

Nature of Geography

Geography is concerned with place. Understanding the nature and causes of areal 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 pattern 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 introduces 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 a measurable objective to be tested in a classroom examination but a goal whose pursuit gives direction to geographical study. As a geographical concept it refers to the areal context of events, objects, and actions; in other words, to the patterns resulting from human occupancy of the global surface over time. The terms *place* and *region* may therefore be distinguished by spatial scale rather than by inherent differences. 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 a document that reflects the interaction of people, things, and ideas with the environment, both in the present and in the past. 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 areal 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.

Growth in technology has also 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. The application of GIS, in particular, has greatly assisted geographers in depicting the character of place. They can now process larger quantities of data more quickly and with greater refinement. They can also 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 in yielding knowledge of the earth in a manner that is integrative of people and the land. Its study, in fact, requires spatial reasoning over a wide range of intellectual orders, thereby making it a valuable means of developing thinking skills in students. The subject is also seen to have an applied dimension that can affect our daily lives and be a powerful medium for the development of skills contributing to citizenship and cultural awareness.