

CLIMATE CHANGE & HEALTH IN FORT WILLIAM FIRST NATION

YOUTH PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

Community Report



September 2020

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Introduction

The youth photovoice project described in this report is part of a larger collaboration between Fort William First Nation (FWFN) and Lakehead University called *Climate Change & Health in Fort William First Nation: Planning for the Future, Today*. The purpose of the *Change & Health in Fort William First Nation* project was to build a deeper understanding of the connections between climate change and health in FWFN, using arts-integrated methods and two-eyed seeing. In this project, health is thought about in a holistic way, guided by the Medicine Wheel, in terms of physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health.

A core component of the project was interviewing community members to gather stories, traditional knowledge, and perspectives on the links between climate change and health focusing on Elders, traditional knowledge keepers, and those closely connected to the land. Interviews were conducted with over 20 adults and Elders by Liz Esquega, the lead community researcher. Additionally, at the conclusion of each interview, knowledge holders were asked to share a key idea or a message about climate change for the youth of FWFN. These messages were then visualized by an artist in the community and subsequently woven together into a final quilt given back to the community as a gift and also shared with the youth that participated in the photovoice component of the project.

A second core component of the project was to involve youth in the discussion about climate change and health using photovoice as a tool. This component of the project took on the form of a partnership with the FWFN Youth Center, initially to conduct a six-week photovoice workshop. The intentions behind this partnership were to:

- Build awareness about the impacts of climate change;
- Gather youth perspectives on climate change in general and the links between climate change and health (particularly the mental and emotional health impacts) using an arts-integrated approach (photovoice) and;
- Foster intergenerational knowledge sharing and relationship building between FWFN Elders and youth.

Over the course of the project, the youth engaged in sessions geared towards learning about climate change, teaching them how to use DSLR cameras, and guided in the use of photography as a medium for sharing their perspective on climate change and their futures, tying into the larger community research project. At the culmination of the project in September 2020, the youth created a final compilation of nine photos, which was printed on a large canvas and is now at the Youth Center.

Originally, the timeline for this project was December 2019 - March 2020, with the intention of the final sharing event to occur in March or April of 2020. However, with the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, the final components of this project stretched into September 2020, which allowed for longer dialogue with the youth and an opportunity to complete their final compilation.

Why focus on climate change adaptation and health with youth?

Fort William First Nation is interested in addressing and adapting to climate change as the impacts of our changing climate are becoming increasingly evident. Several observable effects of climate change are underway and already impacting traditional and contemporary land use and community values of FWFN, as can be seen through the findings of an initial research project between the community, Nokiiwin Tribal Council, and Lakehead University in 2017. This community survey identified changes to the natural world described by FWFN community members such as lack of traditional medicines, changing seasonality of plant and animal life, loss of different types of traditional food sources, weather events, and lower lake levels.

Indigenous peoples, including FWFN community members, tend to rely on the land and on traditional ways of life such that the impacts of climate change are of particular concern, particularly the downstream and cumulative implications for health and well-being. Thus, it is important for adaptation measures to be identified and implemented so that climate change impacts can be meaningfully addressed while also protecting and promoting health both now and in the future. Through the research project in 2017, researcher L. Esquega identified the need to better understand potential impacts of climate change on health, to gather stories and traditional knowledge from community members (Elders in particular) that could be relevant for adaptation planning, and to educate and inform community members, youth in particular, about climate change.

The research partners in this project all agreed that meaningful youth engagement and capacity building are an essential component of community-based climate change and health research and adaptation. Ultimately, the burden of climate change will fall on the shoulders of the next generation. It is critical to begin engaging youth in discussions about how climate change challenges will be faced in the future while also amplifying their voices and perspectives.

Why use Photovoice?

Photovoice is a community-based and participatory research method developed in the early 1990s in the context of public health research. The photovoice process provides participants with an opportunity to share personal knowledge and experiences visually and promotes meaningful dialogue on complex issues like climate change. Importantly, the process can be used to give marginalized populations a voice while empowering participants to effect positive change in their communities. Photovoice is a particularly useful tool for engaging and working with youth.

Our Photovoice Project

Participants

This component of the project was made possible by a partnership between the Fort William First Nation Youth Center and its staff team and the research team at Lakehead University, led by the research assistant Courtney Strutt.

The participants for the youth photovoice project were four female FWFN youth between the ages of 16 - 18 who committed to participating for the full duration of the project. Throughout this project, the Youth Center staff were also welcomed and encouraged to join in this project. While the majority of the staff did not actively participate in the sessions, they were always there to open and close the space, provide a hot meal, and ensure that both the youth and the research assistant had what was needed for positive sessions.

Photovoice Process

The youth photovoice process occurred in two different phases due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Phase 1 -- Six-Week Workshop on Climate Change & Photovoice
- Phase 2 -- Coming Back Together: Reflective Sessions

Phase 1 occurred between February - March 2020 through six workshop sessions every Tuesday evening at the youth center. The focus was on building youth awareness about climate change and skill-building around photography, culminating in a compilation of nine photos that represent their responses and perspectives to the guiding questions of *What would you like to tell elders/older adults in your community about your feelings on climate change?* and *What message would you like to share about your future?*

Session themes were as follows:

1. Introductions
2. Learning Photography
3. Learning about Climate Change
4. Learning about Climate Change (continued)
5. Choosing Top Photos
6. Sharing Final Photos & Compilation

Phase 2 was an unplanned set of three sessions from June to August 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required the project to request a time extension in order to complete the final piece of sharing back the photos. These sessions were focused on engaging the youth in continued reflection on their final photo compilation, titled "*Capturing Moments of Change Through Our Eyes*", in order to determine how they wanted to communicate the key ideas behind their piece and how they could share this with their community.

Phase 1: Six-Week Workshop on Climate Change & Photovoice

Week 1: Introductions session introduced the youth to Chiji processing cards as a way of engaging in group dialogue. The youth were asked to select a card that represented something about themselves to serve as an introduction; the research assistant also introduced herself this way and then gave more background about the project and the time together would be spent. The group then transitioned into a short brainstorming activity asking the youth what they already knew about climate change (broken into science, causes, effects, and solutions). From this, it became clear that the majority of youth had some knowledge about causes and effects, but very little understanding of the science or ways forward. The concept of photovoice was then explained and each youth was given a DSLR camera. A guest speaker, photographer Sarah McPherson, did an introductory piece on how to use the cameras. Youth took cameras home with them to get familiar with the cameras functions and with photovoice by taking photos about the prompt “*How am I feeling?*”

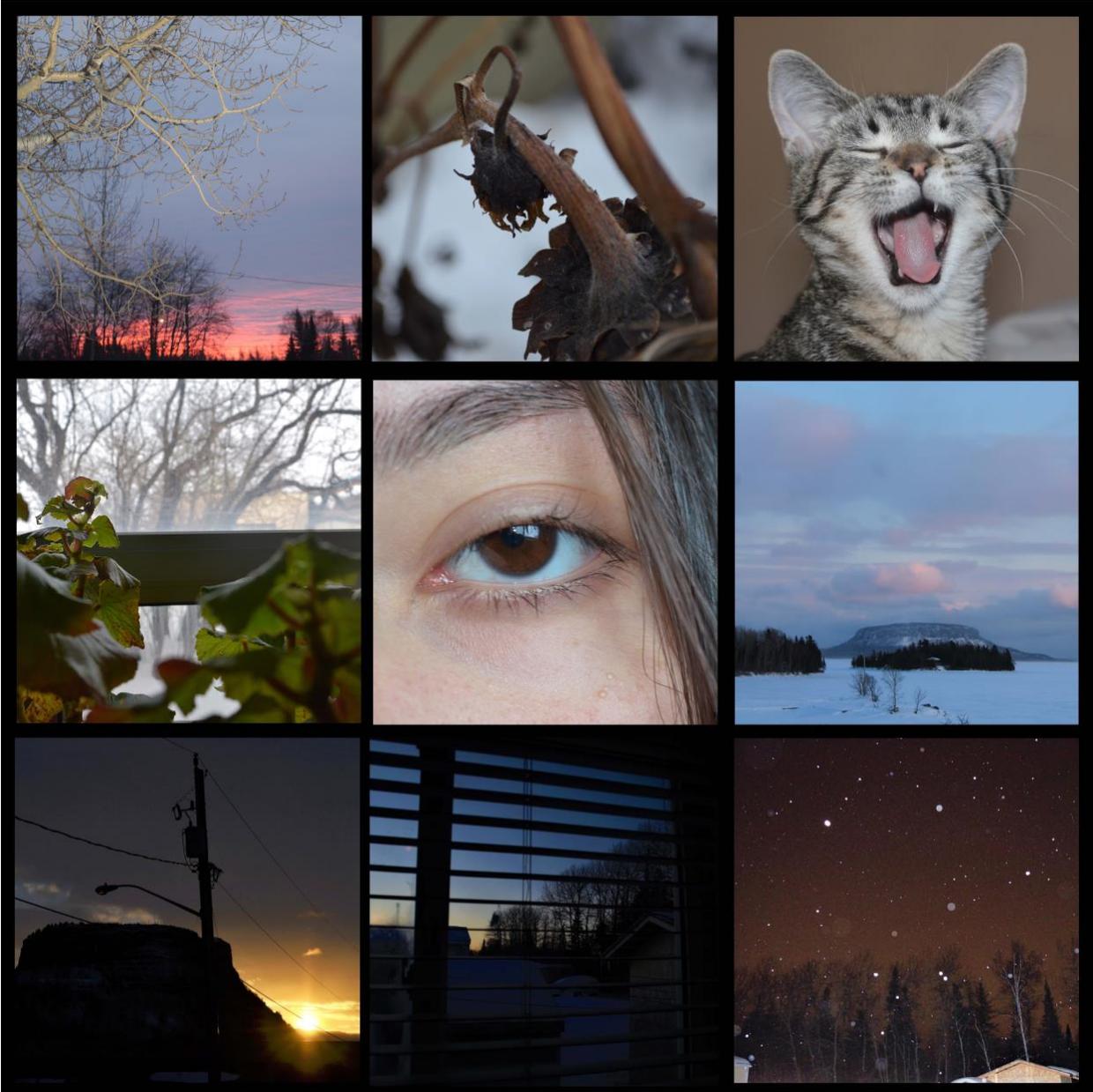
Week 2: Learning about Photography session was mainly focused on building the youth’s skills and confidence in using DSLR cameras. Sarah McPherson came in again to cover some basics about manual photo-taking and got the youth acquainted with the functions on their camera, as well as discussing composition. As a group, we also had a chance to look at the squares of the quilt with messages from the Elders and discuss what we saw and how this may connect to their own pictures. The youth were challenged to begin taking pictures in response to the guiding questions for this photovoice project:



- What would you like to tell elders in your community about your feelings on climate change?*
- What message would you like to share about your future?*

Week 3: Learning about Climate Change session was heavily focused on understanding the science, causes, and effects of climate change and beginning to touch on solutions. The group played out an ecological macro model simulating the greenhouse effect in order to learn more about the science of climate change. The group then participated in an activity about emissions, that connected the scientific terms they had learned in the previous activity to specific actions, determining whether or not they emit GHGs. From there, the group talked about the impacts of climate change through a brainstormed list, which ended in the group identifying which of these impacts they think may be experienced here in Thunder Bay. The session concluded with a discussion of what kinds of photos the youth could take and used the Chiji cards to discuss what was thought and felt by participants during the session. Youth were reminded to continue taking photos and that there will be an opportunity to review them in the group next week.

CAPTURING MOMENTS OF CHANGE THROUGH OUR EYES



Final photovoice compilation.

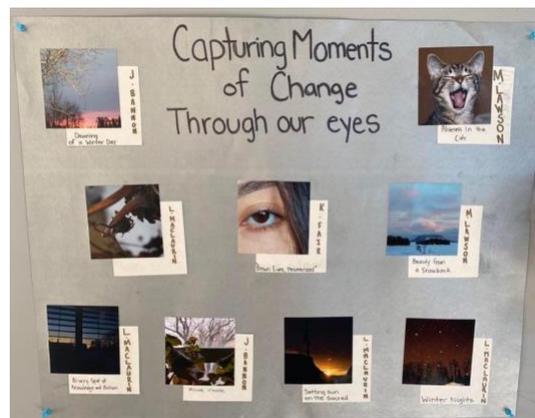
Phase 2: Coming Back Together: Reflective Sessions

The **June Session** was focused on reconnecting with one another after lockdown and reflecting on the connections between the pandemic and the crisis of climate change. The youth were presented with an opportunity to take more photos to choose from for their final compilation or continue to build on the compilation they built in March. The group chose to stick with their original compilation and the remaining time was spent selecting a title and beginning to work with captions for each photo. The group titled their work "*Capturing Moments of Change Through Our Eyes*".



During the **July Session**, the final canvas of their photo compilation was revealed to the youth to much approval. The remainder of the session was focused on a group dialogue around what they feel their photos are saying about climate change and health. The group was again shown the quilt that the elders made and asked to reflect on what messages they felt the elders were trying to say to them and what their piece says in response. This helped to build an understanding of the overall message behind their photos, linked to themes of resilience and the power of youth and identity in place.

In the **August Session**, the youth discussed the upcoming youth-elder circle to begin thinking about what they might want to share about their photos and what they have learned during the sharing circle. This was also an opportunity to finish up the title board that goes with the canvas, which shares the title of their compilation as well as the title and photographer of each photo.



Overall Outcomes

Final Photos



J. Bannon

Dawning of a Winter Day

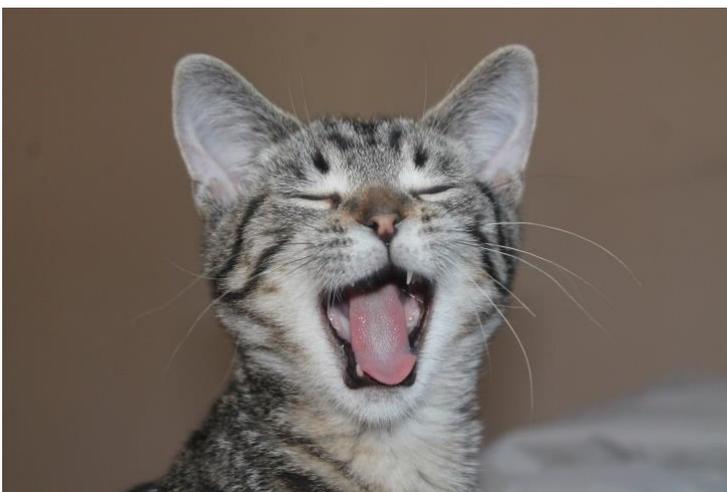
"I was walking to the buses and then it was the morning, early in the morning, and I saw the pink sky and all the trees... it captured the start of a new day, how I was feeling."



L. Maclaurin

Thriving Through the Crack

"I remember I went outside and was trying to find something that resembles climate change... So I took a picture of the sunflowers because they are wilted, but they are still standing. The root, the stem is still in the ground although there is snow and everything around it... It is really resilient."



M. Lawson

Aliveness in the Cat

"I was just feeling the aliveness of the cat... I feel happy, better when I'm around animals. They brighten your day."



J. Bannon
Living through the Cold

"I was sitting in class, looking outside. This was the first week we had our cameras and was trying to think of what I could take pictures of about climate change and I realized that the plants were inside and it was snowy out there, the difference of the plant living inside while it's cold out there."



K. Fair
Brown Eyes, Mesmerized

"Eyes, especially brown eyes, are so powerful. It reminds me of her seeing everything; eyes are so important... it can represent her seeing climate change, close up."



M. Lawson
Beauty from a Snowbank

"Squaw Bay has beautiful scenery like that... I was on a snowbank, snapping photos and I realized the clouds were like that so I thought I'd see if I could snap it and I did."



L. Maclaurin
Setting Sun on the Sacred

"This picture is of Mount McKay, which is very sacred in this community. I remember thinking oh my gosh, the sun is right beside it and it looks really pretty, I want to capture it."



L. Maclaurin
Blurry Spot of Knowledge & Action

"I remember trying to focus on the background, the horizon. I was trying to make the trees clear, but in the window it's blurry. I remember liking that because to me, climate change is like people thinking they know what it is and want to do better, but there is that blurry spot where they don't make the effort to do better."



L. Maclaurin
Winter Nights

"It looked really cool because the snow looks like discs, orbs, they look flat and thin... with the trees showing up clear in the background, almost a fiery background. It looks like there is smoke or something."

Community Sharing

On September 2, 2020 four Elders who participated in the interview component of the project and the four youth gathered at Elder Rita Fenton's house on Fort William First Nation to feast and share together.



Held in ceremony, the sharing circle was an opportunity for the youth and Elders to get to know one another while sharing experiences and perspectives. The event began with an opening and prayer by Rita and was followed by everyone having an opportunity to introduce who they are, their family connections within the community, and how they participated in the project.

From there, the Elders presented the finished quilt and each of them was given an opportunity to speak to the message that they shared to the youth via the quilt and why they felt it was an important message. Hearing directly from the Elders about the message and intentions behind their images allowed the youth to find new meaning in the quilt.



The youth then shared their final canvas compilation, speaking to the content and meaning of their individual photos and what they learned throughout this process. Main themes from the youth in relation to climate change and health were:

- *Resilience of both youth and nature*
- *Power and strength of youth and home places (i.e., Mount McKay)*
- *Sense of being alive with the living world around us*



The sharing circle ended with the sharing of berries, water, and a traveling song. All participants were gifted with a small booklet of the quilt messages and a print of the youth's photo compilation.

Personal Growth

While there was a degree of structure and certainly an intentional process that the youth were led through, moments of growth were occurred through what the youth shared at various moments throughout the 8-month process. These elements of growth can best be captured through the following themes, supported by direct quotes from the youth.

Confidence in themselves as photographers

"I think we were all impressed with the way our pictures turned out, because I'm sure we all weren't expecting this outcome. I think it was very successful."

"When I took the pictures, I felt very skilled, like a photographer."

"Yeah, like I didn't know I could take these photos!"

"At first I felt frustrated, like what the hell was I going to take pictures of. But now after seeing what I can do, I feel successful."

Pride in their identity and coming from this land

"We're proud to be from this land."

"The land, where we are from... we've never lived on the land ourselves but we might have to when we're older if we don't start acting now."

Empowered in their learning

"The eye photo represents what we are all seeing here, through our young, empowered minds."

"It's all different [the photos], yet we are all seeing, trying to capture the moment."

Resilience of youth, responsibility coming in the future due to climate change

"Our older generations, they're not the ones going to be dealing with this forever. We have to grow up in this society and it's not our fault that we were... society makes it so you have to use all these things.... People are used to using plastics and throwing them wherever they want to, it's natural to them, they have that habit, because they see everyone doing that. They became so blind to what's the long run, don't take that into consideration. Our generations are going to have to deal with this. Our world is going to go to shit when we're 50, or beforehand."

“Something about the eye photo that goes with climate change... like it needs to be seen, people need to do something about it.”

“There are a lot of ways it is unfortunate to be born in this generation, but there is also a lot of strength and positive things about this generation, makes me feel hopeful for the future.”

Reflections & Next Steps

There were some clear lessons learned throughout the journey of this photovoice project. Entering into this process, it became clear that the youth had little understanding of what climate change is and the actions needed to address it. The two workshops sessions specifically targeted towards learning about climate change were helpful in bringing about new knowledge and awareness for the youth. However, when connecting this to the photovoice component, more time to engage with this content before adding in the challenge of photography and photovoice would have been helpful in creating deeper linkages between the youth’s photos and the photovoice prompts.

A positive lesson learned was that learning photography and actively getting to take and share photos was a major draw for the youth who stayed committed to the project throughout. This insight can be used to shape components of future projects that are looking to engage youth in dialogue and meaning making. Through the community sharing experience of the youth-elder circle, the project also got to put into practice one of the key findings of the research - the importance of intergenerational connections. Creating a sharing space between the youth and elders made room for relationship building across generations and allowed the research project to wrap-up in a way that was grounded in community.

During a final reflection on the project, one of the youth shared that “*This experience was a gift... I learned a lot, it shared a lot of ideas and brightened my thoughts.*” Sentiments such as these, coupled with the success of an initial intergenerational gathering, have made it clear that a next step for this project is to apply for another round of funding to continue this work, specifically focused on creating intergenerational spaces for youth and elders to build relationships and share knowledge. Another important next step is to maintain the relationships built with the youth center staff and the youth themselves so that continued partnership and projects are built off of what has been learned and experienced throughout this project. These connections can be maintained through communicating continued learning opportunities about climate change and sharing opportunities for the youth to continue to share their work within their community and the larger community of Thunder Bay.