



Challenging Geographic Illiteracy

The Missouri Geographic Alliance at the University of Missouri confronts a U.S. educational crisis of global proportions.

Geographic knowledge helps everyday citizens, as well as legislators, make crucial decisions. Global leaders and decision-makers require a solid understanding of places, peoples, cultures, and global economic systems. However, in Missouri, statewide elementary assessments fail to test for geographic learning. Without these skills, students graduate unprepared to continue education towards careers in the growing geotechnical fields, such as Geospatial Information Systems (GIS).

Startling statistics from the 2002 and 2006 National Geographic Society Roper Surveys:

88% could not find Afghanistan on a map.

Less than 1/3 of 18 to 24 year-olds can find Missouri on a map.

Only 36% of 25 to 44 year old adults could find Missouri on a U.S. map.

Two-thirds of the people surveyed could not find Missouri on a map.

The Missouri Geographic Alliance is strategically attacking the problems of geographic illiteracy such as this, in our state and beyond. One example is building awareness of a current legislation; the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act (TGIF)

<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/program/policy-initiative/>

Of all of the millions of dollars allocated by the U.S. government for teaching “core academic subjects” from 2002 to 2012 through the No Child Left Behind Legislation, geography is the only core subject to receive no funding. TGIF is a bi-partisan effort to rectify the lack of geography teaching in our schools. Visit the website to learn more and how you can make a difference.

The Missouri Geographic Alliance is also helping make available valuable GIS software free to districts and schools throughout the state. All K-12 schools and certified youth programs in the state now have free access to data and detailed maps provided by a Geographic Information System (GIS), thanks to the Missouri Geographic Alliance. If you are interested in being involved in this and other important efforts to improve geographic literacy in Missouri and beyond please visit this link for more information. <http://faculty.missouri.edu/~mga/>

Think of the amount of geography you do daily. You may wonder about current news events, such as the environmental impacts and causes of floods, fires and storms. These events reveal the human-environment interaction within geography. You hear about events across the globe daily and perhaps wonder where these locations are, how regions interrelate or about the geographic literacy of our nation’s citizens and leaders.

Geography is more than knowing place names, but according to Professor Jan Smith of the Pennsylvania Geographic Alliance, knowing places is like learning the alphabet – it is the beginning foundation of geographic literacy and an important skill which should not be overlooked.

Economically, workers need geographic literacy for employment in the growing geotechnical career field, of which Missouri is a national leader with the U.S. Geological Survey and other facilities situated in our state. It is important for Missourians to receive adequate education in geography in order to be prepared for careers in these fields and to be competitive in hiring, having sufficient geo-literacy and geo-technical skills. In addition to the geospatial career fields, business, agriculture, and public and private organizations in our state are impacted by geography. For example, every business brings in resources and materials from outside their own region, and farmers frequently utilize resources which have a geo-technical element, such as GIS (Geospatial Information Systems programs) for delineating crop-growing regions, soils, drought monitoring, and distribution of products. Businesses and institutions today operate in an interconnected global marketplace, and Missouri needs workers, citizens, and decision makers with geo-technical and geo-literacy skills in order to thrive.

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Sarah A. Coppersmith, Ph.D. supports the geo-literacy efforts of the Missouri Geographic Alliance and also builds geographic awareness through her efforts in the teacher education program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Writing Geography! Stories of Space and Place is a program of the Missouri Geographic Alliance which seeks to develop and publicize writing about geography and geographical writing for distribution through Missouri media. The Missouri Geographic Alliance (MGA) is a grassroots network of Missouri elementary and secondary educators, university instructors, geography professionals, and concerned citizens dedicated to the advancement of geographic literacy in the state of Missouri. Visit mga.missouri.edu or contact us at mga@missouri.edu for more information.