

Geography Awareness Week as a Public Domain Point of Entry for Geography

In 1987, when Geography Awareness Week was launched by then-President Ronald Reagan, often referred to as "The Great Communicator," two points of importance to the field of geography were made. First, geography needed to improve its public image and presence. And, second, communicating with the public needed to go far beyond the traditional means of journals, conferences, proceedings, technical reports, etc., which may be the daily fare of many dedicated geographers, but hold little appeal for members of the general public.

Jumping forward 18 years to 2005, the challenge of better communicating with Canadians about geography was addressed at the Symposium on Projecting Geography in the Public Domain in Canada. The symposium was sponsored by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society (RCGS), the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG), and the Canadian Council on Geographic Education (CCGE). Five position papers were commissioned, and can be viewed at www.ccgge.org/ccge/english/geoLiteracy/symposium_june2005.asp.

While doing research for the paper on the media and geography, the words of Ronald Reagan resonated loud and clear. Canadian institutions, including universities, governments, businesses, and professional organizations needed to do a much better job of informing Canadians about the changing role of geography in the affairs of Canadian society. Further, they needed to significantly improve their communications to Canadians about advances in geographic knowledge, in geographic teaching and research methods and techniques, and in geographic information system (GIS) technology.

I agreed to continue my symposium work through the Canadian Association of Geographers, and adopted Geography Awareness Week (GAW) as the means to undertake my assignment. We began by promoting Geography Awareness Week as part of GIS Day for 2006.

By GAW 2007, a number of innovative steps had been implemented. The historical

record is posted on the CAG website (www.cag-acg.ca/en/index.html), and is summarized here as the basis of several recommendations that flow from the Canadian experience.

First, Geography Awareness Week in Canada is organized around *theme days*. In 2009, the theme days are Weather and Climate; Water; Energy; Transportation; and Food and Health. Each topic is of national interest, affects every Canadian every day, and involves many aspects of geography. The mission of GAW, November 16-20, is to illustrate how geographical factors shape each of these critical aspects of life in Canada.

Second, a panel selects 10 *non-academic Canadian websites* each year to tell the story about how geographical factors affect each theme day topic. The websites are accessible year-round, and provide a real world aspect to geography for all parts of Canada by demonstrating how geographical factors affect the five topics of national, local, and personal interest.

Third, the *Applied Geography Showcase and Sampler* informs Canadians about the kinds of client-driven projects that geographers undertake for governments, businesses, and other enterprises.

Fourth, the *GeoSkills Showcase and Sampler* informs Canadians about the skills that geographers employ in education, government, business, entertainment, and recreation. Twenty skills are identified for 2009, and each of them makes an important contribution to how we teach geography, learn about geography, do geographic research, and use geography in the workplace. In addition, the GeoSkills Showcase and Sampler materials make instructive connections between geographic information systems (GIS) and other geographic skills.

Based on the Canadian experience, I encourage geographers to undertake a number of initiatives: 1) develop an international session on Geography Awareness Week at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the AAG in Washington, D.C. (www.aag.org/annualmeetings),

which might be hosted by the (U.S.) National Council on Geographic Education (NCGE); 2) create an international network of GAW coordinators and interested persons, to be hosted by the International Geographical Union (IGU); 3) share materials among GAW organizations through Internet postings; 4) increase the involvement in Geography Awareness Week activities by geographers in all areas and subfields of geography.

By way of illustration, the Applied Geography Sampler and the Geoskills Sampler noted above invites contributions from the international community. I believe that the sampler approach provides great opportunities for geographers to tell "ordinary folks" about their work, and represents the kind of outreach activity that can help to move geography into the public domain in Canada, the United States, and other countries as well. I look forward to receiving contributions at any time, and I expect that other organizations sponsoring 2009 GAW activities are also open to contributions of pertinent materials to their programs.

Finally, support of and regard for Geography Awareness Week activities can be readily demonstrated by referencing the web pages of GAW hosts on departmental and agency web pages, by including GAW materials in course outlines, by hosting GAW-related events in departments and agencies, and by promoting Geography Awareness Week through the media (especially through community newspapers, which seem to be very attuned to the "where aspect" of matters that concern the public).

In my opinion these small steps will help to sow more and better seeds of geography awareness, and the harvest will be more and better geographical understanding, appreciation, and support by the public. ■

Barry Wellar
Director, Geography Awareness Week
Canadian Association of Geographers
wellarb@uottawa.ca