5 Themes of Geography

Location, Human/Environmental Interaction, Region, Place, Movement

A study of Geography begins with knowing where things are located on a map. But more important, it requires an understanding of why things are located in particular places, and how those places influence our lives. The "five themes of geography" were created in 1984 by the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) and the Association of American Geographers (AAG) to facilitate geographic education and provide an effective organizational structure for the teaching of geography. By using these themes as a basis for understanding geographic information, we can gain a better appreciation of cultural and environmental changes around the world.

**Location** (position on Earth’s surface); the geographical **situation** of people and things; the **distribution** of various locations of a collection of people or objects.

**Interaction** (Cultural ecology - relations between cultures and environment).

**Region** (area of unique characteristics, ways of organizing people geographically); an area on the Earth's surface marked by some degree of homogeneity of some phenomenon.

**Place** (associations among phenomena in an area); the uniqueness (or sameness) of a location.

**Movement** (interconnections between areas); the mobility of people, goods, and ideas across the surface of the planet.

**Location** (relates to the locational tradition)

Ways to indicate location (position):
1) Maps: best way to show location and demonstrate insights gained through spatial analysis.
2) Place-name: a name given to a portion of the Earth’s surface (“Miami”).
3) Site: physical characteristics of a place; climate, water sources, topography, soil, vegetation, latitude, and elevation
4) Situation: the external locational attributes of a place; its relative location or regional position with reference to other nonlocal places.
5) Absolute location: latitude and longitude (parallels and meridians), mathematical measurements mainly useful in determining exact distances and direction (maps).
6) Relative location: location of a place relative to other places (situation), valuable way to indicate location for two reasons:
   a) Finding an unfamiliar place - by comparing its location with a familiar one (“Miami - 35 miles northwest of Cincinnati”).
   b) Centrality, understanding its importance (Chicago – hub of sea & air transportation, close to four other states; Singapore – accessible to other countries in Southeast Asia).
6) Distribution: arrangement of something across Earth’s surface.
   a) Density – frequency with which something occurs in an area. **Arithmetic density** – total number of objects (people) in an area. **Physiologic density** – number of people per unit area of agriculturally productive land.
   b) Concentration – extent of a feature’s spread over an area. **Clustered** – relatively close. **Dispersed** - relatively far apart.
   c) Pattern – geometric arrangement of objects.
**Human/Environmental Interaction** (relates to the man-land tradition)

1) Cultural landscape – includes all human-induced changes that involve the surface and the biosphere. Carl Sauer: “… the forms superimposed on the physical landscape by the activities of man.”

2) Cultural ecology - the multiple interactions and relationships between a culture and the natural environment.

3) Environmental Determinism – human behavior, individually and collectively, is strongly affected by, and even controlled or determined by the environment.

4) Possibilism – the natural environment merely serves to limit the range of choices available to a culture

5) Environmental Modification – positive and negative environmental alterations

**Region** (relates to the area-studies tradition)

1) Distinctive characteristics:
   a) area: defined spatial extent
   b) location: lie somewhere on Earth’s surface
   c) boundaries: sometimes evident on the ground, often based on specifically chosen criteria
   d) other: cultural (language, religion), economic (agriculture, industry), physical (climate, vegetation)

2) Three types of regions:
   a) Formal – (a.k.a. uniform, homogeneous), visible and measurable homogeneity (link to scale and detail)
   b) Functional – product of interactions, and movement of various kinds, usually characterized by a core and hinterland (e.g. a city and its surrounding suburbs)
   c) Perceptual – (a.k.a. vernacular), primarily in the minds of people (e.g. Sunbelt)

3) Regions can be seen in a hierarchy (vertical order, scale), (e.g. Ft. Lauderdale – Broward County – Florida – Southeastern US …)

**Place**

1) Culture – people’s lifestyles, values, beliefs, and traits
   a) What people care about: language, religion, ethnicity
   b) What people take care of: 1) daily necessities of survival (food, clothing, shelter) and 2) leisure activities (artistic expressions, recreation)
   c) Cultural institutions: political institutions (a country, its laws and rights)

2) Components of culture:
   a) Culture region – the area within which a particular culture system prevails (dress, building styles, farms and fields, material manifestations,…)
   b) Culture trait – a single attribute of culture
   c) Culture complex – a discrete combination of traits
   d) Culture system – grouping of certain complexes, may be based on ethnicity, language, religion,…
   e) Culture realm – an assemblage of culture (or geographic) regions, the most highly generalized regionalization of culture and geography (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa)

3) Physical Processes – environmental processes, which explain the distribution of human activities
   a) Climate – long-term average weather condition at a particular location. Vladimir Koppen’s five main climate regions (expresses humans’ limited tolerance for extreme temperature and precipitation levels)
   b) Vegetation – plant life.
c) Soil – the material that forms Earth’s surface, in the thin interface between the air and the rocks. Erosion and the depletion of nutrients are two basic problems concerning the destruction of the soil.

d) Landforms – Earth’s surface features (geomorphology), limited population near poles and at high altitudes

**Movement**

1) Culture Hearths – sources of civilization from which an idea, innovation, or ideology originates (e.g. Mesopotamia, Nile Valley), viewed in the context of time as well as space

2) Cultural diffusion – spread of an innovation, or ideology from its source area to another culture
   a) Expansion diffusion – an innovation, or ideology develops in a source area and remains strong there while also spreading outward
      1) Contagious diffusion – nearly all adjacent individuals are affected (e.g. spread of Islam, disease)
      2) Hierarchical diffusion – the main channel of diffusion some segment of those who are susceptible to (or adopting) what is being diffused (e.g. spread of AIDS, use of fax machines)
      3) Stimulus diffusion – spread of an underlying principle (e.g. idea of industrialization)

b) Relocation diffusion – spread of an innovation, or ideology through physical movement of individuals
   1) Migrant diffusion – when an innovation originates somewhere and enjoys strong-but brief-adoption, loses strength at origin by the time it reaches another area (e.g. mild pandemics)
   2) Acculturation – when a culture is substantially changed through interaction with another culture
   3) Transculturation – a near equal exchange between culture complexes

c) Forces that work against diffusion:
   1) Time-distance decay – the longer and farther it has to go, the less likely it will get there
   2) Cultural barriers – prevailing attitudes or taboos