

Why Geography?



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Awareness of the World

Never has a nation's people possessed more information, or been in command of more sophisticated means of acquiring, disseminating, and analyzing data, than do contemporary Americans. In addition to traditional resources, during recent decades GPS, GIS, satellite imagery, computer mapping, the wonderful resources of the Internet, and other technological advances have vastly expanded our knowledge of Earth's surface. Yet given these tremendous resources for enhancing our geographic awareness and global understanding, most Americans -- living in a Global Age -- continue to possess little more than a Stone Age awareness of the world about them.



Each day of our lives, we live "geography." Examples affecting each of us on a regular basis can be drawn from almost every facet of our daily experience. Environmental influences, such as resource availability and cost, changing weather and climate patterns and their potential impacts, and the threat of spreading diseases and exotic species, are of increasing concern. Politically we are confronted with a host of issues ranging from matters pertaining to local taxation, planning, and zoning to regional (if not global) terrorism and other manifestations of conflict. Economically, we have seen changes in the value of property and commodities at home, while the stock market has plummeted during recent years as a result of influences ranging from Japan's economic malaise to Latin America's financial instability. The disproportional distribution of wealth and opportunity continues to be a major irritant confronting all of humankind. Socially, too, we are affected by the rapid pace of change in the nation's demographic, social, and ethnic composition and determining our own position and role on the world stage. Unfortunately, all our citizens are increasingly involved in and dependent upon a global community about which so many remain dangerously ignorant and unconcerned.

Most Americans lack a well-developed "mental map" of Earth's surface, with its varied mosaic of physical and human conditions. To these geographic illiterates, our planet assumes the image of a vague, fragmented, and incredibly confusing hodgepodge of meaningless phenomena that are randomly scattered about on an all but bare tabula rasa. There is a world inhabited by faceless peoples whose cultures lack a proud heritage, bonding institutions and customs, feelings and values, tools and technologies, and essential dimensions of space and time. Places, to the geographic illiterate, are meaningless. They have no grasp of those unique physical and human features that give each spot on Earth's surface its own distinctive character, from which each draws its identity and importance. And the spatial sorting of features into similar and dissimilar places using the geographer's concept of region holds little meaning or relevance to those who are unaware of their location, nature, and significance. Their world is composed of vague physical features and life-sustaining environmental systems for which they lack valid mental images, appropriate terminology, or an understanding of their nature, origin, and importance. Those who are ignorant of basic geographic principles also have little knowledge of environmental potentials and limitations. Under these circumstances, how can they possibly be expected to make enlightened decisions relating to the use and sustainability of our finite global natural endowment?

A Spatial Vacuum

To persons possessing a poorly developed mental map, historical events occurred in a spatial vacuum. "History" and "geography" remain spatially unlinked and unrelated, severely limiting the significance of one to the other. Such individuals, although constantly confronted by critical problems and issues, sadly lack the information needed to make rational analyses, sound judgments, or reasoned attempts at resolution. Further, to the geographically insensitive, human differences often appear to be threatening and can lead to feelings of prejudice and acts of discrimination. Such individuals are prisoners of their own ignorance and provincialism. As a result, they are poorly equipped to assume meaningful citizenship in an increasingly intradependent and multicultural global community!

It stands as a rather sad and somewhat inexplicable indictment of this country's priorities and approach to education that among the world's industrial nations, Americans rank among the least literate in geographic knowledge and, perhaps worse, geographic curiosity. Examples of this ignorance are numerous. So, too, are the increasingly apparent, appalling, and often damaging consequences -- be they social, economic, political, military, or environmental -- that result from our failure to provide citizens with adequate geographic instruction.

In most countries of the Western urban-industrial world (and in many less-developed countries as well), geography constitutes the "core" of the social science curriculum. The United States is unique among these nations in relegating geography to a relatively minor role in both the elementary and secondary curriculum. Some progress has been made in terms of enhancing geography's position in the curriculum during recent years, particularly through the various initiatives of the National Geographic Society. Despite these efforts and others, however, most of the world's educated people are much better informed about the world (and often about the United States!) than are the majority of our own citizens.

In an increasingly complex, troubled, and closely intertwined world community of cultures and nations, Americans simply do not know much about our global neighbors (or, for that matter, about ourselves in a geographic sense). We have little understanding of, or feeling for, other lands and peoples. We are largely ignorant of their ways of living, environments and natural resources, human capabilities, and cultural attainments. We also know little about their similarities and differences, their hopes and dreams, or their problems and needs. Perhaps of greatest importance, we fail to understand how closely linked and important we have become to one another. How can Americans possibly expect to maintain a position of respect and leadership in a world of cultures and nations about which we know -- and seemingly care -- so little?

Now, more than ever, citizens can ill afford to remain ignorant of the world about them. The compression of time and space resulting from the technological "explosion" has placed even our most remote neighbors at our very doorstep. It is essential that all Americans understand and appreciate their role and responsibility in an increasingly complex global community. Each of us must be aware of Earth's fundamental physical and cultural patterns; of its key locations, distributions, patterns, and divisions; and of its primary linkages, movements, networks, and systems. We also must understand our planet's basic areas of production and consumption, its major spatial interrelationships, and its causes and hot spots of conflict. A populace that remains largely ignorant of fundamental geographic knowledge surely limits a nation's ability to perform and compete effectively on the global stage.

The Necessity of Geographic Education

Geography education is no longer a curricular luxury. It is an absolute necessity. If the United States is to endure, we must ensure that all students -- kindergarten through college -- be given the key to the future: an understanding of the world that only a rigorous geography curriculum can provide. Few people question the need for history education; why, then, do so many question the importance of teaching geography? History, after all, is but a recording of past geography; a society that **lives** a "good geography" will surely **leave** a good history. Geography has been described as "learning for living" and is a science with a strong futuristic emphasis. It is also the ancient and time-honored science that can best provide the essential knowledge needed to ensure that our citizens are prepared to assume responsible and enlightened leadership in today's complex and demanding global community.

T. S. Eliot wrote, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time." Today, all citizens certainly must be able to think globally, while continuing to act locally. By better knowing the world about us, we come to better know ourselves -- whether at home, or as members of the global community.

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