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

Betty Wells  
*Iowa State University*

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# 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.

## Principal Investigator:

**Betty Wells**  
Sociology  
Iowa State University

**Co-investigator:**  
**Angie Carter**  
Augustana College  
Rock Island, IL

**Budget:**  
\$4,927 for year one

**Q** How might Photovoice, rooted in local experiences, help to create a community-based dialogue about water quality issues?

**A** This participatory approach to water quality conversations was an effective method of engagement, and contributed to a sustained dialogue. The photographers and PIs have 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.



**P O L I C Y**

## Background

The project goal was to embark on a new type of community-based dialogue, one rooted in local experiences, to reduce the polarization characterizing water quality issues. Iowa's Raccoon River Watershed is an important focus area because the nitrate-nitrogen export of this watershed is among the highest in the United States. Challenging demographics also come into play. Nearly 70 percent of the farmland is leased, often from absentee landowners. Farmland owners are aging (average age over 65), and increasingly are likely to be women. Non-operator farmland owners (NOFOs) have an important, often unacknowledged, role in watershed-scale water quality improvements.

Sustained social engagement is a challenge in this and other watersheds. The Raccoon River Watershed Water Quality Master Plan (Agren, Inc. 2011) includes excellent data-based recommendations, but data alone is unlikely to inspire changes in land leases or plans about future land use, increase conservation adoption at a watershed scale, or prompt vital conversations about water. This project engaged diverse groups, with a focus on women farmland owners, and invited dialogue beyond the mainstream agricultural community.

## Approach and methods

Conservation and social engagement research informed this community-based project. In addition to the Photovoice methodology, the PIs focused on building social networks and creating ownership to seed (and sustain) success. A foundation of trust needed for successful collaborations takes time to build. Therefore, they supplemented Photovoice with intentional recruitment, facilitation, and networking.

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



*Exhibit viewers at the Perry Center showing.*

“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. The team leaders also have partnered with the Brenton Arboretum, Iowa Arboretum, and WFAN on exhibitions and receptions.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Recruiting***

Recruitment began at two water quality and conservation meetings for women farmland owners in fall 2015. These meetings, in Jefferson and Coon Rapids, featured peer-to-peer learning and a site visit highlighting a conservation success on a local woman farmland owner’s farm, a model based on the Women Caring for the Land curriculum. The Jefferson meeting, attended by 15 farmland owners, featured a site visit to Chris Henning’s home and farmland near Cooper. The Coon Rapids meeting, attended by 28 farmland owners, was held at Whiterock Conservancy. Liz Garst and Darwin Pierce led a bus tour of conservation sites on the Garst Farm. For more information, see <http://www.wfan.org/raccoon-river-watershed-meetings-for-women-landowners/>

Other participants were recruited at the annual meeting of the Raccoon River Watershed Association on March 5, 2016, as well as through advertisements in local newspapers and newsletters and by tapping into social media and ISU, WFAN, RRWA, and PFI listservs.

### ***Convening***

Participants met several times between March and June 2016. At the convening meeting in March, facilitators Angie Carter and Betty Wells introduced the Photovoice method with an example from a community-based project in Appalachia that engaged local residents in sharing stories about their water quality concerns and efforts to improve water quality in their community. Carter developed a short introductory handout about the methodology of Photovoice (including Photography 101, basic photographic principles). Participants would use cameras (their own or their phone) to capture the story of their watershed from their own vantage points – conservation in process, agricultural practices, wildlife, watershed concerns, etc. – and write short descriptions for each picture. The attendees were provided ample opportunity to become acquainted, share stories, and ask questions. Although attending the first meeting did not obligate the attendees to join the project, all remained active participants from start to finish. Six women chose to engage their watershed by participating in the Photovoice project: Patti Edwardson, Churdan; Chris Henning, Cooper; Jan Kaiser, Woodward; Colleen Radebaugh, Rippey; Courtney Turnis, Coon Rapids; and Danielle Wirth, Woodward.



Photo display board.

At the second meeting, participants brought photos to share and told a bit about them. Facilitators asked, “What stories do these photos tell?” and “What stories are missing from these photos?” The group chose a new name for the project: River Stories: Views from a Watershed. This title was apt because two project participants were from the Des Moines River Watershed, and the group wanted to emphasize ties to both the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers.

### ***Exhibiting***

Participants’ photos and stories were printed and shown at the Perry Town/Craft Community Center in a photo exhibit advertised to legislators, policy makers, agricultural networks, and the local community. The June 12, 2016, event featured a reception and time for Q&A with participants. About 40 people attended.

## **Impact of results**

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.

Potential medium-term outcomes in the next one or two years include:

- efforts integrated into the work of conservation agencies, watershed coordinators, and grassroots organizations,
- increased capacity of landowners to take action on their land to improve their watersheds,
- continued partnership development through continued programming and outreach
- increased capacity of NOFOs with peer-to-peer learning and Photovoice participation,
- continued exhibition of River Stories at local events and venues, and
- publications designed to increase engagement and outreach to non-resident and/or non-operating landowners farmland owners.

## Education and outreach

- Carter and Jean Eells presented “1000s of Acres: Adding Conservation Partners” at the 2016 Iowa Water Conference in Ames on March 23, 2016; the presentation focused on participatory methods and highlighted the Photovoice project process.
- Carter presented “Creating Community in Your Watershed,” an Iowa Learning Farms webinar, on June 15, 2016; <https://connect.extension.iastate.edu/p7vxisg64gq/?launcher=false&fcsContent=true&pbMode=normal>
- Project participants shared 26 photostory boards featuring stories from their watersheds at a June 2016 exhibition in Perry. They also have been shared at:
  - Event and weeklong display at Brenton Arboretum, September 12-19, 2016.
  - Event and weeklong display Central Iowa Arboretum, October 2-9, 2016.
- ISU Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture symposium featured River Stories presentation by Chris Henning and selected photoboards by Henning and other River Story photographers, October 19, 2016
- Evening reception and luncheon displays at the WFAN Conference at the Lied Center in Nebraska City, NE, November 4-5, 2016.
- Additional display venues planned for early 2017: Reiman Gardens, Ames; Practical Farmers of Iowa’s annual conference; and an evening dance at the Old Post Office in Perry.
- Angie Carter created a public, online community through Facebook groups that is open for others to share photostories about their land or see updates about project participants’ photostories: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/298756690466528/>

## Leveraged funds

Iowa Learning Farms, WFAN, and Raccoon River Watershed Association assisted with the planning of the two community watershed meetings and related field components. Carter’s 2014-2015 Toyota/Audubon TogetherGreen fellowship (administered through WFAN) provided \$10,000 for use in planning the community meetings and events. In addition, Wells received some financial support from the ISU Sociology department for travel and supplies.

**For more information,  
contact:  
Betty Wells**  
303D East Hall  
510 Farm House Lane  
Iowa State University  
Ames, IA 50011-1054  
(515) 294-1104  
e-mail:  
[bwells@iastate.edu](mailto:bwells@iastate.edu)