

## The Nature of Geography

Geography is concerned with place. Understanding the nature and causes of aerial differentiation on the global surface has been the geographer's task since people first noticed differences between places.

Through geography we seek to understand these differences in patterns of human distribution, interrelationships between human society and the physical environment, people's use of the Earth in time and space, and how these differences are related to people's cultures and economies. These, and other related themes, express major concerns of our time and reflect the consequences of spatial decisions.

In geography's pursuit of this understanding the questions "where?," "why?," and "how?" are central. The first of these introduces the issues of location and spatial choice; the latter two signify that modern geography is not content merely to describe, but seeks to explain. Beyond these questions, geographers also ask a fourth—"what if?"—as a means of seeking alternatives and giving the subject an applied dimension that can assist decision makers in planning and development at a variety of geographical scales.

The idea of place is not an examinable objective but an *ultimate* goal, whose pursuit gives direction to geographical study. As a geographical concept it refers to the aerial context of events, objects, and actions; in other words, to the patterns resulting from human occupancy of the global surface over time. The areal context is set in space which, though measurable, has by itself no meaning. Space becomes place when humans invest it with meaning, most commonly by giving it a name and all of the associations that that name evokes. The terms *place* and *region* may, therefore, be distinguished by spatial scale, rather than by inherent differences, for both involve space that has been invested with meaning. Two important implications flow from this understanding of place:

*First*, geography is strongly influenced by the norms of the social sciences. The complexity and changing nature of human society seldom permit the type of precision expected in the physical sciences. Instead, the social sciences offer a variety of perspectives and methods of study by which to examine the consequences of human behaviour on the global surface. In studying the idea of place from a spatial perspective, geographers inevitably encounter the problem of change through time; for them, landscape is document. Historians, too, are concerned with change through time as they document the consequences of human behaviour. Thus, like geographers, historians are also concerned with place. Indeed, a common concern with place brings the work of geographers and historians close together.

*Second*, physical geographers, no less than human geographers, contribute to an understanding of place; for the concept of site—the physical characteristics of a place—is integral to understanding aerial differentiation on the global surface. Nevertheless, geographers focus on the patterns and interactions to be found on that surface, and not *primarily* on the natural processes that act on it from above or below. They recognize that interaction between humans and their environment has always been mutual, and that the growth of technology has increased the human capacity to modify the environment.

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That growth in technology has greatly aided geographers in their traditional tasks. It has given them increasingly refined techniques for gathering and interpreting data, whether in the field by means of GPS or by aerial and satellite imagery. Spatial relationships are at the heart of geography. Using software to analyze spatial relationships among objects being mapped, *GIS*, in particular, has greatly assisted geographers in depicting the character of place. Not only can they now process larger quantities of data more quickly and with greater refinement, but also they can manipulate variables and thus project alternatives that give geography an applied dimension. Finally, their work can be displayed using advanced techniques of computer-generated mapping.

The view of geography presented here is that of a core sharply focused on the concept of place one in which both physical and human elements play an important part. The subject has an applied dimension that can affect our daily lives. It can, therefore, be a powerful medium for the development of skills contributing to citizenship and cultural awareness.

## Commentary on "The Nature of Geography"

The statement expresses a core view of the subject. It echoes recent calls from presidents of the American Association of Geographers for geographers to present a core view of their subject in the public domain, rather than the narrow specialties that so often seem to divide geographers from each other. This core view is also consistent with school curricula in whatever configuration geography is taught.

The third paragraph deals with the four questions that are central to pedagogy in geographical education and points to geography's value in its applied form. The fourth paragraph makes the distinction between an objective and a goal. An understanding of place can often be as elusive as a goal in a game; yet, just as its pursuit sets direction in a game, so too it sets the direction for our subject. The nature of that understanding presents a challenge because human perception makes it virtually impossible to be wholly objective about place.

Paragraph five is an important one. By stressing the geographer's traditional concern with the concept of place, and how it intersects with the work of the historian, I have sought in the paragraph to build bridges between the two subjects. This approach also reflects my view that Canadian parents want their children to understand Canada (and their province) as a place and their role in it. Geography has much to contribute to that understanding—hence my reference to citizenship in the final paragraph.

In the sixth paragraph I have endeavoured to show that physical geographers have an important contribution to make to our understanding of place, because all places have site associated with them. Implicitly, therefore, I am suggesting that a concern with place is a key difference between physical geographers and earth scientists. It is one more good reason for geography (physical and human) to receive more attention in social studies curricula than it often does, and not to have its physical component detached under the title of earth science.

The seventh paragraph reflects an attempt to put technological growth in proper perspective as a servant of geography and not a separate industry to be hived off like earth science.

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