Why Geography Education Matters

People have always been fascinated with investigating their home—the Earth. For centuries, the study of geography and the maps geographers have created have stirred imaginations and inspired explorations of the unknown. Today, geography is more relevant than ever before, as issues of climate change, cultural diversity, economic globalization, urban sprawl, biodiversity loss, sustainable agriculture, water quality and quantity, crime, energy, tourism, politics, and natural hazards grow in importance on a global scale and affect our everyday lives. To grapple with these issues requires a populace that has a firm foundation in geography, a populace that can see the "big picture" but that understands how different patterns and trends are related from a global scale down to the local community.

This firm foundation is tied to geographic education. To generate a populace that supports a consistent labor pool of geographers requires several key components. First, it requires an educational program that begins much earlier, through rich field experiences in school and out of school, through inquiry-driven, technology-infused, project-based geographic experiences in sciences, social studies, history, and even mathematics in the K-12 classroom, continuing into community colleges and undergraduate university level. Second, it requires recognition that geography is not memorizing place names, landforms, and imports and exports, but that it is a triangulation of a body of content, a way of looking at the world, and a set of skills.

The geographic body of content includes themes and regions; it embraces the past and present. It not only anticipates the future but plans for it. It respects and celebrates diversity, culture, and landscape. It seeks to improve the health of the planet and its people. The geographic way of looking at the world embraces concepts of change, scale, patterns, sustainability, and spatial relationships. The set of skills includes but is not limited to cartography, computer science, multimedia, spatial and nonspatial statistics, and spatial analysis with Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing. The skills incorporate the inquiry process of asking a geographic question, gathering geographic data, visualizing and critically assessing that data, analyzing that data, making a decision with geographic information, and acting on that geographic knowledge. This process usually sparks additional questions and investigations. The geographer is innately curious about a good many things. The geographer is excited about seeing the connections between the cultural and physical worlds, on a personal, community, regional, national, and global scale.

The geographic perspective informs other disciplines. When epidemiologists study the spread of diseases, scientists study climate change, or businesspersons determine where to locate a new retail establishment, they use spatial thinking and analysis. In each case, geography provides critical tools for studying these issues and for solving very real problems on a daily basis.

Geographic questions begin with the "whys of where"—why are cities, ecoregions, earthquakes, and other objects located where they are, and how are they affected by their proximity to nearby things and by invisible global interconnections and networks? Geographic investigations are often value-laden and involve critical thinking skills. For example, after examining a map of cotton production in the USA, geographers investigate the relationship between altitude, latitude, climate, and cotton production. After discovering that much cotton is grown in dry regions that must be irrigated, they can ask "Should cotton be grown in these areas? Is this the best use of water and other natural resources?" Hence, geographers understand that the Earth *is* changing, think scientifically and analytically about *why* it is changing, and dig deeper: *Should* the Earth be changing in these ways? Is there anything that I should be doing or could be doing about it?

Why should geographers care about geographic education? Despite the long history and contributions that geographers have made over the centuries, geography has been so neglected over the past century in much of American primary and secondary education that most people do not understand what geography is. What is the relationship between birth rate and life expectancy? How does acid mine drainage in a mountain range affect water quality downstream? How will climate change affect global food production? Just think of the major issues of geographic nature that the planet has already experienced in 2011—political unrest, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and more. What could be more relevant than studying these issues? Yet if geographic education is neglected, not only does the entire geography discipline suffers, but all of education and society. That's why I encourage you to become involved with the AAG's Geographic Education Specialty Group and to become a member of the National Council for Geographic Education (www.ncge.org). I have created a video on why geography education matters on YouTube at http://esriurl.com/2140.

Geography is not simply a "nice to have" subject for an already crowded primary, secondary, and university curriculum. It fosters the critical thinking skills, technology skills, citizenship skills, and life skills that underpin all other disciplines. It is essential for grappling with the essential issues of the 21st century. If we continue to ignore geography education, we do so at our own peril. ■

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The 2011 NCGE National Conference will take place August 3-7, in Portland, Oregon. www.ncge.org.