

A FRANK AND ERNEST LOOK AT GEOGRAPHERS

What kind of person makes a geographer? The question has long interested me, finally resulting in this discourse, which has pushed aside my NSF (Not Sufficient Funds) application to research the Caribbean origins of the Abdominal Snowman.

In general, geographers tend to be real down-to-earth, with the exception of climatologists (who have their heads in the clouds), and a few starry-eyed navigators. They are also people who know where it's at, although it is the cartographers who really know how to keep the world in perspective, no doubt a projection of the left hemispheres of their brains.

Geography is such a diverse field, however, that the practitioners of the various subfields often have little in common with each other and frequently don't know, much less care, what people in other branches are doing.

Take physical geographers (please take them!). Since geography is usually divided into human and physical, logically a physical geographer is one who is not human. Geomorphologists certainly have their faults and some have rocks in their heads; they often have dirty minds. Some become so immersed in their work that they risk drowning in fluvial processes. And while we don't wish to be too intrusive, let's give vulcanism a plug (if that's not sticking our neck out too far); it's a hot topic, after all.

Not all physical geographers work on the earth surface, many study the atmosphere. These are known as air-heads. They often make vane attempts to figure out why the wind is not blowing the way it should.

Human geographers come in many varieties. Interbreeding occurs, but this gives rise to aberrant genetic anomalies. Their traits are adaptive, however. For example, most urban geographers live in the suburbs; as do specialists in agricultural geography.

Agricultural geography is a difficult specialty, requiring a lot of Hart. There are a lot of clods in agricultural geography, and a good sense of humus is essential if you want to be out standing in the field.

Economic geographers are always putting in their two cents. Many of these are quantitative geographers, a dependable lot. You can always count on them. Frequently they spend their time figuring out why the variables won't and the constants aren't.

Transportation geographers are difficult to classify; they are rarely seen at professional meetings because they took the wrong plane. However, they do arrive before the historical geographers (they are always the farthest behind the times).

Some geographers specialize in remote sensing and become quite detached from their study areas. Some are so remote that one wonders if they ever visit the real world. Exposure to an excess of ultra violent light makes them spaced out.

People outside the field tend to associate geography with regional studies. Often this reduces our image to no more than a Trivial Pursuit. Modern geography is more than knowing place names, but such knowledge is still essential in the more specialized segments of the field. Regional specialists will always have a place in our hearts, if not our departments.

Regional geographers, to establish their credentials, must travel. It doesn't matter how long the trip lasted, or how long ago it was taken, so long as they have been there. (One famous geographer said he did not consider

himself an expert on a country unless he had at least flown over it in the daytime.) I once gained credibility as a minor expert in arctic environments on the basis of a one-day bus ride through Mount McKinley National Park. I was also assigned to teach oceanography because I had lived many years in Florida -- anyone who has lived in Florida, of course, must have been to the beach many times. I had in fact often been to the beach in my younger daze. That may not make me an oceanographer, but certainly I can claim expertise in coastal geography and associated cultural events (e.g., Spring Break).

I trust that the majority of my colleagues will have the latitude to share my sediment that this article should be rated P.G. But enough of this. Back to the Abdominal Snowman. After that, I must return to my research on the grits-hash browns line, the only true cultural demarcator which unequivocally defines the South as a region. After all, what's important in geography is really a matter of taste. Chacun a son goo.

Donald Brandes