

## Flint Hills Map Project

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

"You are here." Those three simple words are helpful when a person is trying to learn a location or is seeking direction. Today we will learn about an innovative project which is seeking to educate youth and others about the value of their location in the Flint Hills region of Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

The Flint Hills Map and Education Program is directed by Emily Connell and coordinated by Annie Wilson. Emily was director of the Symphony in the Flint Hills before taking her current position as Director of the El Dorado Main Street program. Annie is a talented musician and former teacher at Emporia. She lives on the family ranch near the rural community of Elmdale, population 55 people. Now, that's rural. Emily and Annie have a deep love for the Kansas Flint Hills.

"The Flint Hills are a special place, and we want to educate our children about this wonderful place where they are growing up," Emily said. "When you drive around, every truck stop has a map with an arrow saying 'You are here,' and it's worn clear through where people put their finger on that spot."

That desire to identify one's place led Emily to think about the identity of the Flint Hills, especially for children. "We want to show children where they live and how great it is," Emily said. In 2014, she connected with educator Annie Wilson and a team of specialists from the Kansas Geological Survey, The Nature Conservancy, Extension and others to develop an educational mapping project for the Flint Hills region.

"Our vision is to place a high quality Flint Hills map with an educational interpretive panel in every school in the Flint Hills," Emily said. A beautiful map of Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie was created, along with three educational side panels designed for elementary, middle, and high schools, respectively.

"This is place-based education, which research has shown to motivate students," Annie said. Annie also developed an accompanying website which offers extensive educational resources for teachers, plus general information for researchers and the public.

"This is intended to give teachers relevant tools for teaching their core subjects, not add something on top of the other things they have to do," Annie said. The website includes more than 250 lesson plans and learning activities, such as math problems drawn from actual Flint Hills experiences which help make such instruction more meaningful to students.

The website includes more than 200 information resources which have been verified for usefulness and reliability. "The website just took off," Emily said. "I'm so proud of Annie."

In the schools, the maps are to be displayed publicly for five years, along with the interpretive panel. These are not just posters. They are museum quality, durable displays with the school's location individually identified. The panels are illustrated by Lawrence artist Nancy Marshall. "She can convey so much information in her illustrations," Emily said. For example, the middle school panel includes 58 elements showing prairie wildlife with accompanying text about the eco-region, culture, and economy.

“We want to offer this to all Flint Hills schools at no cost,” Annie said. Based on an initial survey, 120 schools are interested. The map team is now fundraising through the Flint Hills Discovery Center Foundation to underwrite the cost of the displays.

“We don’t know of anywhere else that is doing this,” Annie said. “We hope other regions might adopt this idea.”

“The future of the Flint Hills depends on our children,” Emily said. “We want to build their identity and pride,” Annie said. “We want to help communities keep their most important resource: Their children and future leaders.”

The website is [www.flinthillsdiscovery.org/map](http://www.flinthillsdiscovery.org/map).

“You are here.” Those simple words can be helpful to a person finding a location or seeking direction. In this case, they are helpful to young people who are learning about the importance of the Flint Hills region. We salute Emily Connell and Annie Wilson for making a difference with maps, information, and place-based education.

Are you looking for a place which has advocates working to educate its children about the importance of their natural region? You are here.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.