

CATHY WURZER: So if you need help identifying buckthorn or poison ivy, finding snowshoes or ways to help the environment, there is a TikTok account for you. Our producer Gretchen Brown spoke with Angie Hong, the educator behind @mnnature_awesome.

ANGIE HONG: There is an entire back water channel of the Mississippi River south of Saint Paul, Minnesota, that was plugged up and stopped flowing for 50 years due to a clogged culvert. When the Mississippi River flows through Minnesota, it takes this really wiggly route as it goes through Minneapolis and Saint Paul, and then it takes a very sharp turn at the bottom of Washington County right by Gray Cloud Island.

In the same place, there's a long skinny channel that separates gray cloud island from the rest of the county. In 1923, the county built a road across the channel so that people could get to the island, and there was a culvert underneath the road so that the water could continue flowing through. But there was a couple of big floods in the 1960s, and the culvert got plugged, so the water couldn't flow through.

And for 50 years, it just sat there stagnating filling up with sediment and muck and all sorts of algae. Finally, five years ago in 2017 the South Washington Watershed District and Washington County worked together to build a bridge, and the water is flowing free again. If you head there during the summertime, you can actually float a canoe or a kayak down the stretch, and it's this really great kind of secret stretch of river that almost nobody explores.

GRETCHEN BROWN: That's the voice of Angie Hong. She's a nature educator who coordinates the East Metro Water Education Program working in Chisago, Isanti, and Washington counties, and she posts to over 80,000 followers on TikTok. Her handle is @mnnature_awesome, and she joins me now. Hey, Angie. Welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

ANGIE HONG: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

GRETCHEN BROWN: You seem to be someone who finds a lot of joy in nature. Let's listen to another recent TikTok of yours.

ANGIE HONG: I thought I'd show you what an oak savanna looks like in the winter. And then I thought, nah, I'll show you a trout stream with watercress in the winter. And then I thought, you know what? Let's just go for a hike in the woods. All right. Now, we're walking down the railroad tracks. And no, don't worry. There are no trains coming.

It can be a tricky time of year because there's not enough snow yet to go skiing or snowshoeing, but it is definitely cold. But I kind of think there's a little bit of magic to this time of year because, really, you get the whole place to yourself.

GRETCHEN BROWN: I mean, a lot of joy in that video. You just have kind of an infectious joy in your work. Tell me a little bit about that clip that we just heard.

ANGIE HONG: Sure. Well, I think one of the best parts about working so hard to protect the environment and protect the lakes and rivers, prairies, woods, in our area is actually getting to go out and enjoy them occasionally. So there is a place, Standing Cedars Community Land Conservancy up in Osceola, that is one of my favorite hidden gems.

I like to go there a lot with my son and my dog, actually, and it's one of those places where we almost never see other people. But they've been doing a lot of great oak savanna, prairie woodland restoration over the years. It's just such a fun place to go and explore and watch the changing seasons.

GRETCHEN BROWN: Yeah. This time of year, it's cold. It's dark. A lot of people just stay inside. How do you find ways to connect with nature in the winter?

ANGIE HONG: I totally relate to that feeling, and I've also learned from personal experience that if I don't go outside, that's when the seasonal depression really hits you. I try to build in time every day that at least once-- maybe in the middle of the day-- I'm going out and taking the dog for a walk.

Put on some ice cleats over my shoes so I can go hiking on the trails or even get out there on my skis or my snowshoes. But it really helps me to just get that fresh air and get a little bit of rejuvenation every day.

GRETCHEN BROWN: It's so easy to get just annoyed by the cold and the ice and the snow. I mean, is it having the right gear? Is it going to the right place? What makes the difference for you?

ANGIE HONG: Yeah. I definitely think having the right gear. I know there was two articles in particular that were transformational for me when I first moved to Minnesota 20 years ago. And the first-- it sounds silly, but just buying a pair of snow pants.

Because all the way through high school, all the way through college, even if I was going out sledding, I would be wearing jeans. And of course, you were always too cool, so you wouldn't even want to zip up your jacket. But just getting a pair of snow pants and being able to walk comfortably without my legs freezing.

And then the other thing that made a big difference for me was when I bought my first pair of mukluks as boots. And they keep your feet so warm, and they're so light that you don't get that feeling when you're wearing heavy winter boots where it's just like clump, clump, clump, clump, clump, clump, clump. You know? With the mukluks, it's kind of like wearing giant socks, but they're really warm. I bought the same pair of snow pants and the same mukluks 20 years ago, and I'm still wearing them today.

GRETCHEN BROWN: We're asking people around the state how they find joy in winter, and I'm wondering if you could share specifics with me. Give away your secrets. What's your favorite thing to do in the winter, and where do you do it?

ANGIE HONG: I started about five years ago cross-country skiing, which is all to say that I am not very good at it. I am slow as bejesus, but I really enjoy doing it anyway. And particularly, I go to a William O'Brien State Park or Pine Point Regional Park. But the other thing that I just crazy, crazy love doing is sledding.

GRETCHEN BROWN: I love that.

ANGIE HONG: I actually love sledding with my dog. Obviously, my son, too, but my dog-- I will bring her along, and she chases the slide all the way down the hill and then kind of tackles us at the bottom. It's the funniest thing ever. So it doesn't even need to be driving up to a state park. We'll just go to the middle school down the road from here and go sledding for an hour. And it's just the most fun thing to do in the winter.

GRETCHEN BROWN: That's great. I think you're inspiring me to buy a sled.

ANGIE HONG: Yeah. Yeah, you definitely should.

GRETCHEN BROWN: Do you have suggestions for a frame of mind shift for people who find it hard to appreciate this time of year?

ANGIE HONG: Yeah. There's that saying. "If you choose not to find joy in the snow, you will still have the same amount of snow, just less joy," which I think is definitely true. There is plenty of times that I think, oh my gosh. It's so cold. I don't want to go outside. But there is almost never a time that I regret going out once I have.

I'm also just kind of choosing to enjoy the beauty of the season. So looking around and saying, oh, wow. Isn't that snow pretty? And isn't it nice that I get the trail to myself? And isn't it cool how quiet it is when I'm walking? Or isn't that a funny noise that my feet make when I'm walking in the snow when it's going crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch? So just kind of trying to notice those little but enjoyable things.

GRETCHEN BROWN: You make it sound so easy. Let's talk about your TikTok account for a little bit. How did you get started posting on TikTok? Is there a story there?

ANGIE HONG: I mean, I think it's the typical COVID story that a lot of people have. So I've been coordinating this shared water education program in the East Metro, lower Saint Croix area for more than 15 years. We had a whole slate of activities planned for the spring of 2020. And then suddenly, everything came to a crashing halt.

And I was not willing to just stop doing public education, and so then I just started making little videos. And honestly for about a year, nobody was watching them. I had just about decided to just stop doing it, and then finally a video took off and another took off and then-- yeah. So I've basically been making them ever since.

GRETCHEN BROWN: I mean, as an educator, what is your goal? What do you want people to take away from your videos?

ANGIE HONG: Ultimately, we're really wanting people to get involved, do something in their life that is going to help to protect and restore the water resources. And whether that's volunteering, planting a rain garden or a pollinator garden at their home-- ultimately, we're wanting people to get excited and get engaged.

It's exciting and inspiring to me because I see how much people in Minnesota care about the environment. There's people all across the political spectrum who consider themselves conservationists and are actively working to protect and restore the habitat in the area. So it's one of those little spots of hope, I think, in my opinion.

GRETCHEN BROWN: Yeah, for sure. Let's leave it there. Angie, thank you so much.

ANGIE HONG: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

CATHY WURZER: That was producer Gretchen Brown speaking with Angie Hong. Angie is the coordinator for Minnesota's East Metro Water Education Program. You can follow her on Tiktok at @mnnature_awesomeess.