

Kentucky Geographic Alliance
Coordinator Letter
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Geography is a unique discipline in that it encompasses both the physical and the social sciences. Geographers are concerned with *What is where? Why it is there? and Why should we care?* At random I have asked elementary teachers if geography is taught in social studies. Almost invariably the reply is, “Oh yes, we use maps all the time.” Certainly a preeminent standard for assessment in Kentucky is that students will use geographic tools (such as maps) to identify and describe natural resources and physical characteristics of regions. However, geography encompasses so much more than creating or interpreting maps. The Five Themes of Geography have been around for many years, but are still useful tools for planning geography lessons. Students can remember the themes as **MR. HELP** (**M**ovement, **R**egion, **H**uman/**E**nvironment interaction, **L**ocation, and **P**lace). The themes can quite easily connect to Kentucky standards and provide a deeper understanding of geographic concepts.

Location and Place are typically the themes most teachers focus on for geography content, although Fourth grade teachers often incorporate the study of regions into their Kentucky curriculum. Regions are a primary means to organize geographic information spatially. Students should be able to organize and analyze similar areas within Kentucky, the U.S. and the world. From current events, teachers could have students look at regions of the Middle East, Mesopotamia, the Holy Land, or even displaced people (the Kurds). Have students identify the characteristics that geographers would extrapolate to create a sense of place.

Humans inhabit the earth and there is a relationship that exists between them. The earth’s natural resources are our life-support system and should be managed well. Students should be aware of the limits of earth’s natural resources and the consequences of depletion. Teachers could expand on this relationship between earth and humans with instruction on topics, such as, pollution, recycling, composting, restoration, landfills, conservation, stewardship, and deforestation. There are children’s books, such as, *Where Does the Garbage Go?* (Showers, 1993), that could be used to introduce a lesson relevant to students’ everyday lives. A website to determine where wastes are disposed of in Kentucky is located at <http://www.waste.ky.gov/programs/sw/>.

Movement is another theme of geography that can help students understand the importance of migration and immigration, diffusion of ideas, patterns of trade and

commerce, and other networks or linkages that occur on the earth. Students could look at the effect of isolation or accessibility on the culture of a community. Within Kentucky, the blockade of the Mississippi River during the Civil War contributed greatly to the decline of the Shaker community. Trade was imperative for the survival of the Shakers. Students could also investigate the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the Shaker community. These represent just a few ideas of how the content of geography can be extended well beyond the simple use of maps and made more interesting and relevant to Kentucky students.

November 13-17, 2006 was the celebration of Geography Awareness Week (GAW). This annual emphasis, sponsored in part by the National Geographic Society, encourages teachers to redefine the importance of geography in the curriculum. Although the KGA sponsors a state-wide contest for teachers, we usually hear from 10 teachers or less who participated in GAW. This past year in Kentucky, only 207 students took the AP Geography exam. There are less than 20 Advanced Placement geography teachers in our state. The KGA is interested in changing these statistics. Part of our mission is to establish a network of all those interested in geographic education and to serve as a conduit through which geographic ideas, concepts, information, and materials can be disseminated throughout the Commonwealth. In keeping with this mission, the KGA is offering a Teacher Summer Institute June 18-22, 2007 for training on using the MESONET weather data to teach earth science. In addition, we would like to encourage teachers to attend the AP Institute at Western Kentucky University June 24-29, 2007. Other opportunities for teacher, parent, and student participation in geographic events will be offered throughout the next year. We would like to encourage each of you to become an active member of the KGA. Stay tuned to the website for upcoming geographic programs and events.