National Geography Standards
1994

Geography Education Standards Project
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Geography

Geography is the science of space and place on Earth's surface. Its subject matter is the physical and human phenomena that make up the world's environments and places. Geographers describe the changing patterns of places in words, maps, and geo-graphics, explain how these patterns come to be, and unravel their meaning. Geography's continuing quest is to understand the physical and cultural features of places and their natural settings on the surface of Earth.

Chapter 1

The Geographic View of Our World

Geography *is* for life in every sense of that expression: lifelong, life- sustaining, and life-enhancing. Geography is a field of study that enables us to find answers to questions about the world around us— about where things are and how and why they got there. We can ask questions about things that seem very familiar and are often taken for granted.

For example, most people know the map of states in the United States. But not all of us know why some state boundaries, especially in the West, consist of straight lines, whereas others, especially in the East, appear to wander here and there.

The answer is based on an understanding of geography. State boundaries in the West were often created before settlement. They were drawn by people who were far away and who lacked specific information about the geography of the area. These state boundaries were imposed on the land, often following lines of latitude and longitude. Most boundaries in the Hast were drawn after settlement, by people who knew the land from long personal experience. Therefore these boundaries often reflect the grain of the land—rivers, ridges, lakes.

Let's continue to look at maps and to ask some even more challenging geographic questions. We'll begin with the world as a whole, shift to the United States, and then focus on a

single state, Pennsylvania.

What Is Geography?

The preceding questions and answers exemplify the approach taken by geographers when looking at Earth: Where is something? Why is it there? How did it get there? How does it interact with other things?

Geography is not a collection of arcane information. Rather, it is the study of spatial aspects of human existence. People everywhere need to know about the nature of their world and their place in it. Geography has much more to do with asking questions and solving problems than it does with rote memorization of isolated facts.

So what exactly is geography? It is an integrative discipline that brings together the physical and human dimensions of the world in the study of people, places, and environments. Its subject matter is Earth's surface and the processes that shape it, the relationships between people and environments, and the connections between people and places.

The world facing students graduating in the year 2000 will be more crowded, the physical environment more threatened, and the global economy more competitive and interconnected. Understanding that world, that environment, and that economy will require high levels of competency in geography, because geography means a sensitivity to location, to scale, to movement, to patterns, to resources and conflicts, to maps and geo-graphics.

Why Geography?

All individuals need to have an understanding of geography, which means that they need to have an understanding of the spatial contexts of people, places, and environments on Earth. An isolated geographic fact does not constitute geographic understanding. For example, to know that Mount Everest is the highest peak in the world is not understanding geography until that isolated fact is put into a variety of spatial contexts. Geographic understanding requires that we know not o.ily the location of Mount Everest but why it is the highest peak in the world. We must understand the physical processes that were responsible for its creation and evolution. We must understand why its location in the Himalaya has impacts on the Indian subcontinent in terms of access to water and downstream flooding, political security and territorial conflict, and transportation passes and barriers. To a geographer. Mount Everest is in the ecological nerve center of the Indian subcontinent. To a geographer, Mount Everest can only be understood in terms of its interlinked physical and human spatial contexts. We need this understanding of geography for reasons that range from the most profound to the most utilitarian:

The Existential Reason

In 1977, the U. S. spacecraft Voyager 1 set out on its epic journey to the outer solar system and beyond. When it had passed the most distant planet, its camera was turned back to photograph the solar system. Purely by chance, the camera recorded a pale blue dot in the vastness of space. Every human who has ever lived has lived on that blue dot—Earth. Humans want to understand the intrinsic nature of their home. Geography enables them to understand where they are, literally and figuratively.

The Ethical Reasons

Earth will continue to whirl through space tor untold millennia, but it Is no' certain that it will exist in a condition in which humans can thrive or even live. Earth is the only home that humans know or are likely to know. Life is fragile; humans are fragile. Geography provides knowledge of Earth's physical and human systems and of the interdependency of living things and physical environments. That knowledge. In turn, provides a basis for humans to cooperate in the best interests of our planet.

The Intellectual Reasons

Geography captures the imagination. It stimulates curiosity about the world and the world's diverse inhabitants and places, as well as about local, regional, end global issues. By understanding our place in the world, humans can overcome parochialism and ethnocentrism. Geography focuses attention on exciting and interesting things, on fascinating people and places, on things worth knowing because they are absorbing and because knowing about them lets humans make better-informed and, therefore, wiser decisions.

The Practical Reasons

Geography has utilitarian value in the modern world. As the interconnectedness of the world accelerates, the practical need for geographic knowledge becomes more critical. Imagine a doctor who treats diseases without understanding the environment in which the diseases thrive and spread, or a manufacturer who is ignorant of world markets and resources, or a postal worker who cannot distinguish Guinea from Guyana. With a strong grasp of geography, people are better equipped to solve issues at not only the local level but also the global level.

Why Geography Standards?

Geography education is the key to geographic competency. To achieve geographic understanding on a national scale requires a concerted effort by the educational system to ensure that all students receive a basic education in geography.

Geography standards are the key to geography education. The National Geography Standards represent a consensus on what constitutes a world-class education in geography for all American students.

In developing the standards, the Geography Education Standards Project used curriculum materials collected from many countries as well as materials familiar to most teachers in the United States, such as state and local curriculum frameworks and the 1984 *Guidelines for Geographic Education: Elementary and Secondary Schools.* Particular care was taken to use the framework and exercise specifications prepared for the *Geography Assessment Framework for the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP). Thus, these standards evolved from the geography community's thinking about what constitutes appropriate and challenging content (see Appendix A: Genesis of the National Geography Standards).

Two imperatives drive the National Geography Standards. First, geographic understanding must be set into a process of lifelong learning. There is an inseparable and seamless connection between formal educational contexts—preschool, K-12, college—and adult life. Second, geographic understanding must be set into life contexts: school, family, society, and occupation.

The standards are intended for life: lifelong in terms of commitment and life-enhancing in terms of purpose. Geography is empowering in practical contexts. Geography is enriching by

helping humans understand their personal experiences.

The National Geography Standards aim to create a geographically informed person: someone who understands that geography is the study of people, places, and environments from a spatial perspective, someone who appreciates the interdependent worlds in which we all live. The study of geography has practical value through the application of a spatial view to life situations.

The Geographically Informed Person

The power and beauty of geography allow us to see, understand, and appreciate the web of relationships between people, places, and environments.

At the everyday level, for example, a geographically informed person can appreciate the locational dynamics of street vendors and pedestrian traffic or fast-food outlets and automobile traffic; the routing strategies of school buses in urban areas and of backpackers in wilderness areas; the land-use strategies of farmers and of real estate developers.

At a more extended spatial scale, that same person can appreciate the dynamic links between severe storms and property damage or between summer thunderstorms and flash floods; the use of irrigation systems to compensate for lack of precipitation or the connections between temperature inversions and urban air pollution episodes; the seasonal movement of migrant laborers in search of work and of vacationers in search of sunshine and warmth.

At a global level, the geographically informed person can appreciate the connections between cyclical drought and human starvation in the Sahel or between the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the long-term consequences to human health and economic activities throughout eastern and northwestern Europe; the restructuring of human migration and trade patterns as the European Union becomes increasingly integrated or as the Pacific rim nations develop a commonality of economic and political interests; and the uncertainties associated with the possible effects of global warming on human society or the destruction of tropical rain forests on global climate.

The National Geography Standards

Physical and human phenomena are spatially distributed over Earth's surface. The outcome of Geography for Life is a geographically informed person who sees meaning in the arrangement of things in space; who sees relations between people, places, and environments; who uses geographic skills; and who applies spatial and ecological perspectives to life situations.

The World in Spatial Terms

Geography studies the relationships between people, places, and environments by mapping information about them into a spatial context.

The geographically informed person knows and understands:

1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools and techniques to acquire, process and report information from a spatial perspective.
2. How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context.
3. How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface.

Place and Regions

The identities and lives of individuals and peoples are rooted in particular places and in those human constructs called regions.

The geographically informed person knows and understands:

4. The physical and human characteristics of places.
5. That people create regions to interpret Earth's complexity.
6. How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of place and space.

Physical Systems

Physical processes shape Earth's surface and interact with plant and animal life to create, sustain, and modify the ecosystems.

The geographically informed person knows and understands:

7. The physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface.
8. The characteristics and spatial distribution of ecosystems on Earth's surface.

Human Systems

People are central to geography in that human activities help shape Earth's surface, human settlements and structures are part of Earth's surface, and humans compete for control of Earth's surface.

The geographically informed person knows and understands:

9. The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface.
10. The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaic.
11. The patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface.
12. The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement.
13. How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface.

Environment and Society

The physical environment is modified by human activities, largely as a consequence of the way in which human societies value and use Earth's natural resources, and human activities are also influenced by Earth's physical features and processes.

The geographically informed person knows and understands:

14. How human actions modify the physical environment
15. How physical systems affect human systems.
16. The changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources.

The Uses of Geography

Knowledge of geography enables people to develop and understanding of the relationships between people, places, and environments over time - that is, of Earth as it was, is,

and might be.

The geographically informed person knows and understands:
17. How to apply geography to interpret the past.
18. How to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future.