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# AMERICA'S WILD LEGACY



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## LOST RIVER KARST SYSTEM

INDIANA

Photo by Bowden Quinn



One of the most complex hydrological systems in the world winds through southern Indiana. The Lost River is dotted with deep springs, caves and sinkholes. Except for the period following heavy rains, a 22-mile section in the middle of the river is dry, while the water continues to flow underground, coming back to the surface in impressive springs called “rises.” The water flows underground at depths of up to 150 feet.

The Lost River has been called an “underground Grand Canyon” and “three-dimensional river delta.” Without warning, the caves can quickly fill up with water. People are discouraged from going into the caves because they are too fragile and too dangerous. The caves are home to at least 24 extraordinary creatures- nineteen of which are endangered or rare, and five, including the northern cavefish, which can be found only in this region. This system ranks among the top 10 caves in the country for plant and wildlife richness.

Relatively little is known about subterranean systems, like the Karst. In order to preserve the cave’s opportunities for research and discovery, it must be carefully protected. But a plan to allow a 31 percent increase in logging in the nearby Hoosier National Forest jeopardizes the cave system and the Lost River with new roads and construction. Septic tanks associated with the development of new homes in the area threaten to disrupt the delicate river system.

In order to save this rare and mysterious wonder for future generations, the Sierra Club is working to designate the Lost River Karst system as a Wild and Scenic River, and to create a buffer zone around to protect the fragile habitat of the caves.

## THE LOESS HILLS

IOWA

Nestled near the Missouri River, the Loess Hills are one small vestige of the vast prairie that once blanketed Iowa. The rare landscape—a combination of steep peaks and prairie—is not found anywhere else in the United States. In fact, the National Park Service has designated 12 Special Landscape Areas within the Hills’ 660,000 acres.

The connected ridges of the area provide an important wildlife corridor. Animals that find refuge in the Hills include wild turkeys, bobwhites, foxes, mink, and badgers. Herons, ducks, hawks, and songbirds also nest in the area. Plains pocket mice, ornate box turtles, Great Plains skinks, and rare prairie rattlesnakes burrow in the Hills.

But these untouched prairies will likely disappear within the next fifteen years if we don’t protect them now. Without a comprehensive plan and consistent budget for resource protection, The Loess Hills will fall victim to mining, development, off-road vehicle abuse, invasive species, and wind

and water erosion. Sedimentation, pesticide, and fertilizer runoff have already affected streams in the area.

The Sierra Club and local allies are working to save this remnant of the vast prairie that once spanned the nation’s heartland by securing conservation easements to protect 20,000 acres by 2020, and ensuring that off-road vehicle bans are enforced.



Photo by Jim Redmond