

Geographic Terms and Concepts

When studying the discipline of geography and considering the various terms and concepts that geographers utilize, it might be helpful to contemplate the following points. Geographers place special emphasis on the term **place**. When discussing any place on the planet geographers would ask; what is it, where is it, how did it become what it is, where is it in relationship to other places, how is it a part of something larger like a country or a region, and finally how does the **absolute** or **relative location** of a place affect the people who live in that place. So, in other words geographers attempt to recognize spatial patterns. It is a **spatial science** that is concerned with the spatial behavior of people and the spatial relations between places.



A handheld GPS device

When considering the concept of place there are some basic observations to keep in mind. All places have location, direction and distance with respect to other places. A place has size. A place also has cultural and physical elements. Places can



The Panama Canal dramatically affected the relative distance between the East and West coasts of North America.

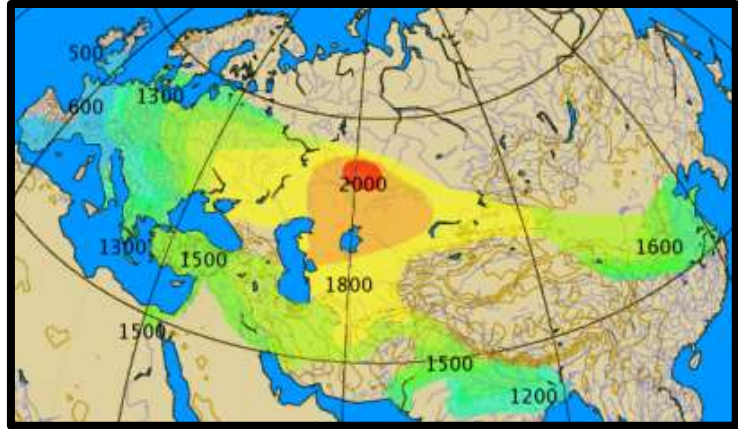
change over time and the various elements of places interrelate with other places. As mentioned, every place has an absolute location and a relative location.

Absolute location is the exact latitude and longitude position of a place. Relative location is more subjective, it can be defined as the position of a place relative to any other place. The relative position of a place is very important when considering such factors as interconnection with other places. Every place also has an **absolute distance** from any other place that can be measured. Perhaps more important though is the relative distance between two places. The further apart two places are from one another in distance and the more it costs to travel from one place to another, in real costs or in time commitment, can dramatically affect the level of interconnectedness between two places.

Spatial or **cultural diffusion** is another useful concept to consider. Geographers study how ideas and technologies, goods and services spread from one place

to another. A new idea will develop in one place, and in some instances that idea may not spread to other places while at other times that idea might spread slowly to other places and at other times spread rapidly. An interesting project might be to examine the spatial or cultural diffusion of something like blue jeans. For instance, where did they originate, how and why did the idea of wearing blue jeans

spread from one group to another, and why do some groups still resist adopting blue jeans as a clothing option. Obviously, one could do this exercise with just about anything or any idea. Think about some of the most influential ideas ever conceptualized, and also consider how these ideas have spread from one culture to another and the impact that they have had.



The spatial diffusion of the war chariot from 200 BCE to 500 BCE

Geographers also analyze the **natural environment** of the planet, and how the various natural processes work. The Earth has a dynamic system

that includes the **atmosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere**, each of which interacts with the other impacting the physical world and **ecosystems** in which we live. Geographers study the interaction between the world's **atmosphere and hydrosphere** and the **climatic environments**



The Amazonian Rainforest

that result from this interaction. These climates range from **tropical** to **polar** and **subpolar** and from **subtropical** to **temperate**. The long-range temperature and weather of a particular place is that regions climate.

In addition, geographers also consider the lithosphere, where the Earth's

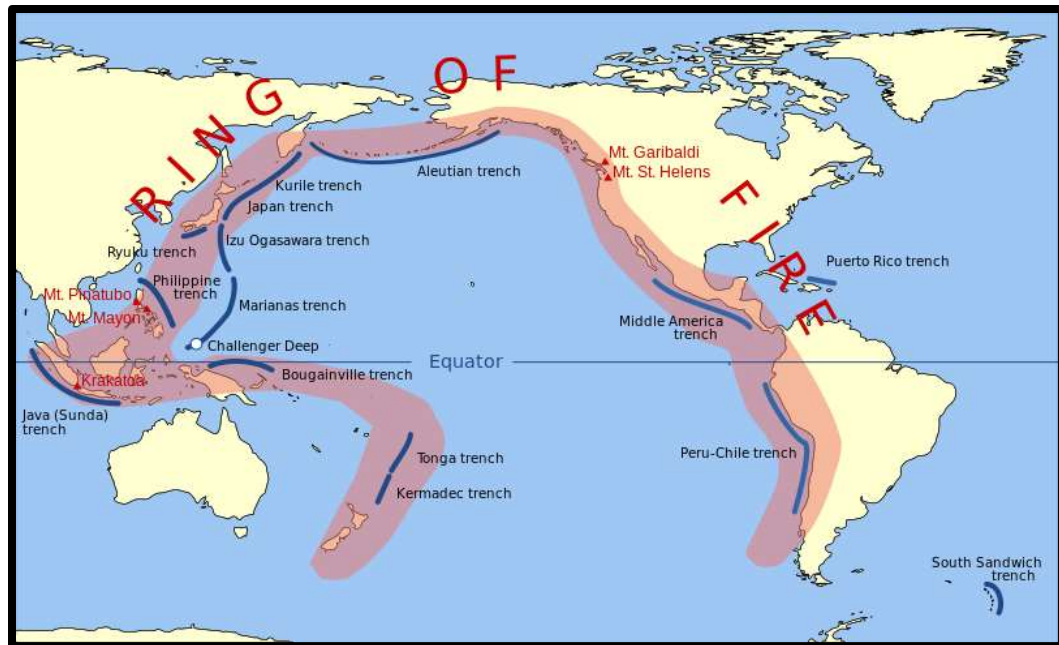
Tectonic plates

literally float on top of a molten layer. Tectonic plates separate from one another at

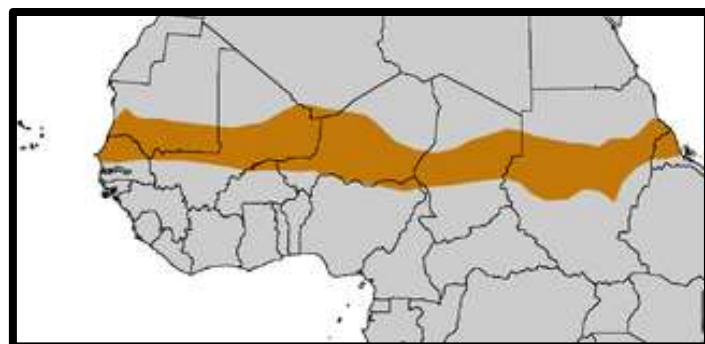
divergent plate

boundaries and come together at **convergent plate boundaries** where oceanic plates are **subducted** below continental plates. Some plates slide by other plates at what are called **transform plate boundaries** like the San Andreas Fault. The interaction of tectonic plates builds up mountains and creates the deepest trenches in the oceans. The physical relief of the planet's surface which is built up by tectonic processes is altered over time by **weathering** and **erosion**. **Atmospheric and lithospheric** processes create **natural hazards** such as **volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods**.

When examining human and physical geography, geographers also look at the **natural resources** of planet Earth. This includes **renewable resources**, such as trees, plants and sunlight and **nonrenewable resources** such as oil and minerals. Although oil is produced by the natural processes of decay and pressure, we are currently using up this valuable resource over a relatively short time while it takes eons for the planet to create more. Another valuable resource is the available arable land that we depend upon to feed people and animals. Overuse, such as overgrazing can contribute to **desertification**, an ongoing problem in the Sahel region of Africa. Geographers also explore the impact of **industrialization**, including how it developed in England and spread to other regions. The **atmospheric pollution** that results from industrialization is also an important factor to consider.

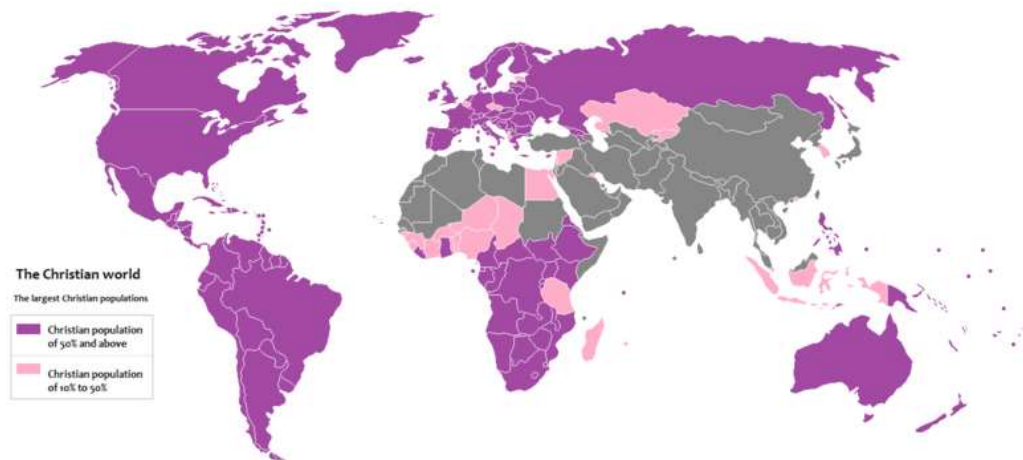


The Pacific Ring of Fire



The Sahel region of Africa

Geographers also examine **cultural geography**. Within this subdiscipline geographers look at the languages that people speak, including how and where specific languages developed and how those languages are related to other languages. Cultural geographers also explore the various belief systems, or religions that people have created. Some of these belief systems are **universalizing** religions; which basically means that the followers and teachers of a particular belief system think that all humans should, or eventually will, believe as they do. Other religious belief systems are classified as **ethnic religions**, meaning that only people of a particular ethnic group should or do make up the majority of those who practice this religion. A cultural geographer might also examine how a religious belief system spreads from one group to another or from region to another. The **diaspora** of the Jewish population of Palestine is one example of how a religious belief system can spread.



Christianity, which began as a religious belief system in Palestine more than 2000 years ago, has spread around the globe.

Cultural geographers also study the various **ethnic groups** that make up the planet's population. There are 190 plus countries in the world but there are literally thousands of ethnic groups, some of which are numbered in the millions while other ethnic groups may only have a few hundred members. The gradual absorption of smaller ethnic groups by larger ones is one of the basic truths of human development. Most, if not all ethnic groups have at least some degree of **ethnocentrism**, a belief that their cultural practices or beliefs are somehow superior to the practices and beliefs of other ethnic groups. In examining various cultures, geographers also consider the issue of gender. To measure the overall level of gender differences between cultures a **gender equity index** is utilized.



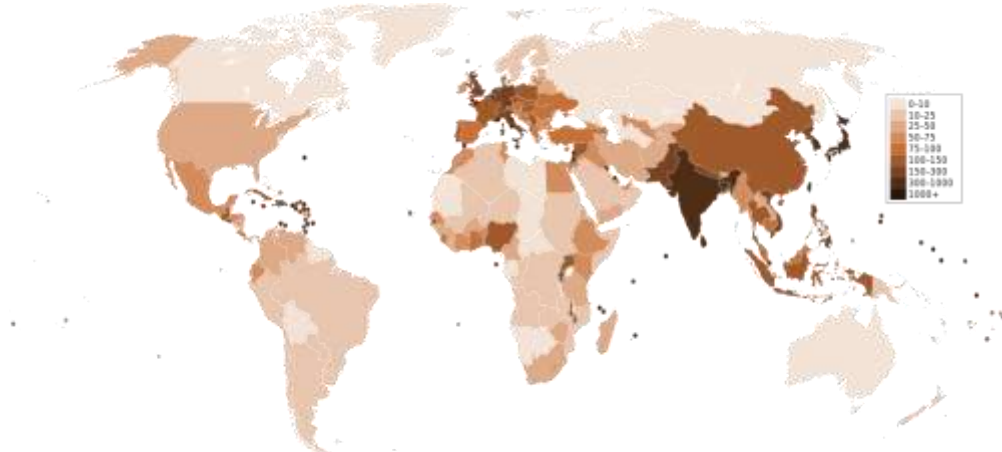
Over 1.2 billion strong, the Han Chinese can be considered the largest ethnic group in the world

Another specialized field in geography is demography, the study of human populations in terms of growth or decline and movement from one place to another. Demographers look at the **population density** of particular countries or regions within those countries. In doing so a demographer might also consider the **physiological density** of a region, which is the number of people per unit of cultivable land. Geographers also inspect the **population-resource ratio** of particular groups or countries. The levels of **urbanization** of

particular countries or regions, including the growth of **megacities** are other issues that geographers study. **Crude birth rates, total fertility rates and crude death rates** are

all statistics that geographers use in determining where a country falls on a **demographic transition** chart. **Population doubling** time is also an important factor to consider as we examine population growth and project future population trends. As mentioned, demographers also look at where people live and the movement of people from one place to another. Up until around eleven thousand years ago humanity was primarily a migratory species, with hunting and gathering groups moving from one region to another to take advantage of available resources. Since the dawn of civilization most people are sedentary, but others have continued to migrate from one region to another in search of opportunities or to flee conflict.

Another field of human geography is **political geography**. The political boundaries that exist between historic and modern countries are considered, as well as the geographic concept of nation, which for geographers means any group of people that share a common identity, a sense of unity and a desire for self-governance. There are numerous peoples, such as the Kurds, who are nations without a state of their own. The desire of the Kurdish people for self-government, or Kurdish **nationalism**, is a politically divisive issue in the Middle East. Political geographers also study the status and rights of the **indigenous peoples** of the world, which can vary greatly from one country to another. In examining the



2006 Population Density Map



The capital of Brazil – Brasilia.

political geography of a country, the type of government used, either federal or unitary, is considered. The geographic position and the economic and political status of **capital cities** are also studied.

Economic geography is also a field of human geography. Economic geographers look at the **gross**

national income and **purchasing power parity** of countries and populations, as well as the overall level of development. Geographers determine whether certain economic activities fall within the **primary sector, secondary, tertiary or quaternary sectors**. For instance, farming and forestry are both considered primary economic activities. The factories that produce most of the goods we utilize on a daily basis are placed in the secondary economic activity category, while most professional and government positions are part of the **tertiary** economic sector. With the development of modern economies the new category of **quaternary** economic activity was established for financial and information services corporations. Economic geographers also examine the growth of **multinational corporations**, spread of **outsourcing** and **offshoring**, and the growth of **offshore financial centers**.

To assist in examining the level of economic development of countries, geographers have created a **human development index**. In addition, geographers consider the over level of sustainability of certain human activities. In all modern societies a **formal economy** exists, which is regulated and taxed by governmental authorities. However, when exploring the economic level of a society we also have to look at **informal economy** activity, such as a street vendor selling unlicensed products. As less developed countries attempt to modernize their economies, geographers are also beginning to look at **responsible growth**.



The Cayman Islands are one of many popular offshore financial centers



Black Market graffiti in Russia. Informal economic activity has been widespread in many of the states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union.

In many of these less developed or **emerging countries**, the majority of the populations do not necessarily enjoy the **human rights, political rights, social rights and cultural rights** that people in more developed countries typically believe should be shared equally by all. Over the past few decades the world has seen the growth of democratic governance and the expansion of many of these rights to ever larger groups, however there are still many peoples who continue to live in countries where the ability to enjoy political freedom and enjoy basic human rights is a challenge.

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