

Arkansas Geographica

Newsletter of the Arkansas Geographic Alliance Spring 2007



Coordinator's Corner

An article in the Fall 2006 issue of ArcNews caught my attention. ArcNews in a magazine meant to keep users of ESRI (Environmental Systems Research Institute) software, i.e., ArcView, ArcGIS, and ArcExplorer, apprised of new upgrades to that software and how it is being used by ESRI users. There are also occasional items about GIS and other geospatial technologies and related educational issues. The article that caught my attention was titled, "The Fourth R? Rethinking GIS Education," by Michael F. Goodchild.

Goodchild argued that being literate in math, science, English, and reading, was certainly no more important in our day and age than being spatially literate – being able to capture and communicate knowledge in the form of a map, understand and recognize the world as viewed from above, recognize and interpret patterns, know that geography is more than just a list of places on Earth's surface, see the value of geography as a basis for organizing and discovering information, and comprehending such basic terms as scale and spatial resolution.

As teachers of geography, we must ensure that our students become more spatially literate by helping them understand such basic concepts of spatial thinking and reasoning as: location and place; distance and direction; map reading; migration; cartography; GIS concepts like raster and vector, layers, points, and polygons; coordinate systems; and, map projections.

Our students will only be able to function successfully in their global world if they are spatial (geographically) literate. We need to help them become such!!

Jeff Allender: the new Co-coordinator

I was raised in the Great Lakes region, mostly around Milwaukee, (go Packers!) and as my mother was a teacher and my father superintendent of the local school district, I swore I'd never be a teacher. I was in my junior year at UW-Whitewater, a music major and theater minor, when I was forced to take my first geography class. By the second class, I fell in love with it, changed my major, and never looked back. I began my masters at Syracuse because they had the best Soviet Geography department at the time (I wanted to work in the US Foreign Service in Moscow), but finished up back home at UW-Milwaukee (you can't take the cheese out of a cheese-head) with an emphasis on urban and transportation planning. My thesis was an air pollution study on an old industrial valley in the heart of the city.

Over the next decade plus, I taught part- and full-time at several universities in Wisconsin, worked (at the speed of continental drift!) towards my PhD, and was a wilderness/backpacking guide at several national parks including the Grand Canyon, Isle Royale, the Everglades, and several regional parks in the Great Lakes. For five years I was also the Physical Environment Instructor and eventually Director of a National Audubon Society Summer Camp for teachers, which for nine weeks every summer, was just about the best job I've ever had. Think summer camp for adults!

By the early 1990s, I finished my dissertation and accepted a job at UCA. My dissertation was on the economic impact of tourism development in Belize, and I guess tourism development in Third World destinations has been my main interest ever since. Between my Master's and PhD, I learned that it's a lot better doing field work in a tropical tourist area than a dirty, industrial valley in a large city.

My wife Mary, daughter Katie, and I, have lived in Conway for almost 17 years now, and to my mind I've become a local (though my dialect might imply otherwise). Mary is a nurse at Children's Hospital and Katie a rising soccer star and sophomore at Conway High. We love it here, and I especially enjoy teaching Introduction to Human Geography where I require the education majors (half the class) to develop geography lesson plans. I helped Brooks and Jerry with a couple of the summer institutes a while back and really enjoyed it as well.

I hope that I can contribute to the expansion of geography throughout Arkansas and the success of the Alliance. Please feel free to call on me if I can assist in whatever Alliance activities you're involved in.

Arkansas Geographic Bee
Friday, March 30, 2007
Henderson State University
Arkadelphia, Arkansas

Reflections on Geography Education

By

Jerry Hanson

I would like to offer some reflections on geography education in Arkansas after 16 years as state co-coordinator. As you may know, I have stepped down as co-coordinator of the Arkansas Geographic Alliance. Dr. Brooks Green is the new state coordinator. I ask that you give him the support and advice you so openly provided me these past 16 years.

I have had the privilege of working in all phases of the Alliance geography education program from summer institutes, summer workshops, Geography Bees, fund-raising, collaboration with the Department of Education and the Governor's Office, and planning and shaping the geography education program. These have all been learning experiences and have influenced my perspectives in shaping geography education programs.

One of the reflections I offer is that the early years of the Alliance programs had a dynamic electricity to them as new teacher consultants came in and became Geo-evangelists for the Alliance. It has been harder to maintain that electricity over the past few years, but I hope it can be re-energized in a similar fashion as the early 1990s. We need new, young and motivated teachers to take up the cause and work with our experienced teacher consultants. I think that within five years there will be a return to a need for geography education in the social studies. It will be necessary to have in place the teacher consultants who form the core of the Alliance programs.

After conducting summer workshops throughout the Education Coops over the past few years, there has been a notable reduction in interest in geography content among teachers. This seems to me to reflect the growing pressure from administrators to focus on writing, reading and math skills. Too many teachers come to the geography workshops for the hours only and not for the content. This situation has to change if geography education is to thrive in the next few years. The Alliance has some tools to address this condition in the form of the Geo-Literacy and Geo-Math programs offered in the summer workshops.

I want to thank all of you who have helped the Alliance geography education program move ahead in Arkansas. While there is much work to do, you have supported a quality program designed to reduce geographic illiteracy. Keep up the good work.

Geography of Arkansas CD-Rom Available

A CD-ROM will be available in March 2007 on the Geography of Arkansas. The project is an outcome of an off-campus duty assignment by Jerry Hanson at UALR. The project puts together a geography of Arkansas focusing on the Five Themes of Geography and Arkansas six natural regions. Each region focuses on the physical and cultural patterns that make that region unique. The project uses photographs, diagrams and a short narrative to describe the regional landscapes of the state.

The CD-Rom called, Connecting Arkansas, will be available after March 1st, 2007. The cost will be postage only (\$2.50). You can order one from:

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Harm deBlij, in *Why Geography Matters*, writes: "As [a] democratic nation that elects representatives whose decisions affect not just America but the entire world, we Americans have an obligation to be well informed about our small and functionally shrinking planet. But the evidence is that our geographic literacy is inadequate and that our interest is lagging—at least when it comes to world affairs. Between the early 1980s and the start of the war in Iraq, international news coverage, measured in minutes devoted to it annually, fell by two-thirds.

Geographic literacy is a matter of national security, so that the weak state of our geographic knowledge constitutes a serious, perhaps critical, disadvantage in an increasingly competitive world. Geographic insights can be crucial in addressing geopolitical problems; they are needed also in decision making in spheres ranging from the cultural to the economic. We need to make better use of maps, to exploit the new technologies that have transformed cartography from illustration to interaction. We need to be more familiar with the globe and what, after all these years, it can still teach us about direction and orientation."

We need to improve the status of geography education in our schools. Kids need to understand their world in order to compete for jobs in an increasingly global economy, to help the US meet international challenges from terrorism to avian flu, and simply to enjoy our diverse planet.

Geography provides the framework, as well as new technologies like GIS, for understanding our world. More than just maps, it addresses connections between people, places, cultures and environments.

But sadly, our kids aren't getting it. Recent surveys show that Americans do poorly on even basic geography skills. Our kids must be prepared for success in the 21st century. It is time to put the world into a world-class education.

All "core" academic disciplines—except geography—receive federal help.

National Geographic and other geography education groups are trying to remedy this by working with members of Congress to bring geography into parity with other core disciplines, such as math, science, English, and history.

As a nation—and in each community across the nation—we must rely on our schools to produce geographically literate graduates. With federal help we can ensure that every U.S. high school graduate is ready for the challenge.



New excavations near the mysterious circle at Stonehenge in England have uncovered a village of homes where hundreds of people lived 4600 years ago, roughly the same time that the giant stone slabs were being erected.

