

Global Ignorance – Geographic Illiteracy

by David J. Keeling

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Jaded by reports that have highlighted the generally poor performance of U.S. students in science, math, and history compared to other industrialized societies, most Americans probably were not shocked by the recent news that they are also among the most geographically illiterate people in the Westernized world.

Although most Americans are more aware today of distant lands such as Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea and Venezuela due to recent media reports on political and economic crises in these countries, few have the ability to find these places on a world map or to discuss critically their cultural characteristics. This lack of geographic awareness permeates all segments of our society, from students to presidents, and from ordinary citizens to senators and businesspeople.



Dr. David J. Keeling, head of WKU's Department of Geography and Geology
Photo by LaDonna Harmon

We might laugh when a student pronounces erroneously that people speak Belgish in Belgium or snicker at the news that our president does not know the capital cities of some important countries. Many will ask whether it really matters that many Americans cannot locate their home state on a U.S. map, that few realize Iranians do not speak Arabic or that most Indonesians practice Islam, or that a significant number of Americans believe Australia has the same size population as the U.S. Is this growing level of global ignorance really a serious and undeniable problem for our society?

Indeed it is! As the undisputed global military superpower and a key player in the economic globalization of the planet, the U.S. exerts significant influence throughout the world and the world exerts tremendous influence on Americans. For example, in Bowling Green, more than 40 immigrant groups live in our community; we wear clothes produced in China, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala; many of our vehicles and electronic goods are assembled in Mexico and we have direct commercial links with dozens of countries. Many of our students are destined for careers that are significantly international in a variety of ways, and even those students whose careers are primarily local or regional will interact with the global

system in ways unimagined a decade or two ago.

U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige has argued that geographic illiteracy is unacceptable because we live in "a world of 24-hour-news cycles, global markets, high-speed Internet and big challenges for all who inhabit it. And in order for our children to be prepared to take their place in that world and rise to those challenges, they must first understand it."

Without a doubt, our need for a higher level of global literacy, for a broader and deeper understanding of the world around us, is critical and compelling. How can we possibly understand the impacts of globalization on our society if we have no basic knowledge of the world in which we live? Across the globe, the "ignorant American" routinely is derided, and the level of contempt for U.S. policy and, at times, American culture has risen dramatically since the 1980s. More than ever, especially after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, we can no longer afford to ignore the rest of the world, its people, politics and cultures.

Yet, how can we overcome the astonishing depth of global ignorance and geographic illiteracy that pervades our society? How do we connect the myriad geographic threads that bind the world together and develop a meaningful and rewarding understanding of global diversity and interrelatedness? One of the major complaints frequently heard about geographic literacy is that it involves the rote memorization of physical features, major cities and countries – the highest mountain, longest river, deepest ocean and state capital approach to understanding the world around us. This type of information is certainly important as the foundation of geographic knowledge, but it is not how today's geographers approach the study of our planet. Nevertheless, in defense of learning this basic geographic vocabulary, imagine speaking or writing English with no concept of syntax, grammar, spelling, or word structure. Or imagine trying to understand history with no concept of time, social development, or political relationships. Knowing the capital of North Korea or the major waterways of South America may seem tedious to some, but this information serves as the essential framework or skeleton around which we can construct more meaningful global knowledge. Perhaps our greatest challenge as educators over the coming decades, therefore, is to overcome the public's perception of global knowledge as simply a collection of place names. Global literacy is more about understanding and explaining geographic or spatial interrelationships than it is about basic location or collections of isolated facts.



Could you find Afghanistan on a map? Take the National Geographic-Roper 2002 Global Geographic Literacy Survey to test your geography skills.

The power of geography, and its importance in eliminating global ignorance, lies in its ability to provide insights into complex human-environment relationships. Geography helps us to make sense of the ever-changing landscapes and spatial networks that make up our planet. Moreover, new spatial technologies such as *Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) are providing better ways for us to gather, analyze, display, and interpret global

information.

In the early 21st century, we face a world where political and economic relationships are changing rapidly, where human alteration of the environment is accelerating and where human patterns of interaction (migration, trade flows, transport and communication, for example) constantly are shifting. Geographic literacy matters because having a good level of global knowledge is fundamental to the enlightenment of society, and democracy is absolutely dependent on the people's enlightenment. Democracy only works well when voters are educated enough to make a conscious decision about candidates and issues. In other words, if people know a lot about, say, Iraq, Afghanistan, or North Korea, they might make better decisions when asked to support an invasion, a new trade package or some other policy initiative. Thus, universities, governments, journalists, students and ordinary citizens cannot afford to ignore global relationships or their underlying geographies. As a society, we can no longer remain ignorant about the world around us, a world with which we increasingly interact, or about the rapid and dramatic environmental, political and economic changes that are reshaping our planet in profound and fundamental ways. If individuals and societies become more educated about global diversity and the intricacies of geographic relationships, they can better understand the limitations and potential of human action and transition from a narrow, parochial view of the world to one that is truly global.

*For more information on Geographic Information Systems (GIS), visit <http://www.wku.edu/geoweb/GIS/home.htm>.

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