

THE FIVE THEMES OF GEOGRAPHY

The study of geography includes specific *topics* such as landforms, climates, population, and culture. Geography also entails a number of unifying, interrelated *concepts*. Among the most important concepts are the “Five Themes” of geography. They are:

Location. Geographers want to know where things are located, both by themselves and in relation to other things. Therefore, **location** is a very important theme because it answers a fundamental geographic question: “Where?”

Place. Geographers want to know what different parts of the world are like, and why. Accordingly, **place** is concerned with the human and physical features that characterize different parts of Earth’s surface. In our everyday speech the words location and place may have the same definition. In the study of geography, however, they have distinctive meanings. **Location** answers the question “Where?” **Place** answers a different but equally important geographical question: “What is it like?” Here is an example that illustrates the difference between the terms. I use **location** when I point to New York City on a map, or say it is found where the Hudson River meets the Atlantic Ocean, or give its latitude and longitude. I use **place** when I say that New York City has a warm summer and cool/cold winter, encompasses a large area, has lots of tall buildings, and is home to millions of people who exhibit a large variety of cultural and ethnic attributes.

Human-Environment Interaction. Human beings and the physical environment interact in many ways. Geographers recognize that human beings play a very important role in shaping and modifying the natural environment. Some results of this interaction may be visually enchanting, such as the skyline of Manhattan, or the terraced rice paddies of Southeast Asia, or the English countryside. But other products of **human-environment interaction**, such as pollution and deforestation, are very troubling. Geographers also recognize that the environment impacts human life through such agencies as climate, landforms, and natural hazards (earthquakes and hurricanes, for example). Indeed, people and the environment impact each other so pervasively and so profoundly that when geographers use the concept of **place** (that is, when they consider what a particular area is like, and why) they often end up focusing on **human-environment interaction**.

Movement. Geographers recognize that the world is increasingly inter-connected because of trade, commerce, migration, electronic media, discretionary travel, and other forms of **movement**. One result of **movement** is that the global pattern of culture is becoming less complex. Another result is that different parts of the world have risen or fallen with respect to their economic importance. Still another is that **human-environment interaction** is increasing because new roads and better communication have encouraged more contact between people and their environment. The theme of **movement** often complements the theme of **place** by helping to explain why a particular area has a particular characteristic. For example, I use the theme of **place** when I say that many people of Greek ancestry live in Astoria, Queens, and that many people of Russian ancestry live in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. If I want to explain why these people live in those locales, then I would describe and analyze their migration, a form of **movement**.

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Region. A **region** is an area of the earth that has one or more unifying characteristics or (stated differently) one or more things in common. **Region** is a significant concept because it helps geographers achieve their most fundamental goal: to describe and analyze the distribution of phenomena on Earth's surface. Our world is exceedingly diverse. Geographers recognize that one way to make sense out of the observed complexity is to create **regions**; that is, to divide the world into areas with something in common. **Regions** can be large or small, and can be based on just about any human or environmental characteristic(s). Examples of **regions** include Sahara Desert, Hudson Valley, Upper West Side, and Islamic realm.