) for connection and emergency/safety purposes - \$800,000
- Wireless service within the primary MNRA buildings and classrooms - \$12,000 initial cost + 7,200/year

## Site and Building conditions and operations:

Due to limited funding, both Recreational Services and the College of Education relied on staff to handle maintenance amid other duties. No dedicated UI maintenance or landscaping teams were established for MNRA, nor fully funded. When management shifted to the College of Education (CoE), Rec Services shared information on MNRA's physical condition and urgent needs with associated costs. Many building and landscaping services were performed by local contractors or volunteers. This work has been coordinated by 1.25 FTE employed by Facilities Management until October 2024 and then the CoE since.

With CoE ending its funding for MNRA maintenance in January 2025, Facilities Management has reviewed the Rec Services document to address conditional and operational issues at MNRA.

- Year 1 facility, technology, and landscape repairs and updates - \$14,845,000
  - Includes all currently identified facility repairs, a new severe weather storm shelter, required restrooms, fallen/failing tree removal, equipment repair/replacement
- Annual operational/care cost estimate – \$917,200/year
  - Building and landscape maintenance/repair + Utility costs + Water system maintenance

There is currently no specific UI or departmental source of funds allocated for these expenses, which are associated with the no-cost lease from the Corps of Engineers.

If the UI ends the lease, the site will revert to Corps of Engineers property and remain in its natural, undeveloped state, like other areas around Lake Macbride managed by the Corps. Unless the Corps identifies another partner to lease and manage the land, they may require the UI to demolish any existing facilities that could pose safety concerns at an unoccupied/unmanaged site.

The cost of demolition is estimated to be approximately \$500K, to ensure the site is clear of vacated structures. If a new leasing partner is established by the Corps, that entity might decide to maintain and manage the existing facilities.

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## Academic Programs

Tanya Uden-Holman, Sarah Hansen, Marco Morel, Brian Morelli

The subcommittee interviewed more than a dozen faculty and staff from multiple colleges who utilize MNRA within their curriculum or to support their research. MNRA supports the UI's academic mission including:

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- The Department of Earth & Environmental Sciences typically enrolls around 250-300 students per year in courses that include outdoor field labs or field trips.
- Lifetime Leisure Skills (LLS) Department has offered 139 for-credit classes to 1,928 students, reflecting 29,866 contact hours over the past five years.
- MNRA is used by at least 18 University of Iowa user groups (including colleges of Education, Law, Liberal Arts & Sciences, and University College), as well as others external to the University.

Feedback from campus stakeholders includes:

- College of Education students had “unbelievably positive” feedback about MNRA and saw it as transformative for their future classrooms.
- MNRA is critical because it represents the natural state for conducting research as opposed to Kent Park or Hickory Hill, which have been regrown and altered.
- MNRA's centuries-old forest offers a unique research environment for various species. It recently attracted global scientists to study a 17-year cicada brood emergence. One faculty member stated that MNRA is “crucial for teaching fundamental biology principles.”
- UI students across disciplines gain hands-on experiences. For example, 300 elementary education majors each year engage in practicum experiences at MNRA.
- Respondents noted a variety of obstacles including transportation barriers for students, ADA gaps, and insufficient facilities like storm shelters and bathrooms.

Some faculty utilize MNRA exclusively while others use MNRA and other field opportunities spread across Johnson County. Additionally, the UI has at least two research projects connected to MNRA while four other universities and government agencies have ongoing research at MNRA.

Faculty and staff using MNRA for research and academics said because the land has largely been untouched for hundreds of years it provides a unique ecosystem to study how living species are evolving with changing weather patterns, a potential bellwether for human health.

Programs conducted and hosted by the University of Iowa (e.g., School of the Wild) are managed and staffed by the CoE. The CoE has explored alternative locations for these programs and indicate that by the end of summer 2025, they would be able to secure sites, allowing all programming to continue.

Recreational Services teaches Lifetime Leisure Skills courses “designed to engage students in fun and healthy recreational activities that can be continued beyond college and throughout their lives.” (Source: UI General Catalog). Courses typically taught at MNRA have included kayaking, hiking, and wilderness first aid. While not ideal, course instructors reported they could likely find other venues for hosting these courses if MNRA isn't available.

The Raptor Project is also managed through the CoE. To remain active, it will require new facilities and a confirmed site. While potential sites and the associated costs for securing and

maintaining the raptors can be considered and studied, a new or different solution is not included in this summary.

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## External Groups Subcommittee

Craig Just, Pete Matthes, Ben Walizer (Emily Campbell previously)

Members of the subcommittee engaged with and received information from a variety of organizations and individuals since the fall semester.

Below are some of the comments the subcommittee received about the MNRA from various organizations from the community:

- MNRA is ecologically significant, and it should be protected
- I host an annual, week-long training event at MNRA and “I can’t imagine doing it elsewhere”.
- If the UI ends the lease, hopefully some sort of public access could be negotiated with the Corps.
- One community group’s response to them assuming the lease “No. Too much deferred maintenance”.
- People “love” the spaces at MNRA and there are issues with cell service and storm safety.
- The MNRA provides an example of the “wild” natural communities that once blanketed Iowa. Studies have shown the importance of being outdoors to our physical and mental health
- MNRA continues to serve UI staff, students, alumni, and the broader community in multiple ways.

The committee also requested feedback from the public via a widely disseminated email address. All but 6 of the emails received requested the university maintain MNRA and the distribution of those respondents is shown below:

	Respondents	% of Respondents
UI Faculty & Staff	88	13%
UI Students	8	1%
Johnson County Residents	272	40%
Non-Johnson County Residents	120	18%
School of the Wild	165	24%
K-12 Students	23	3%
Total	676	100%

Public feedback prompted the committee to seek engagement with community organizations to evaluate their interest in pursuing any of the following collaborations:

- **Assume Full Responsibility of the Terms and Remainder of the Lease:**
  - Commitment: Partner assumes full responsibility for the MNRA lease.
  - Financial Commitment: Determined by the partner.
  - Benefits: Full control over MNRA operations and programming.
- **Become Primary Lease Holder with UI as a Partner:**
  - Commitment: Partner becomes primary lease holder, with UI as supporting partner.
  - Financial Commitment: Shared initial investment and annual costs, with UI contributing a portion.
  - Benefits: Collaborative management, leveraging UI's expertise and resources.
- **Shared Partnership with UI and Other Community Groups:**
  - Commitment: Multiple partners share the lease and responsibilities.
  - Financial Commitment: Proportional share of the \$14.8 million initial investment and \$907,200 annual costs.
  - Benefits: Distributed financial burden, diverse input in management decisions.

#### **Commitment Terms:**

- **Minimum Duration:** 6 years (3-year commitment with 3 years' notice for ending the partnership).
- **Minimum Investment:** Must cover complete road repair, internet and phone coverage, water quality improvements, and storm shelter protection.

These community organizations declined the opportunity and to the committee's knowledge the Corps of Engineers has no plans to develop the land.

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## **Conclusion**

### **Positives**

- **Academic and Community Value**
    - MNRA supports ~33 classes annually, serving ~592 students across multiple colleges
    - Hosts research projects for UI and other institutions
    - Programs like *School of the Wild* and *Raptor Project* foster hands-on learning and environmental education
  - **Broad Community Support**
    - Strong endorsement from community members
    - Community members see MNRA as ecologically significant and beneficial to health and education
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- **Unique Natural Resource**
  - MNRA offers a rare “wild” environment, providing natural experiences not available elsewhere in Iowa
  - Facilitates popular outdoor recreation courses like kayaking, hiking, and wilderness first aid
- **Strategic Alternatives Considered**
  - The committee outlined partnership models involving UI and external groups, promoting collaborative solutions

## Challenges

- **Significant Financial Investment Needed**
  - **Initial costs:** ~\$14.8 million for road repaving, facility repair, internet/cellular infrastructure, storm shelter, etc.
  - **Ongoing costs:** ~\$917,200/year for maintenance and operations
  - No current budget allocation from UI for these expenses
- **Infrastructure and Safety Concerns**
  - Aging roads and facilities require urgent repair
  - Limited cellular and internet service pose safety and usability issues
  - Lack of storm shelters is a risk for users, particularly school groups
- **Operational Uncertainty**
  - College of Education will end MNRA funding by Jan 2025
  - Recreational Services previously lacked dedicated maintenance staff or budget
  - If UI relinquishes the lease, the Corps of Engineers may require demolition of structures (~\$500K)
- **Limited External Interest in Lease**
  - Despite community support, no external organization committed to assuming the lease due to financial burden and deferred maintenance