

[Print this page](#)

WHAT ARE GEOGRAPHIC CONCEPTS, AND HOW ARE THEY USED IN ANSWERING GEOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS?

Geographic concepts include most of the boldfaced words in this chapter, such as place, relative location, mental map, perceptual region, diffusion, and cultural landscape. In doing geographic research, a geographer thinks of a geographic question, one that has a spatial or landscape component, chooses the scale(s) of analysis, and then applies one or more geographic concepts to conduct research and answer the question. Geographers use fieldwork, remote sensing, GIS, GPS, and qualitative and quantitative techniques to explore linkages among people and places and to explain differences across people, places, scales, and times.

Research in human geography today stems from a variety of theories and philosophies. To understand what geographers do and how they do it, it is easiest to start by defining what geography is not. Today's geography is not environmental determinism.

Rejection of Environmental Determinism

The ancient Greeks, finding that some of the peoples subjugated by their expanding empire were relatively docile while others were rebellious, attributed such differences to variations in climate. Over 2000 years ago, Aristotle described northern European people as “full of spirit... but incapable of ruling others,” and he characterized Asian people (by which he meant modern-day Turkey) as “intelligent and inventive... [but] always in a state of subjection and slavery.” Aristotle attributed these traits to the respective climates of the regions—the cold north versus the more tropical Mediterranean.

Aristotle's views on this topic were long-lasting. As recently as the first half of the twentieth century, similar notions still had strong support. In 1940, in the *Principles of Human Geography*, Ellsworth Huntington and C.W. Cushing wrote:

The well-known contrast between the energetic people of the most progressive parts of the temperate zone and the inert inhabitants of the tropics and even of intermediate regions, such as Persia, is largely due to climate... the people of the cyclonic regions rank so far above those of the other parts of the world that they are the natural leaders.

Huntington and Cushing suggest climate is the critical factor in how humans behave. Yet what constitutes an “ideal” climate lies in the eyes of the beholder. For Aristotle, it was the climate of Greece. Through the eyes of more recent commentators from western Europe and North America, the climates most suited to progress and productiveness in culture, politics, and technology are (you guessed it) those of western Europe and the northeastern United States. Each of these theories can be classified as **environmental determinism**, which holds that human behavior, individually and collectively, is strongly affected by, even controlled or determined by, the physical environment.

For a time, some geographers attempted to explain the location of major cultural hearths as solely a function of environment. Quite soon, however, certain geographers doubted whether these sweeping generalizations were valid. They recognized exceptions to the environmental determinists' theories. For example, the Maya civilization in the Americas arose in a tropical climate that most assumed was incapable of complex cultures. They argued that humanity was capable of much more than merely adapting to the natural environment. The many environmentally determinist theories that explain Europe as “superior” to the rest of the world because of the climate and location of the region ignore the fact that for thousands of years, the most technologically advanced civilizations were found outside of Europe in North Africa, Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia.

Chipping away at deterministic explanations helped move the geographic study of the relationships between human society and the environment in different directions. Everyone agrees that the natural environment affects human activity in some ways, but people are the decision makers and the modifiers—not just the slaves of environmental forces. People and their cultures shape environments, constantly altering the landscape and affecting environmental systems.

Possibilism

In response to environmental determinism, geographers argued that the natural environment merely serves to limit the range of choices available to a culture. The choices that a society makes depend on what its members need and on what technology is available to them. Geographers called this doctrine **possibilism**.

Even possibilism has its limitations, partly because it encourages a line of inquiry that starts with the physical environment and asks what it allows. Human cultures, however, frequently push the boundaries of what is “environmentally possible” through their own ideas and ingenuity, and advances in technology. In the interconnected, technologically dependent world we live in today, it is possible to transcend many of the limitations imposed by the natural environment.

Today, much research in human geography focuses on how and why humans have altered environment, and on the sustainability of their practices. In the process, the interest in **cultural ecology**—an area of inquiry concerned with culture as a system of adaptation to and alteration of environment, has been supplemented by interest in **political ecology**, an area of inquiry fundamentally concerned with the environmental consequences of dominant political-economic arrangements and understandings (see Chapter 13). The fundamental point is that human societies are diverse and the human will is too powerful to be determined by environment.

Today's Human Geography

Human geography today seeks to make sense of the spatial organization of humanity and human institutions on Earth's surface, the character of the places and regions created by people, and the relationships between humans and the physical environment. Human geography encompasses many subdisciplines, including political geography, economic geography, population geography, and urban geography. Human geography also encompasses cultural geography, which incorporates a concern with cultural traits such as religion, language, and ethnicity.

Cultural geography is both part of human geography and also its own approach to all aspects of human geography. Cultural geography looks at the ways culture is implicated in the full spectrum of topics addressed in human geography. As such, cultural geography can be seen as a perspective on human geography as much as a component of it.

To appreciate more fully the vast topics researched by human geographers, we can examine the multitude of careers human geographers pursue. Human geographers have titles such as location analyst, urban planner, diplomat, remote sensing analyst, geographic information scientist, area specialist, travel consultant, political analyst, intelligence officer, cartographer, educator, soil scientist, transportation planner, park ranger, and environmental consultant. All of these careers and more are open to geographers because each of these fields is grounded in the understanding of places and is advanced through spatial analysis.



Choose a geographic concept introduced in this chapter. Think about something that is of personal interest to you (music, literature, politics, science, sports), and consider how whatever you have chosen could be studied from a geographical perspective. Think about space and location, landscape, and place. Write a geographic question that could be the foundation of a geographic study of the item you have chosen.

People and Places: Trinidad: Global Environmental Change