

# In the wetlands, kids at Limestone Community School explore ecology and climate and find their ‘photovoice’

JW [www2.ljworld.com/news/2025/feb/01/in-the-wetlands-kids-at-limestone-community-school-explore-ecology-and-climate-and-find-their-photovoice/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2025/feb/01/in-the-wetlands-kids-at-limestone-community-school-explore-ecology-and-climate-and-find-their-photovoice/)



photo by: Contributed by Imogen Herrick

Limestone Community School students exploring Haskell wetlands to document the area as part of a photovoice project.

Not only is a picture worth a thousand words, as they say, it’s also full of lessons — even for the photographer who took it.

That’s something that Imogen Herrick, an assistant professor of STEM education at the University of Kansas, knows very well. When she was earning her Ph.D. at the University of Southern California, she explored a technique called “photovoice” to help kids learn about complex issues, like climate change, by taking photos related to those topics and discussing what they meant.

The kids she was working with in California explored the urban landscape of Los Angeles and took photos that showed climate change in action in their lives — for example, a patch of dry grass, or smoke from a wildfire. Not only did it get students thinking about climate science, she said, it also helped them to better “manage their emotions” about climate change and its effects.



photo by: University of Kansas

Imogen Herrick

So, when Herrick came to the University of Kansas about a year and a half ago, she secured a grant to keep doing the same thing — this time with kids from Limestone Community School and the complex ecosystem to the south of Lawrence, the Baker and Haskell Wetlands.

Over the past three or four months, Herrick and Limestone director and co-founder Madeline Herrera have been taking fifth- and sixth-grade students out to the wetlands regularly. There, they engage in what Herrick called a “walking pedagogy” — walking around and talking about things they’re seeing, anything that could spark learning.

And, of course, the students were equipped with iPads to take photos. The only instruction they were given was to document “whatever is beautiful, whatever you want,” Herrick said.

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photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

Some of the students’ photos taken during the photovoice project in Baker and Haskell Wetlands in Lawrence.

“Whatever is beautiful, whatever you want” is what people came to see at the gallery show on Friday night, held at the students’ urging.

A boardwalk over a pool of greenish water — or, recently, blue-gray ice — is beautiful.

So is a dried flower head, or a snail shell nestled amid some sticks and rocks, in a photo labeled “The safe spot.” And a pair of paw prints on a piece of wood bears the caption, “Animals were here.”



photo by: Contributed by Imogen Herrick

Students at Limestone Community School take part in their photovoice project.



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What unites all of these things, and why they're so important for learning, is that these are the things the kids noticed and were curious about. That's where the "voice" part of "photovoice" comes in. Back in the classroom after the photos were taken, Herrick said they looked at them and learned about the context behind them — talking about the importance of native plants, for example, or what drought looks like in a wetland.

Right next to the paw print photo, there's another one where the tall, dry grasses are interrupted by two unnatural objects — a concrete path, and a blue, tattered mattress, lying half-on, half-off of it.

"humans are here," it's been captioned.



photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

Photos from Limestone Community School students documenting the Baker and Haskell Wetlands. The photo on the left with a mattress is has a note under saying "humans are here." The photo on the left with animal prints says "Animals were here."

Humans' presence, too, was something the kids were curious about. Some wanted to know, for example, why the wetlands were divided by a road. So the class brought in people like Courtney King, a research assistant at Haskell Indian Nations University, to tell the students how it came to be that way, and about the decades-long political fight, before the kids were born, over whether that road should be built through the wetlands in the first place.

That's one of the benefits of the photovoice method: the variety of disciplines it brings into the classroom. Herrick said that although the photos can be viewed purely as an artistic medium, they're also good science practice, because the kids are documenting findings and discussing the reasons for them.

And, then, Herrera said, they're connecting these seemingly everyday scenes to topics on a much bigger scale, like climate change and land use.

"Although we are focused on this really hyper-localized piece, it's connected to this worldwide issue," Herrera said.

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You might be surprised to hear that the grant Herrick received for this project came not from a climate science organization, but from the American Psychiatric Association.

That's because Herrick's work isn't just about documenting climate change's effects on communities. It's also about emotion and how kids are reacting to a changing world.

The effects of climate change are making young people throughout the world feel more anxious. One study in The Lancet surveyed 10,000 people ages 16 to 25 from 10 countries in 2021. It found 59% of them were "very or extremely worried" about climate change, while more than 50% reported feeling each of the following emotions about it: sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless and guilty. And 45% of the respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively impacted their daily lives.

Herrick said younger children have felt those types of emotions, too, and arts-based initiatives like this photovoice project are "really good ways" to help students manage and process those emotions and provide them a feeling of agency.

Herrick described how sometimes hope as a feeling can be "deactivating" if someone doesn't have any power to change something. You can hope to win the lottery, but you have no control over which numbers are picked. Herrick has found that making art gives kids a feeling of agency that leads to a "constructive hope." A mix of learning about places, harnessing emotions and feelings and discussing issues around climate change can help students "reimagine a just and sustainable world" and give them steps to know how to move forward.

“They feel like it’s happening to them, but they don’t feel like they have a lot they can do about it,” Herrick said. “When we can contextualize (the broader issue), they find actions they can take.”



photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

Part of the photo exhibit showcasing dead fish that were dumped in the Haskell wetland. The art in the middle reads “NO DUMPING.”

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And that’s why the kids were so excited to share their work, and so insistent that this be an exhibition instead of just a class project.

Limestone, which was founded in 2022, focuses on learning by doing, through hands-on projects, according to its website. And when the students decided a public art gallery would be the finale of this project, Herrera and Herrick had to do some of that kind of learning themselves — suddenly figuring out how to host an art exhibit.



“Who do we invite? Where do we print the photos? How do we print the photos?” were suddenly questions that they had to face, but the kids felt like they needed to raise awareness about the importance of the wetlands and their fragility, and Herrera was not going to stop.

“They feel like they can be champions in raising awareness. Who am I to stand in their way?” Herrera said.



photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

Limestone Community School students presenting their photo exhibit to the public. The school's director, Madeline Herrera, is pictured sitting on the right.



photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

Madeline Herrera, the director and co-founder of Limestone Community School, speaking during the photo exhibit held by the school's fifth and sixth graders. They were inspired through a photovoice project, documenting Baker and Haskell Wetlands as a way to tell the story of climate change.

And so they prepared the gallery at the architecture firm Multistudio's offices. They hung some of the photos up, propped some up on tables, mounted others on easels. They even served hors d'oeuvres. And, on Friday, their friends and family applauded them as they presented the beautiful, striking, interesting sights they'd collected over the past few months and thought so much about.

The project is done now and the gallery show is over, but Herrick said the students' photos and voices will still be seen and heard. They're part of a broader project called Climate Learning In Community with Kids, or CLICK, which aims to create an online map where teachers can look up locations that have done similar projects, see the photos and discuss those photos and the kids' views on the environment and climate change.

That way, each local project can be its own story that others can learn from, too.

“You are putting the research in the hands of the community to tell their own stories,” Herrick said.



photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

Photos of the Limestone Community School students documenting the process of their photovoice project in the Baker and Haskell Wetlands.



photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

The students curated their photos for the exhibit based on different themes. This section, entitled "Harm" features photos of impacts of pollution or harmed wildlife in Baker and Haskell Wetlands in Lawrence.



photo by: Bremen Keasey/Journal-World

Lawrence community members explore the art exhibit held by Limestone Community School students about the climate change. It was based on a photovoice project.