The Importance of Geography

TV personality Dr. Harm J. de Blij (pronounced “duh BLAY”) is a well-known geographer in the United States today. He appeared on the popular television show Good Morning America in 1989 to discuss geography-related issues. Here, he explains why geography is important. Read his comments and then answer the questions that follow.

Our world and our country change every hour of every day. Global population mushrooms... Old countries fall apart and new countries form. Familiar names disappear from the map and new ones appear. Boundaries are created, erased, relocated. Nations quarrel, even go to war over remote specks of land... New terms come into use: Pacific Rim, ethnic cleansing, no-fly zone, choke point.

Like the human world, the physical Earth is being transformed. A “blizzard of the century” is preceded by a hundred-year storm and followed by the worst flooding on record. New temperature records seem to be set on a weekly basis. Unprecedented [never seen before] droughts afflict one region while another drowns. And again newly prominent [important] terms abound: greenhouse warming, El Niño, ozone layer, desertification.

Is there a common denominator [connector] for all this change? Can our world and its transformations be better appreciated through a particular perspective? ... Both questions [are answered] with one positive affirmation [yes]: geography...

Okay, you may say... geography has its uses. But does that make it important?

Consider this: a general public not exposed to... geography can be duped [tricked] into believing all kinds of misinformation... This means that when a group of scientists decides to scare the beejeebers out of the public by predicting imminent [impending] glaciation (as they did in the 1960s) or looming greenhouse warming (the fad of the 1990s), far too many people are insufficiently skeptical [doubting] and, through their elected representatives, may be persuaded to spend billions better invested elsewhere.

Equally important is geography’s function as an antidote [cure] to isolationism... In our ever more interconnected, overpopulated,
competitive, and dangerous world, the more we know about our planet and its environmental history and geography, about other peoples, cultures, political systems, and economics, about precarious boundaries and sensitive borderlands, about distant resources and developing regions, the better prepared we will be for the challenging times ahead.

From that perspective, geography’s importance is second to none.

1. What is the meaning of each geography term below that de Blij uses in his remarks? Look up each one in your textbook or another geography resource.

   a. desertification: ____________________________________________

   b. glaciation: ________________________________________________

   c. greenhouse warming: _______________________________________

   d. ozone layer: ______________________________________________

   e. El Niño: __________________________________________________

2. In his remarks, de Blij suggests that the study of geography can be divided into two broad categories—physical geography and human geography. Place each of the following topics into one of these categories of geography by labeling human geography topics with an H and physical geography topics with a P.

   ______ a. peoples ______ d. economics

   ______ b. greenhouse warming ______ e. desertification

   ______ c. glaciation ______ f. cultures

3. Explain why the following events and topics that de Blij mentions would interest both human geographers and physical geographers.

   a. floods and droughts: _________________________________________

4. According to de Blij, how does the study of geography in school help our nation’s democratic system of government work better?

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