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### Elementary Geography: Objectives and Curriculum<sup>1</sup>

The nature of modern geography. --- One cannot effectively consider objectives in the teaching of any subject without first having a definite comprehension of the nature of that subject. What then is modern geography? It is a descriptive and explanatory science, dealing with the relationships between man and his natural environment. By "natural environment" there is meant, of course, the combined physical, plant, and animal environments. The distinctive function of geography is both to describe and to explain the relationships of man to the natural environment; to examine and interpret the adjustments which groups of people have made to the combination of

natural environmental conditions that exist in the regions in which they live; to explain why men use the land and its resources as they do; to study the advantages and disadvantages, the opportunities and handicaps, of unit regions throughout the world for utilizations by man. The essence of this may be stated in a very simple way by saying that in studying modern geography one studies why people work and play and live in different lands in the ways they do, or, again, that in studying the geography of any part of the world one is concerned with learning how the people there have made or can make their work and play and their ways of living fit the find of country in which they dwell.

Thus defined, geography has a field cultivated but little, if at all, by any or all of the other natural and social sciences; has a unity formerly lacking; and has a point of view unique among the sciences which deal with humanity. Thus defined, geography is neither a natural science nor a social science; its field lies between the domains of those groups of sciences. These statements do not, of course, for the briefest moment mean that geography can claim exclusive ownership of all of the facts with which it deals. No science enjoys exclusive possession of all the data with which it is concerned, and whether a fact is geographical or not depends in many cases on how it is used.

Principle objectives. --- 1. The first objective in the teaching of elementary geography, and the most fundamental one, is to emphasize the application of geography to the immediate problems of life; to show *how* men live, *what* they do, and so far as practicable, *why* they live and work as they do in different environments in various parts of the world; to establish a background which will aid the pupil in later fitting his own live intelligently into his physical

<sup>1</sup> From: Barrows H. and Parker E., "Elementary Geography: Objectives and Curriculum", *The Elementary School Journal*, XXV, 7, excerpted from pp. 493-498.

*In this article H. Barrows and E. Parker present the modern 1925 view of geography as they believe it should be used by elementary school teachers. They then go on to identify the five most important objectives of geography for elementary school children. In summarizing the points made by the authors in 1925, sections have been deleted from the full length article.*

*At the time this article was written, Harlan Barrows was Professor and Chair of Geography at the University of Chicago and Edith Putnam Parker was Assistant Professor of the Teaching of Geography in the School of Education, University of Geography. The authors also wrote geography textbooks for school geography that were known for many decades as the Barrows and Parker Series.*

*This article has been selected and commented by Joseph P. Stoltman, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, USA.*

surrounding and in choosing surroundings to which his capacities are suited.

2. The second objective in the teaching of elementary geography is to give the pupil knowledge of the location and character of the leading surface features of the earth (continents, oceans, mountains, plains, rivers, lakes, cities, etc.) *in their various relationships to human activity*, but never as isolated facts. In connection with this objective, it is to be noted that since geography is concerned with relationships between man and nature in specific places, it affords a greater opportunity than does no other subject taught in the elementary school to fix in the minds of pupils the names and locations of important surface features. It is again stoutly affirmed, however, that it is only the relationships which exist between the distribution, activities, life and works of man, on the one hand, and earthy features, on the other, that have real geographical quality. It is through these relationships and only so that geography should teach facts of location.

3. The third objective in the teaching of geography in the grades is to give sympathetic understanding (of necessity, elementary) of the conditions and problems of the peoples of other countries which are associated with, and grow out of the kinds of lands in which they dwell; to help the pupil to get the point of view of foreign peoples. Certainly to view the lives of nations and of communities in relations to their environments provides an indispensable prerequisite to understanding their problems and attitudes and so helps to pave the way for intelligent sympathy and for effective cooperation.

4. The fourth objective is to show the dependence of man on earth conditions and earth resources as the materials bases of social development and to bring out the economic interdependence of the peoples of different countries. Just as an inhabitant of a crowded city cannot live without any relations to his fellow-citizens, so no nation will in the future be able to avoid close association with its neighbors in a world which is fast approaching a crowded state. The pupil should come to realize that, through improved means of transportation and communications, the environment affecting each group of civilized people has come to embrace practically the entire earth. An appreciation of the interdependence of men and of the unity of the

earth will help the pupil to become an intelligent citizen of the world.

5. The fifth great objective is to point the way to better uses of land and natural resources. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of teaching to the young citizens of America fundamental conceptions about the right use of the land. An intelligent interest in governmental and social obligations toward the efficient use of natural resources is an important prerequisite to good citizenship.