

Watershed Stories: Grassroots efforts in Iowa's Raccoon River Watershed

Abstract:

Women farmland owners in Iowa's Raccoon River watershed were engaged in a community-based project using Photovoice, a participatory research method, to take photos and tell the stories of how those photos show their connection to the watershed.

Investigators:

Betty Wells
Sociology
Iowa State University

Angie Carter
Augustana College
Rock Island, IL

This participatory approach to water quality conversations was an effective method of engagement, and contributed to a sustained dialogue. The photographers and PIs organized an ongoing series of exhibits around Iowa, and continue to engage in conversation with media, community members, and one another about water quality in their watershed. This demonstrates effectiveness in building community among the participants and inspiring project ownership.



POLICY

What was done and why?

Photovoice is a community-based process that uses photography and group dialogue to understand topics of importance or concern within a community. It is different than documentary photography. Community members, rather than an outside photographer, take pictures of their own community. The resulting photos and captions, or "photostories," have multiple benefits as a source of knowledge for participants and the community at large.

Because building social networks across watersheds is an ambitious undertaking, the PIs developed a capable, committed partnership with the capacity to engage the public, evolve over time, and sustain change. Partners included the Raccoon River Watershed Association (RRWA) and Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN). In addition to the Leopold Center, support came from ISU Extension Sociology, Iowa Learning Farms (ILF), Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) and local hosts: Whiterock Conservancy, Coon Rapids; the City of Jefferson, Dallas County Extension, and especially the City of Perry library and Town/Craft Center.

What did we learn?

Most of the project's short-term objectives were achieved, although discussions among participants began did not begin until March 2016 and the community conversation about water quality at the public exhibition took place in June, at the end of the project year. The PIs have continued to further disseminate River Stories by involving project participants in speaking for their watershed by hosting exhibitions of photographs and stories at local venues. The PIs will continue to coordinate with RRWA and WFAN to seek additional funds and/or opportunities to support integration of this project in their organizational outreach.

Carter and Wells will create a River Stories publication highlighting the project and featuring photos, accompanying stories, and participant biographies. This publication will be shared within and beyond the watershed through the Leopold Center and project partner networks. Partners will use the Photovoice project in promotional and outreach and education programs.