Celebrating geography

Stephen Scoffham

Stephen reflects on the theme of his Presidential lecture.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing which was broadcast live on television to a worldwide audience. The images of Earth which the early astronauts sent back from space generated enormous interest. Two photographs stand out in particular. 'Earthrise' taken by William Anders on the Apollo 8 spaceflight in 1968 showed Earth appearing over the lunar horizon. This offered an entirely new perspective on the world and gave rise to the metaphor of 'Spaceship Earth'. A few years later, in 1972, the image of Earth taken by the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft also caught the public imagination. Known as the 'Blue Marble', it showed Earth as a blue and white globe floating in a vast expanse of deep darkness (Figure 1). What makes both these images so powerful is the way that they capture the extraordinary fragility, isolation and incontestable beauty of the planet that we inhabit. Amongst the most widely distributed images in the history of photography, they were adopted as a symbol by the environmental movement and did much to support the growth of global consciousness.

Exploration

Anniversaries are one way of celebrating geography. Journeys of exploration are another. Throughout history intrepid adventurers have ventured to distant lands or sailed across uncharted seas to find out more about the world around them. The European exploration of the New World, the discovery of a sea route to India and the search for the source of the Nile are just three examples of many fascinating stories which bring geography to life. Often the significance of these journeys can really only be understood by looking at maps. Christopher Columbus identified the Caribbean Islands as the 'West Indies' because he mistakenly thought he had reached the Asiatic coast. Vasco da Gama's voyage around the Cape of Good Hope opened up a previously unknown sea route around southern Africa from Europe to China which rendered the Silk Road obsolete. The expeditions which confirmed the source of the Nile built European knowledge of central Africa – a region that had previously been regarded as 'terra incognita'. Tracing these different journeys on a map fires the imagination and fuels the desire to find out more about other places and environments. It can also feed into a lifelong interest in maps themselves.

However, exploration can also be celebrated equally successfully on a very different scale and in much more familiar environments. One of the features of geography is that it draws on our direct experience of places, however humble they may be. This means there is a powerful argument for using local streets and buildings as the focus for geographical enquiries. Finding out about the features which contribute to the character of a locality, collecting data about social or environmental issues, exploring an aspect of economic activity or examining plans for future developments all have the potential to motivate students because they focus on the place where they live and are meaningful to their lives. The opportunity to apply skills such as mapwork, enquiry and GIS in these familiar contexts and with purposeful outcomes can be highly affirmative. Indeed, it has the potential to set in motion a mutually reinforcing cycle in which an enquiry leads to an investigation and analysis which then prompts further enquiry questions. Such a process is the spur to geographical thinking and long term-engagement with the subject.

A sense of place

But there is a further dimension to consider. Our relationship with place contributes to our identity and helps to build our sense of who we are. Local enquiries and investigations can deepen this understanding. Put simply, the more we understand about the world around us, the more we understand about our particular location and our place within it. An associated benefit is the way in which learning about our surroundings enhances feelings of attachment and belonging. The 'broaden and build' theory of positive emotions developed by Barbara Fredrickson (2004), explains how local exploration can enhance personal resilience and promote well-being. Meanwhile, place attachment theory focuses on the way in which people attribute emotional and affective meanings to particular environments (Tuan, 1974). Both these theories affirm the psychological value of engaging with the local urban and rural surroundings.

The experiences we have of the world, both direct and indirect, fuse together over time to create a filter or lens through which we interpret subsequent events. Doreen Massey (2005) describes this as our geographical imagination. Interestingly, such thinking opens up the possibility of diverse opinions and viewpoints. As Margaret Roberts (2011) points out, we all have different 'imaginations' because we all have different experiences, influenced by gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, age and the opportunities we have had to interact with other people. One of the consequences is that how we see the world, what we think is significant and how we decide to act will vary not only in terms of time and place but also between groups and individuals. Embracing this diversity enriches geography and is another way of celebrating how it illuminates our understanding.

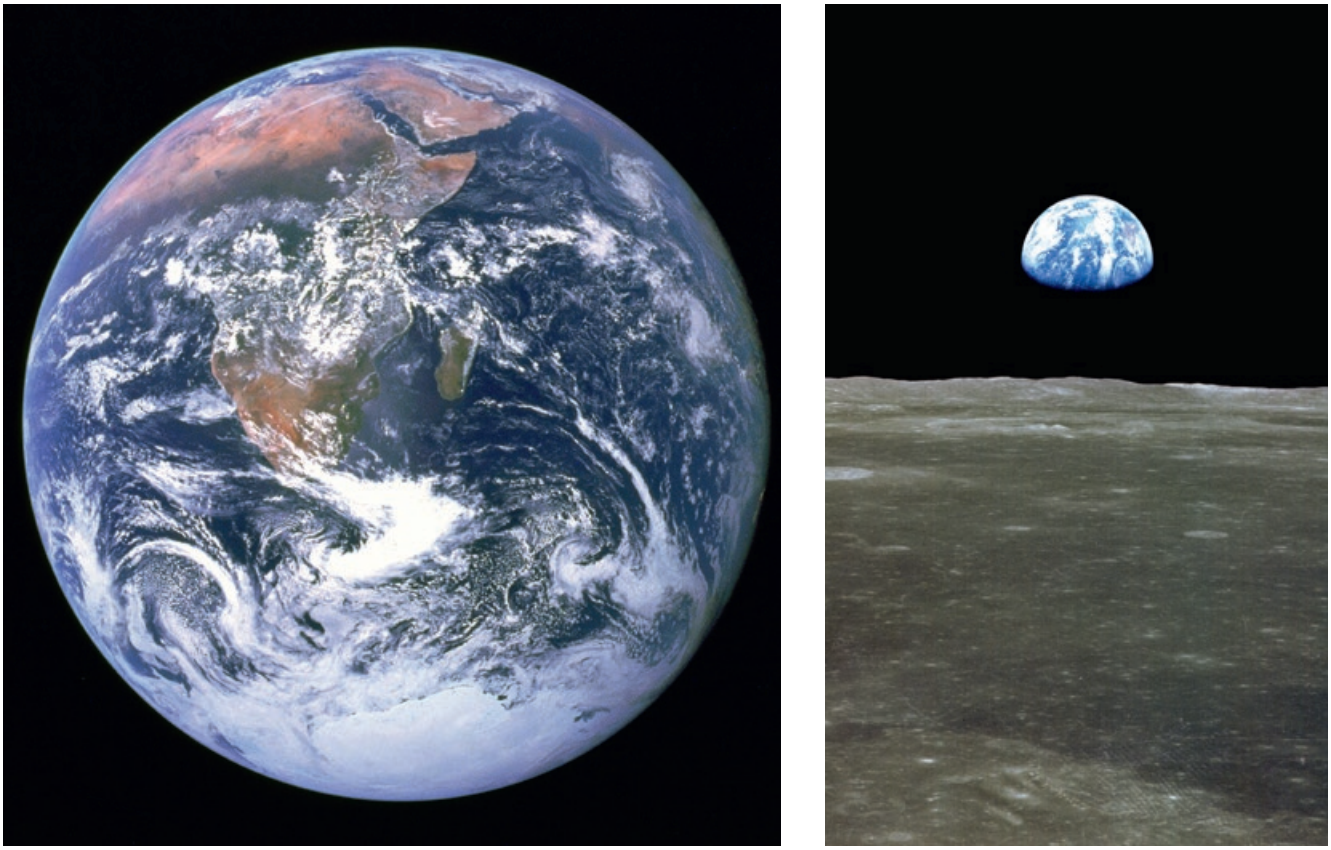

Figure 1: 'Blue Marble' (left); 'Earthrise', taken by William Anders (right). These and other images of the Earth from space taken 50 years ago became the symbols of the global environmental movement. **Photos:** © NASA.

What is it then that draws both children and adults to geography? This is a question that can be answered in a number of ways. On a cognitive level, a thirst for both direct and indirect knowledge of the world shines through in the accounts of the chroniclers and adventurers of the past. The old adage that geographers like to learn about geography through 'the soles of their feet' is also significant. Outdoor experiences of all kinds also appear to draw people to geography, as confirmed by a study of teacher educators (Catling and Martin, 2010). In the same study, around half of respondents reported the enjoyment of maps and the impact of enthusiastic teachers. Autobiographies and personal reflections often capture more subjective factors. A sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of the physical environment and the natural world is frequently acknowledged (Figure 2). Michael Palin (2008), for example, sees geography as exploring 'the living breathing essence of the world we live in'. It is, as he put it, about 'sunsets and eclipses, mountains, dreamlines, dancing dervishes and painted churches' (2008, p. 5). If this seems a trifle over-enthusiastic, it is worth remembering that one of the aims that underpins the original version of the geography national curriculum was to develop children's 'sense of wonder at the beauty of the world around them' (DES/WO, 1989, p. 6).

Thinking geographically

Thinking geographically means that we need to embrace both objective analysis and subjective responses. Part of the strength of geography lies in this dynamic interaction and the search for an integrated world view. It involves a fusion of the power of the imagination, the hard truths of science and the sensitivity of the humanities. Forging geographical understanding is thus a highly creative endeavour. Several hundred years ago the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau argued that we should 'make the language of the mind pass through the heart, so that it may make itself understood' (1762/1979, p. 323). The author and nature writer Robert Macfarlane made a similar point in his study of the British landscape:

> *I perceive no opposition between precision and mystery, or between naming and not-knowing. There are experiences of landscape that will always resist articulation, and of which words only offer a remote echo … Sometimes on the top of a mountain I just say 'wow'.* (2016, p. 10)

For me, it is the way that geography draws on a sense of mystery (and indeed humility) alongside systematic modes of thought that gives the subject its bite.

It is fascinating that this duality mirrors the lateralisation of the brain. Iain McGilchrist (2009) explains how the tensions between the left and right cerebral hemispheres give rise to a dynamic interplay which allows us to bring together incompatible types of information. McGilchrist speculates that the differences between the hemispheres may reflect an evolutionary survival need for creatures to focus on precise tasks whilst also taking an overview of what is happening in their wider surroundings. Could it be that the geography reflects (and honours) this anatomical division?

Figure 2: A sense of wonder at the world - winning entries from the GA's Physical Geography Photo Competition, taken by school students (clockwise from top right: Lydart Valley, Monmouth (Lucy Creasey); Peninnis Head, Isles of Scilly (William Rowley); Looking towards the Rough Bounds of Knoydart (Madeleine Bainbridge); Yosemite Falls (Jamie Phillips)).

Perhaps also this is the reason why those images of Earth from space that were taken by the early astronauts gained such traction. Not only did they mark a key moment in the history of exploration and the systematic investigation of our location in space but they were also a particularly graphic and evocative illustration of the mystery of the universe. The sheer beauty of Earth simply overwhelmed those that saw it. Seen in this light, the images are not only intensely geographical, they go straight to the heart of the celebration of life itself. Above all else, they make the argument that we need to treasure and care for the planet on which we live. After all, Earth is the only home that humanity is ever likely to have. | **TG**

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