

# Looking at the World in Multiple Ways: Geographic Perspectives

Where something occurs is the spatial perspective; how life forms interact with the physical environment is the ecological perspective. We need both perspectives to comprehend Earth as the home of people.

Perspectives, knowledge, and skills comprise the content of geography. In general, a perspective is a framework that can be used to interpret the meanings of experiences, events, places, persons, cultures, and physical environments. Having a perspective means looking at our world through a lens shaped by personal experience, selective information, and subjective evaluation. The perspectives and the questions to which they lead distinguish geography from other approaches, such as historic or economic. A perspective provides a frame of reference for asking and answering questions, identifying and solving problems, and evaluating the consequences of alternative actions.

It is essential to be aware that many different perspectives exist and that learning to understand the world from many points of view enhances our knowledge and skills. It is also essential to realize that our perspectives incorporate all life experiences and draw upon knowledge from many fields of inquiry. Therefore, people cannot be neatly boxed into specific categories based on their cultural experiences, ethnic backgrounds, age, gender, or any other life-status characteristic.

Acquiring, understanding, and using a wide variety of perspectives are essential to becoming a geographically informed person. Such a person knows that each individual has personal points of view based in unique life experiences; accepts the existence of diverse ways of looking at the world; understands how different perspectives develop; is aware that perspectives incorporate values, attitudes, and beliefs; considers a range of perspectives when analyzing, evaluating, and solving a problem; and understands that perspectives are subject to change.

Although the field of geography includes many different perspectives, geographers depend upon two perspectives in particular to frame their understanding of people and places in the world—the spatial perspective and the ecological perspective.

## The Spatial Perspective

A historical perspective focuses on the temporal dimension of human experience (time and chronology), while geography is concerned with the spatial dimension of human experience (space and place). The space of Earth's surface is the fundamental characteristic underpinning geography. The essential issue of *whereness*—embodied in specific questions such as, “Where is it? Why is it there?”—helps humans contemplate the context of spatial relationships in which the human story is played out. Understanding spatial patterns and processes is essential to appreciating how people live on Earth. People who approach knowing and doing with a habit of inquiring about whereness possess a spatial perspective.

## The Ecological Perspective

Earth is composed of living and nonliving elements interacting in complex webs of ecological relationships that occur at multiple levels. Humans are part of the interactive and interdependent relationships in ecosystems and are one among many species that constitute the living part of Earth. Human actions modify physical environments and the viability of ecosystems at local to global scales. The survival of humans and other species requires a viable global ecosystem. Understanding Earth as a complex set of interactive living and nonliving elements is fundamental to knowing that human societies depend on diverse small and large ecosystems for food, water, and all other resources. People who regularly inquire about connections and relationships among life forms, ecosystems, and human societies possess an ecological perspective.

Understanding and using the spatial and ecological perspectives helps geographers understand how to interpret nature and societies on Earth. Viewed together, the geographic perspective overall encompasses an understanding of spatial patterns and processes on Earth and its web of living and nonliving elements interacting in complex webs of relationships within nature and between nature and societies.

A fully developed geographic perspective, therefore, involves an integration of both spatial and ecological points of view, as well as a consideration of other related perspectives that may be useful in understanding and interpreting the world.

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### Complementing the Two Geographic Perspectives

The two primary geographic perspectives, spatial and ecological, are supplemented by many other perspectives that help frame a distinctly geographic way of looking at the world. When used appropriately, these other perspectives expand our understanding of spatial patterns and human-environment interaction. Historical, economic, civic, and cultural perspectives may be used collaboratively with geographic perspectives to assist in formulating and informing investigations. A geographic perspective can be integrated with other systemic perspectives and with life-status perspectives to enrich and enlarge understanding of places, regions, and environments.

It is impossible to list, much less describe, the many types of perspectives people use to develop understandings about their own environments both near and distant from them in time and location. Still, it is useful to consider examples of systemic and life-status perspectives embraced by the geographic viewpoint. Using these perspectives in geography provides the framework for using geographic knowledge and skills to answer questions and solve problems.



Image credit: D.J. Zeigler

*Together, historic, economic, political, and geographic perspectives help explain why Russian colonizers in the 1800s selected a site on the Pacific coast, north of San Francisco Bay to establish Fort Ross as a southern outpost of imperial control.*

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