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.
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 only 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 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 Components of Geography Education

Organization of Geography

Geography is composed of three interrelated and inseparable components: subject matter, skills, and perspectives. Subject matter is a distillation of essential knowledge and is the foundation for the geography standards. Subject matter is the basis on which geographic skills are brought to bear. These skills are: (1) asking geographic questions, (2) acquiring geographic information, (3) organizing geographic information, (4) analyzing geographic information, and (5) answering geographic questions. Knowledge and skills must be considered from two perspectives: spatial and ecological.

Mastering any single component of geography is not equivalent to mastering geography. All three—subject matter, skills, and perspectives—are necessary to being geographically informed. None can stand alone.

There is a related chain of knowledge that the geographically informed person must appreciate and command. Knowing population growth rates is not sufficient unless that knowledge can be related to an understanding of the resource base—the distribution of arable land, climate patterns—and to the transportation system that moves food supplies to consumers, and so on. Likewise, knowing where to find information on the distribution of population is not sufficient unless you know how to evaluate the reliability of that information, can relate it to maps of arable land and transportation routes, and can then speculate on the impact of changing population policies, migration patterns, or new crops on the patterns of people and rates of food production. This process returns you to the subject of population growth rates, completing a chain of knowledge involving people, places, and environments.
Understanding the relationships between people, places, and environments depends upon an understanding of space. Space is the environmental stage upon which the drama of geography is played out, and places are particular points on the environmental stage where the action occurs. In this respect, there is a parallel with the approach of history. History is concerned with understanding the temporal dimension of human experience (time and chronology). Geography is concerned with understanding the spatial dimension of human experience (space and place).

Space in the world is identified in terms of location, distance, direction, pattern, shape, and arrangement. Place is identified in terms of the relationships between physical environmental characteristics, such as climate, topography, and vegetation, and, such human characteristics as economic activity, settlement, and land use. Together, these characteristics make each particular place mean-
ingful and special to people. Place, in fact, is space endowed with physical and human meaning. It is the fascination with and exploration of space and place that give geography its way of understanding the world.

THE SUBJECT MATTER

The roots of the word "geography" are found in two Greek words: geo, meaning Earth, and graphia, meaning description or depiction. The purpose of geography, therefore, is to describe or depict Earth. But there is no single way of doing that. Rather, Earth can be looked at in various ways.

As a physical object, it is an oblate spheroid with an equatorial circumference of approximately 24,902 miles; its surface is covered by water and land in a ratio of approximately 2.3:1; and that surface ranges from 29,028 feet above sea level to 35,840 feet below sea level (the top of Mount Everest to the bottom of the Mariana Trench).

As a physical environment, Earth is characterized by large-scale processes, such as the atmospheric jet streams that snake across its surface, and large-scale landforms, such as the Ring of Fire surrounding the Pacific Basin.

As a place in which humans can live, it offers such diverse habitats as the permafrost of Siberia, the tropical rain forest of the Congo River basin, and the Atacama Desert of Chile.

As a place in which humans do live, it displays intricate patterns of environmental modification (e.g., the polderlands of the Netherlands, or the terraced hills of the Philippines), as well as varied patterns of land use (e.g., the densely populated area of Hong Kong, the sparsely peopled central desert of Australia, and the automobile-based sprawl of southern California).

Geographers look at Earth in all of these ways—as a physical object, as a physical environment, and as a human place. Geographers also look at the world as a whole, to understand the connections between places, and to recognize that the local affects the global and vice versa. But in order to study Earth as the home of people, geographers must develop a framework that cuts into the connections between places.

Our framework consists of two levels. At the first level, the subject matter of geography is divided into six essential elements. By essential we mean that each piece is central and necessary; we must look at the world in this way. By element we mean that each piece is a building block for the whole. At the second level, each essential element contains a number of geography standards, and each geography standard contains a set of related ideas and approaches to the subject matter of geography.
Physical and human phenomena are spatially distributed over Earth’s surface. The outcome of *Geography for Life* is a geographically informed person (1) who sees meaning in the arrangement of things in space; (2) who sees relations between people, places, and environments; (3) who uses geographic skills; and (4) 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 technologies 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

**Places 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 places and regions

**Physical Systems**

Physical processes shape Earth’s surface and interact with plant and animal life to create, sustain, and modify 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 mosaics
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 ways 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 an 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