MORE THAN JUST MAPS AND MOUNTAINS

Last year, nearly 300,000 GCSE, A-level and university students studied geography in the UK alone. But what place does a subject so firmly associated with exploration and mapping the unknown have in the modern world? On the eve of the annual conference at the home of UK geography – the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) – we canvassed the opinions of a select group of academic geographers. Natalie Hoare reports

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hen the Royal Geographical Society was formed in 1830, one of its primary aims was ‘to advance geography so that it might attain the rank of science’. At that time, despite the vast collection of British explorers heading off into the unknown in the hope of building up a clearer picture of the world, geography wasn’t part of any school curriculum or university prospectus.

In the intervening years, geography has grown into an important and respected discipline – and has, indeed, attained ‘the rank of science’. On the eve of the RGS-IBG’s Annual International Conference, we decided we wanted to try to get a firm sense of geography today – what it is, why it’s important, how it fits into modern society and where it’s headed. With this aim in mind, we contacted a group of UK-based academic geographers from a cross-section of sub-disciplines – as recommended by the RGS-IBG – and asked them a set of questions (see over).

We initially approached 15, but our timing couldn’t have been worse – six were unable to respond due to commitments marking and invigilating exams, assessing dissertations, submitting academic research papers and preparing for the annual conference. But, we did manage to extract the opinions of nine academics from traditional fields such as economic, social and environmental geography, as well as less well-known and arguably more radical fields such as spatial geography and the geography of gender and sexuality.

WHAT IS IT, THEN?

When we asked our panel of geographers just what geography actually is, three key elements kept cropping up: humans, the human and environmental systems from a spatial perspective,’ reckoned Neil Coe of the University of Manchester.

The emphasis on the first two elements mentioned above varied depending on the academic’s own perspectives. Steve Fletcher from Bournemouth University opined that ‘[geography] is the study of the world around us. [It] explains the patterns of landscape and society and identifies how the world is changing and the challenges that those trends might present to residents of Earth.’ UCL geographer Mike

‘Geography is so difficult to define as there are so many different branches of the discipline, each with its own traditions, ideas, vocabulary and methods.’ Steve Fletcher, Bournemouth University

Earth and interactions between the two. ‘I see geography as the science of the processes of the surface of the Earth and the interactions between this and the living environment, including human beings,’ said Margaret Byron of Kings College London. ‘It’s a way of understanding the world that explores

Batty, on the other hand, stated that ‘geography is the study of how people behave in space, mould space and fashion it to their own purpose in the quest for a better life’.

The wide variety of answers to this seemingly simple question raised a question of their own: why is geography
so difficult to define? Fletcher put the problem down to geography's nebulous nature. 'Geography is so difficult to define as there are so many different branches of the discipline, each with its own traditions, ideas, vocabulary and methods,' he said. 'Despite this diversity, each branch takes as its basis a desire to understand the world better.'

This view was echoed by Katie Willis of Royal Holloway. 'Its breadth of content and approaches means that its focus is sometimes difficult to determine,' she said. 'We are used to seeing subjects in terms of being in one box - "science", "social sciences" or "arts". Geography transcends these boundaries so is difficult to place.'

Kath Browne of the University of Brighton suggested that the popularisation of geography has been at least partly responsible for the difficulty in defining the subject. 'The school curriculum and popular culture have a lot to do with the reification of geographies to "maps and mountains"," she said. 'It's much easier to classify and stereotype geography as a very narrow discipline. This means that the breadth and depth of geography is lost to a small proportion of geography's current work and future possibilities.'

### A GLORIOUS PAST

Next, we asked our panel to consider the important contributions to human knowledge that geography has made in the past.

'Cartography first and foremost,' said Batty. 'In a sense, geography touches all our lives; evolutionary theory wouldn't have taken off if Darwin hadn't been a part of the various expeditions of discovery in the 19th century.'

For Byron, the most crucial contribution has been our increased understanding and awareness of natural hazards. 'It has helped us to understand physical processes and to predict and protect the environment, including the human environment, during and from extreme events,' she said.

Georgina Endfield of the University of Nottingham felt that the study of geography has also helped to foster an awareness of our impact on the natural world. '[Geography has helped us to develop a level of] environmental consciousness, highlighting the degree to which human forces have been capable of shaping, modifying and, indeed, damaging the natural world,' she said.

Kevin Cook of St Mary's University College was more specific, referring to more contemporary examples of the discipline's contribution. 'In the field of development studies, a team led by Mike Mortimore has shown that more people don't necessarily mean more erosion,' he said. This work has proved to be important for managing protected landscapes and desertification. 'Also, insights by Alice Coleman into the spatial arrangements of [post-Second World War] housing in our inner cities led to major UK planning changes,' he continued.

Some respondents complained that the question warranted too broad an answer and Neil Coe of the University of Manchester simply replied that '[geography has contributed] a wealth of insights into how every place is unique and why this matters'.

### THE BIG ISSUES

So, what are some of the issues being addressed by geographers today? When we asked this question, we expected to learn about a range of fascinating (and perhaps slightly obscure) research topics. Although there wasn't a lack of these, there are plenty of projects addressing some of the most important questions currently facing humanity. 'Geographers are contributing to [debates about] most of the major issues being faced by the
world today: climate change, waste disposal and issues of recycling, coastal retreat, poverty, HIV/AIDS, housing and planning issues, transport, mass tourism, demographic change, globalisation, the list is almost endless,' said Cook.

When the respondents were given the opportunity to discuss their own work, they provided a stunning illustration of the incredible breadth of current geographical research. Among the projects they described were some that had been running for decades, such as University of Sheffield health geographer Jan Rigby’s participation in a recently completed 40-year study of poverty and wealth in Britain. This research, she explained, will help to shape government policy and assist in efforts to improve the provision of health-care resources.

An area of Fletcher’s work is also set to influence policy makers – in the UK, Europe and Japan. He’s studying the coastal and marine policy of these regions in order to find ways of more effectively managing coastal environments. This research is a great example of geography’s complexity, spanning both the natural environment and humans. ‘[Coastal and marine areas] are a focus for human population, development and infrastructure, they are important areas of economic production and they have immense environmental value,’ he said. ‘These [issues] are exciting as they combine physical and human traditions.’

Another project that combines the physical and the human is being carried out by Batty and colleagues at the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis at UCL. Following the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005, the authorities

Above: a pair of tourists look on as the extreme tidal surge causes the Qiantang River to crash against a wall in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. The study of natural phenomena such as this forms but one aspect of the discipline of geography.
streets. 'The security implications of all this work are crucial,' he said. He's also working on building mathematical models of cities to help evaluate urban planning proposals and to determine exactly how cities work and how we can intervene to make them more equitable and more efficient.

Another respondent who's clearly not content with ploughing a single furrow, Endfield is investigating climate change in Mexico, relationships between climate and health in 19th-century East Africa, and the climatic and health impacts of past explosive volcanic events. Broadly speaking, her work examines society's relationship with the weather and weather-related events such as droughts and floods and the implications for social and economic wellbeing.

Byron's research is rooted more firmly in the human side of geography. She is studying post-war labour migration, migrants and their descendants in the British labour markets in an attempt to determine what happened to the millions of people who migrated to Europe during the 1950s and '60s - in terms of employment, housing and the way in which they perceive their host nation. It is, said Byron, the issue of trans-nationalism that she finds particularly exciting in her work. Although her research looks to the past, it has clear relevance to modern-day multicultural British and European society.

Also well and truly in the human geography camp is Browne, who is currently undertaking extensive research to assess the wellbeing, health and social needs of Brighton and Hove's lesbian, gay, bi- and trans-sexual community and the supposed 'tolerance' among the residents of England's 'gay capital'. 'I'm trying to find out how different people experience and read the city of Brighton and Hove within and beyond “deviant” sexualities and gender identities,' she said. 'This research is then feeding into local policies and politics to progress social change for lesbian, gay, trans- and bisexual people.'

A GLIMPSE OF A COMPLEX SUBJECT
Our investigation into what is happening at the coalface of geographical inquiry provided us with a snapshot of a discipline that is constantly reinventing itself in order to help us better understand our ever-changing world. And like the explorers of the 19th century's golden age of discovery, today's geographers are continuing to break new ground.

The last word went to Rita Gardner, director of the RGS-IBG. 'The UK is a world leader in geographical research,' she said. 'In contrast to the situation in the USA, geography is thriving at universities across the country and it's a matter of great pride that researchers here are constantly pushing the boundaries of our geographical knowledge.'

WE ASKED NINE ACADEMIC GEOGRAPHERS...
- What is geography?
- Why do you think people have trouble defining it?
- What are some of the important contributions that geography has made to human knowledge in the past?
- What do you think are the big issues being addressed by academic geographers today?
- What research topics are you currently working on?

WHO WE ASKED...
Dr Kath Browne, senior lecturer, University of Brighton
Kevin Cook, director of geography, St Mary's University College
Michael Batty, Bartlett professor of planning, UCL
Dr Margaret Byron, King's College London
Neil Coe, senior lecturer in economic geography, University of Manchester
Dr Steve Fletcher, senior lecturer in coastal and marine affairs, Bournemouth University
Jan Rigby, senior lecturer, University of Sheffield
Dr Georgina Endfield, reader in environmental history, University of Nottingham
Katie Willis, reader in development geography, Royal Holloway, University of London