



THE RETICENT GEOGRAPHER, THE POPULAR
IMAGE, AND PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION:
PERCEPTIONS FROM RECENT
INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPERIENCE

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Prompted by a growing frustration during a recent six-year experience, this is a plea to reassess our professional behavior. Energies must be channelled in directions that not only promise to strengthen the academic position of our discipline in the United States, but also will lead to greater exposure of geographic research as well as promote much wider recognition of geography as basic to a well-informed society and to the primary and secondary levels of American education.

The Experience

Since 1977 I have been the organizer of the section on Atmospheric and Hydrospheric Sciences (Section W) for the annual meetings of the Pacific Division of the American Associa-

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tion for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), a valuable yet discouraging experience. Few geographers participated, a condition which I have come to regard as a symptom of an affliction from which many of us suffer and which demands immediate attention, for it is endangering American professional geographers as a species.

The Pacific Division covers a territory similar to that of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers (APCG) (Fig. 1). Not surprisingly, this territory contains more than forty times as many AAAS members (some 25,000) than the total membership of the APCG (some 600); for, after all, geography is essentially an integrative discipline. There are always fewer integrators than the more separation-oriented scholars who comprise the bulk of the AAAS membership. For the same reason, one should not be surprised that the Association of American Geographers (AAG), even though it is numerically the major national professional organization of geographers in this country, is the smallest of a selection of such groups (Fig. 2).

The annual meetings of the Pacific Division, like those of the national AAAS, offer a variety of sections, symposia, and other scholarly gatherings, including many to which geographers of almost every kind could make important contributions in an open-forum atmosphere. Unfortunately, during the period of my involvement, very few geographers seized the numerous opportunities thus offered to display their research and have face-to-face discussions with colleagues in allied fields. A ray of light in this gloomy situation was provided by thirty-one of the papers being given in Section W, partly as a result of direct contacts and announcements in the *AAG Newsletter*, the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, and elsewhere. The remaining ten papers were read in sessions on ecology; energy; horticulture; the social, economic, and political sciences; and in Section E (Geology and Geography) (Table 1). Outside Section W, no geographer participated in symposia which included such naturals as one on biogeography and one entitled "San Francisco Bay System: Use

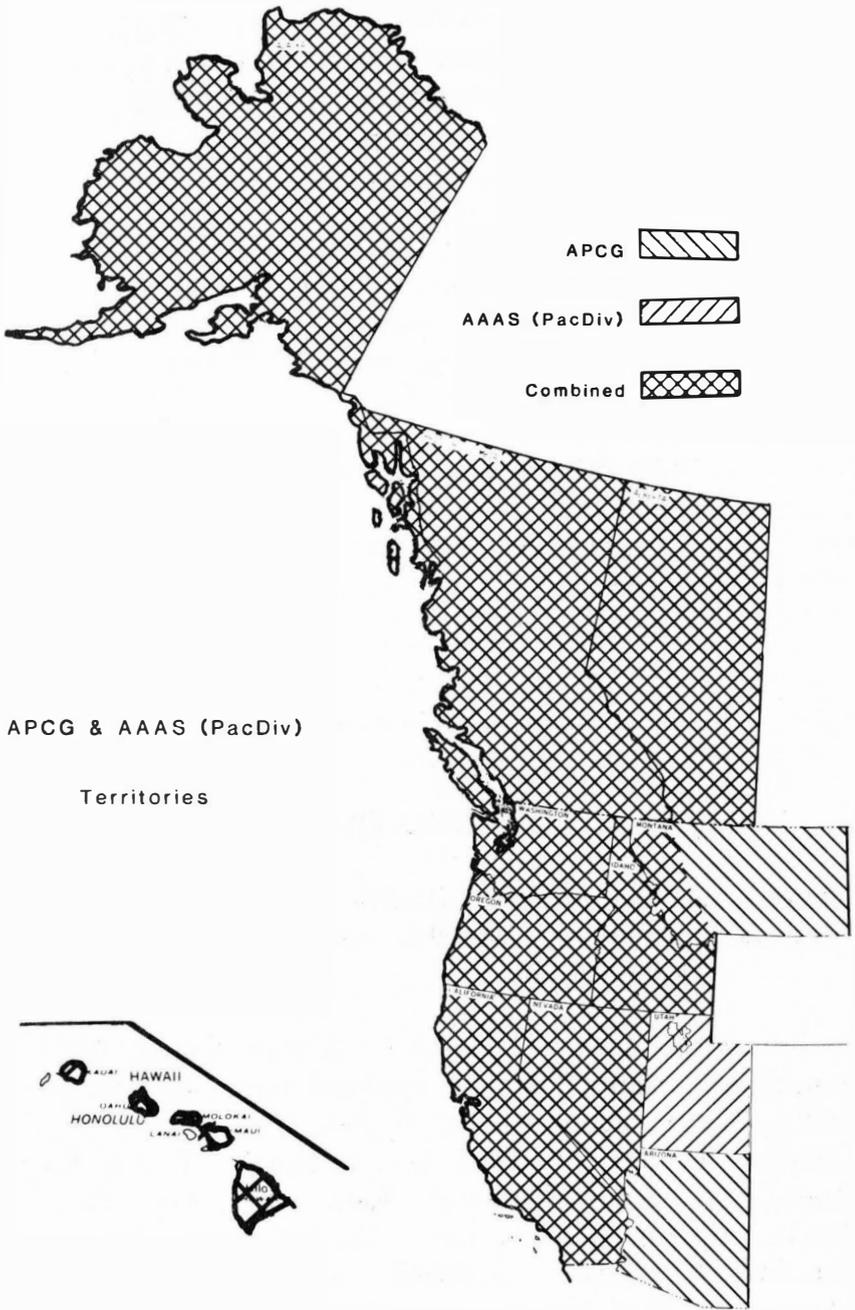
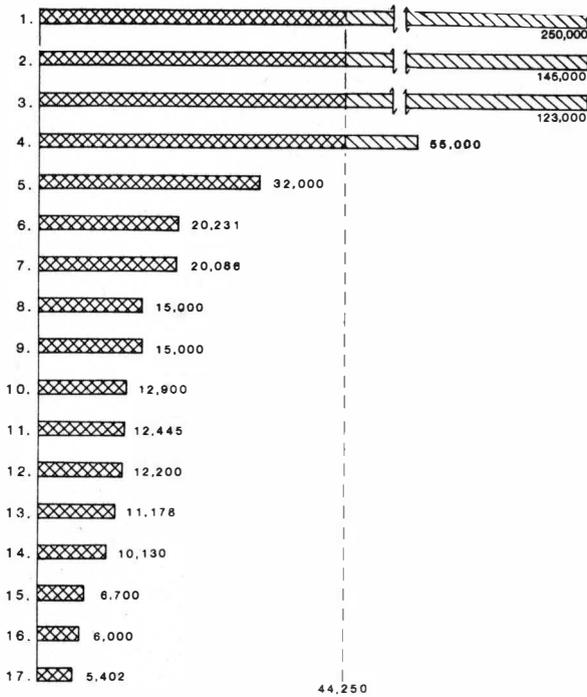


Figure 1



Current Membership of Selected Professional Organizations

Figure 2

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. APCG and AAAS (Pacific Division) Territories.

Figure 2. Current Membership of Selected Professional Organizations.

1. Am. Med. Assn.; 2. AAAS; 3. Am. Chem. Soc.; 4. Am. Psych. Assn.; 5. Am. Physical Soc.; 6. Am. Math. Soc.; 7. Am. Econ. Assn.; 8. Am. Stat. Assn.; 9. Am. Geophys. Union; 10. Geol. Soc. of Am.; 11. Am. Sociol. Assn.; 12. Am. Historical Assn.; 13. Am. Pol. Sc. Assn.; 14. Am. Meteor. Soc.; 15. Am. Philos. Assn.; 16. Am. Inst. of Biol. Sc.; 17. AAG.

Dashed line indicates mean.

and Protection." Section E was held only from 1980 to 1982, during which time three geographers participated.

It seems that, at least in recent years, our record at the annual meetings of the national AAAS has been just as bad. Apparently, even geographers from the host city have tended to stay away, a situation that has been particularly disturbing to our colleagues with British backgrounds who are well aware of the strong participation by geographers in the famous British Association for the Advancement of Science.¹ Although there are no hard data on the participation by geographers in the meetings of the national AAAS, recent experience with "symposia that have a principal geographic motif" tells us that it has been minimal. Besides, "few if any geographers attend the planning session of Section E (of the national AAAS), and it is there that most of the ideas for symposia originate. Since geologists and paleontologists do show up... they naturally suggest programs of interest to them."²

Table 1
Annual Meetings, AAAS (Pacific Division), 1978-1983
Papers Presented or Co-Authored by Geographers

	Number	Percent
Seattle	7	2.2
Moscow	3	1.3
Davis	9	2.1*)
Eugene	4	1.2
Santa Barbara	9	3.0
Logan	9	3.2*)**)
	41	2.2

*) includes Section W symposium.

***) joint meeting with Southwestern and Rocky Mountain Division, both divisions included in count.

Benefits of Interdisciplinary Meetings

Appearances to the contrary, the purpose of this essay is neither to wave the flag for the AAAS *per se*, nor for any of its divisions; but where outside the AAAS can one find as wide a range of scholars converging regionally and nationally? Interdisciplinary contact is essential to academic well-being, not only by means of publications, but also, and *especially*, face-to-face. No single group is more in need of participation in meetings of other disciplines than geographers. Not only does our bent for synthesis demand participation, as distinct from mere attendance, but we also need each other's perspectives and expertise to combat parochialism and inbreeding as well as for evaluation, in short, for the general promotion of the scholarly quality of our work. That we recognize periodic face-to-face contact as important to professional progress is evidenced by our own meetings. Yet why do so many geographers seem to feel that as long as we talk to each other, all is well?

On a personal note, my involvement with Section W has amounted to nothing short of professional enrichment. With one foot on the human side of geography, my interests lie largely in climatology; and, despite a background in meteorology, the exposure of my recent research to an audience of mostly atmospheric scientists has, in the meeting room and outside, tended to reassure me, show me new directions, and make me aware of concepts that otherwise might have escaped my attention. There have been signs that the presentations by the few contributing geographers also benefited the audiences. Our approach tends to be more holistic and to produce more spatial comparisons for we have a tendency to offer a spatial perspective; rather than to imply spatial uniqueness. Particularly important during presentations is our greater inclination to use maps. When recently I used two borrowed wall maps, the appreciation by the audience of what seems to us such a customary device, was surprising.

Apart from scholarly benefits, there is a second, no-less-

important reason for our participation in the meetings of other disciplines. Among the world's developed, industrialized nations, the United States may well be unique in its neglect of geographic instruction at the pre-college/university level. Introducing and developing our discipline in institutions of higher education has exposed us for years to charges by individuals whose ignorance of geography, stemming from their American primary and secondary schooling, breeds suspicion of its worth. Among other things, we have been accused of eclecticism and parasitism.³ The former charge, if it means that we use ideas and findings originating outside geography, is absurd; and long may the practice continue. The latter is groundless: the benefits of research are reciprocal, although the reciprocity is not in perfect balance and can never be. The same ignorance-rooted position is now putting us on the defensive more than ever, when certain politicians, lost for argument in our favor and hard-pressed to reduce spending by similarly unknowing constituencies, require university administrators, many of whom have little notion of geography either, to direct their budget slashing at us and a few other fields which are considered dispensable. Of course, we are all aware of this—such dreary events as at the University of Michigan still prey on our minds—and so is the AAG; but we must do much more than depend on AAG committees, projects, and pamphlets. We, *individually*, must carry the torch. It is imperative that we show who we are and what we can do, ultimately to turn such ignorance into conviction that society is far better off with us than without us. Not only must we advertise geography in the wide, wide United States, but also, vigorously, among our colleagues in other disciplines. For, as Richard Morrill has pointed out, "the image or understanding of modern geography is clouded, even among academics in closely-related fields," and we have done little to dispel it.⁴ Some of us, by implication and attitude, have even fostered it. Moreover, the subject of our focus which we shall now consider, suffers from a widely-held perception of unimportance. Only a concerted effort on our

part will lift the haze and correct the perception.

Geography's Unmysterious Core and Its Popular Perception

Trimmed to its essence, the core of geography is the study of earth space. Among the components of that space are location and place. This is no new revelation; yet one often hears the assertion that geography lacks a focus; and some have suggested, or implied, that the heterogeneity of papers at our annual meetings or the wide variety of course offerings at some institutions is evidence of that deficiency.⁵ Emphatically, the assertion is false. For comparison, one should consider the meetings and curricula of some other disciplines, such as history and biology, which are about as diverse and apparently not subject to the same criticism.⁶ Our focus holds no mystery. Even if only in their minds, serious geographers have their own more elaborate, everyday working definitions, all derived from that focus, as any examination of our multifarious professional literature will show. Of course, there are disagreements among us; and may they ever be debated; but they concern elaborations, such as research approaches and methods, research priorities, interpretations of data, emphases to be placed on classes of phenomena and processes, not the focus itself. No professional geographer will assert that our *prime* concern is time, or the nature of matter, or mathematical procedure, or any of numerous foci that clearly belong to other fields. Having the study of space as our centerpiece, however, does pose a problem of popular perception.

Our kind of space is rarely perceived by non-geographers as worthy of much attention, much less of scholarly concentration. Few question space as a basic element of existence; it is hardly noticed. Everyone questions time, most value it. Times past tend to arouse nostalgia. Except in a few instances, such as the voyages of discovery, we read history to gain a perspective of time much more than of space.

Most people know the names of two or three historians. Who, in the general public, can cite the name of a single geographer? If space is to be dealt with, it is a matter for the

engineer, the airline pilot, the surveyor, or the planner; but planners are few; and who takes planning very seriously in our *laissez-faire* society?

In our daily commute, we are far more concerned with time spent than distance covered. The international businessman wonders whether he can squeeze in that flight to Tokyo before he sets off on his earlier, planned tour of his representatives in Europe. Although his travels are eminently spatial, it is time that is uppermost in his mind. The general perception is that modern living is controlled by the clock far more than by space. We measure time constantly, space rarely. Everyone is aware of time marching on relentlessly, irretrievably. Space is taken for granted; besides, it shrinks—also a function of time—so why bother with it? Such, more or less, is the popular perception of the core of our field. To counter it is one of our basic challenges.

Spreading the Message

Unfortunately, our modest numbers and our daily professional obligations are major obstacles to any effective proselytizing among the general population, at least initially, in order to achieve a greater appreciation of the significance of the study of earth space and a clearer understanding of our aims. We must start with our colleagues in other disciplines by facing them in person. They are a more manageable group, ready to give us their scholarly attention and should, in the normal course of our annual work cycle, be part of our professional interaction. By thus showing them our wares, abilities, points of view, and intentions, we stand to stimulate their curiosity more effectively than before, make them see more clearly that they need our approach and knowledge, and gradually convince them of our basic value to both the scholarly community and society at large.

Once our colleagues are won over, our message will diffuse through ever-wider circles, acquiring the real prospect that with sustained impetus, geography will become established as a

fundamental and full-fledged subject in the curricula of primary and secondary schools in the United States, as it has been traditionally in so many other countries. In short, it is face-to-face contact at interdisciplinary meetings that offers the most promising beginning to bring geography into the spotlight.

The advocated interaction should serve us very effectively, unless some of us continue to leave the impression that the basic subject matter of geography is ill-defined or elusive and allow this to be echoed in all quarters. If confronted by an outsider who demands a definition of geography, the worst possible reaction is to be wavering and apologetic. As a subject, geography is no less clear than history, the main difference being one of orientation and emphasis. Geography is the study of earth space; and having thus begun our answer, let us continue without jargon along the lines of our individual working definition.

Are We Isolationist?

Why do we avoid meetings that are not mainly for geographers? Perhaps the problem concerns publicity, although, due to the sheer weight of its membership (Fig. 2) and the press coverage of its meetings, that may not apply to the AAAS. *Science* the Association's weekly which regularly carries announcements, is sent to all members, of whom by latest count (1981) 356 belonged to the AAG, a number believed to be growing.⁷ The Divisions make their own announcements—the Pacific Division by direct mail to the members in its territory and to other individuals—and so, in various ways, do the participating groups.

Years ago, general curiosity caused me to wander into a local Pacific Division meeting, where a chance encounter resulted in my subsequent involvement. Before then I had paid little notice to the AAAS, having regarded it as an organization for health scientists, biologists, physicists, geologists, and some others, but certainly not for geographers. I know now that the

organization is not for these disciplines exclusively, but it is run by them. Although there are sections for social scientists, they are much less apparent, either at meetings or in terms of their publications in *Science*. As to geography, our virtual non-participation may be related to a misconception about the meaning of the term science, as used by the AAAS. Many of us believe it to exclude the social sciences. *De facto* this is so, but mainly by default. We and others have stayed away. There is neither a legitimate reason why *Science* should be commandeered by the few groups mentioned, nor why our use of it as a voice should be restricted to one or two heroes like Nigel Smith who once even provided the cover photo.⁸ As any democratic organization, the AAAS is subject to elective change. Let us do our part to change it; and to begin, we should do something about Section E which, by its very title, glaringly displays our lack of interest by maintaining the outdated image of William Morris Davis as the fountainhead of geographic inquiry. A change to "Geology and Geomorphology" or "Earth Sciences," with a separate section entitled "Geography" which would concentrate on its human aspects, is one possibility.

There may be other reasons for our being distant. Could it be a prevailing inferiority complex about the quality of our work? Are we afraid that its luster will fade in the broad daylight of outsiders' scrutiny? Perhaps some geographers should keep their work under wraps until their presentations improve, but my recent experience, not only in Section W, has led to the conviction that poor papers are not unique to geographers, and that on the whole we need not be ashamed.

Could it be self-consciousness about the small size of our group? It would seem that our size is all the more reason to be more vocal and visible. Life presents many examples of small groups that are far from the verge of oblivion. Think of the Swedes!

Perhaps we fear the prevalence of strangers at meetings outside geography. Such feelings are, of course, highly personal and depend on whether socializing is one's prime motive for

going to meetings. But, remember, we were strangers once!

Finally, in the West, has the APCG detracted from geographers' participation in Pacific Division meetings? Undoubtedly, although the modest membership of 611 (substantially less than the number of professional geographers in APCG territory—the AAG alone has 889 members there) does not suggest significant competition.⁹

The APCG offers an interesting instance of what could be interpreted as an example of, irony of ironies, geographers' isolationism. Until about 1960, the organization had met for years within the Pacific Division's framework. Then, by a narrow vote, it decided to separate. It seems that the decision had to do with several complaints: perceived lack of attention by the Pacific Division to the quality and location of meeting places, a clashing of meeting and teaching schedules, and too many concurrent sessions. Strangely, in my experience, the APCG has continued to meet at about the same time as the Pacific Division, and not until 1983 has it switched to a Fall schedule. As to sessions being concurrent, that, of course, is an aspect of numerous professional gatherings, *including those of the APCG*. In fairness, the latter are smaller than most and concurrent sessions fewer. Therefore, to some they may be preferable, but whether the per capita yield of professional satisfaction increases in inverse ratio to size of meeting is doubtful. It is difficult, indeed, to escape the conclusion that the APCG's decision of some twenty years ago was ill-considered and that it was motivated by a proud but unprofitable isolationist attitude which could become fatal if persisted in at present. Meanwhile, the Association has lost much help with meeting arrangements and the crucial benefits of face-to-face interdisciplinary exposure and interaction. To be small is one thing; to seem meek and to retreat when things are not exactly right can be perilous. The problems that were perceived then were not and are not unique to the APCG and can be discussed. American geographers in general need to be more aggressive, if we are not to become isolated, ignored, or even trampled underfoot.

"American geography has a story to tell and is a story to tell. . ." ¹⁰ Let us tell it and make our demands known and fight for them, but let us not hide our treasures and spirit. We cannot afford it.

NOTES

1. Wilbanks, Thomas J., Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, personal correspondence, January 10, 1983; Hart, John Fraser, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, personal correspondence, November 22, 1982.
2. Leviton, Alan E., AAAS (Pac. Div.), San Francisco, personal correspondence, November 26, 1982.
3. Morrill, Richard, "The Nature, Unity and Value of Geography," *Professional Geographer*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (February 1983), pp. 1-9.
4. Morrill, op. cit.
5. Morrill, op. cit.; O'Driscoll, Patrick, "Mapping out the way we live now," *USA Today*, April 28, 1983 (cover story of the AAG meetings, Denver, April 1983).
6. Consider also the "extraordinary diversity" of economics, praised recently by the 1983 Nobel laureate in that field, Gerard Debreu, in William Rodarmor, "Cheering up the dismal science," *California Monthly*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (December 1983), p. 13.
7. *AAG Newsletter*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (April 1, 1981), p. 2, and telephone conversation with AAG Central Office, Washington, D.C., December 28, 1983.
8. Smith, Nigel J.H., "Colonization Lessons from a Tropical Forest," *Science*, Vol. 214, No. 4522 (November 13, 1981), pp. 775-761 and front cover photo.
9. *Newsletter, Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, Fall 1982.
10. Adams, John S., "Presidential Remarks," *AAG Newsletter*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (March 1, 1983), pp. 1-2.