

THE *Primary Geographer* INTERVIEW

Joseph Kerski



What does geography mean to you?

Geography is not simply a body of content knowledge, but provides a way of looking at the world. A 'geographic perspective' informs just about every other discipline. When epidemiologists study the spread of diseases, scientists study climate change, or businesspersons determine where to locate a new retail establishment, they use spatial thinking and analysis. In each case, geography provides critical tools for studying these issues and for solving very real problems on a daily basis. Geography is not simply a 'nice to have' subject for an already crowded educational curriculum. It underpins the critical thinking skills, technology skills, citizenship skills, and life skills that underpin all other disciplines. It is essential for grappling with the essential issues of the twenty-first century. If we continue to ignore geography education, we do so at our own peril.

What's your most memorable experience of school geography?

After a field trip in year 7, my classmates and I were sitting with our backs against the bricks of the school building in Colorado, listening to the teacher. While some of the other kids were complaining that they were too hot and wanted to go inside, I was truly enjoying the moment. What's more, I realized for that moment and into the future that I didn't have to 'go along with the crowd,' but that it was perfectly fine to value experiences that not everyone else valued.

Where's your favourite place?

While Holy Hill on the glacial moraines of Wisconsin, USA, and the Chalk Cliffs at Beachy Head, England, come to mind, the geographic perspective has helped me realize that my favourite places are ordinary places, actually. I like to explore where everyday people live and work. Once in London after a GA conference, I walked in a large circle around the old Battersea Power Station because as a child, most of my classmates had the Pink Floyd Animals album that pictured the station, and I always wanted to see it. I like viaducts, old barns, and rail yards. Many people would say that's 'just' a field or 'just' a neighbourhood, but for geographers, it's never just 'just!'. There's always more going on if one takes the time to look, and to think.

What's your favourite geographical activity?

I'm not sure I can select just one, so I hope there is room to print three of them. While I do enjoy teaching online courses, one of my favourite geographical activities to teach multi-day geography and geotechnology institutes for groups of educators. There is nothing quite like that

immersive experience where everyone is gathered for the purpose of learning, away from most other distractions, and nothing quite like GIS and GPS to bring together instructors from a variety of disciplines and to get them out in the field. It is a thrill to see them realize the value of spatial thinking, experience the power and ease of geotechnologies, and develop their own geographic perspective.

Another of my favourite activities is to visit latitude-longitude confluence points. I have visited over 150 of them around the world, including six in the UK. There's nothing quite like feeling 'centred' along the Prime Meridian! My third favourite activity is caving. With most of the mountain peaks climbed and ocean trenches plumbed, caves represent some of the last Terra Incognita of our day and age. Exploring them, one is completely focused on drinking in their beauty but also stepping ever-so-carefully as to minimize one's own human impact.

How important do you think geography is today?

I will put it bluntly – without the geographic perspective, and the ability to use it while engaging in geotechnologies, we are going to have a rough time in the





twenty-first century. People have always been fascinated with investigating their home – the Earth. For centuries, the study of geography and the maps geographers have created have stirred imaginations and inspired explorations of the unknown. Today, geography is more relevant than ever before, as issues of climate change, cultural diversity, economic globalization, urban sprawl, biodiversity loss, sustainable agriculture, water quality and quantity, crime, energy, tourism, politics, and natural hazards grow in importance on a global scale and affect our everyday lives. To grapple with these issues requires a populace that has a firm foundation in geography, a populace that can see the 'big picture' but that understands how different patterns and trends are related from a global scale down to the local community. Geography is a science with methods, tools, and a theoretical base, concerned with cultural and physical processes.

What has geography taught you?

Geography taught me three main things: First, it has taught me to care for the Earth, to take action to protect it. Second,

geography has taught me to enjoy the marvellous place in the universe that the Earth really is. Just think of the ability to stand in the warm sun on a warm patch of ground on our Earth, while you are literally surrounded by billions of light years of cold and dark space. Think of a single planet where you can stand on an ice cap, in a rainforest, on a windblown prairie, and in a thousand other ecoregions. Third, geography has helped teach me respect for people. Consider how diverse our planet's climate, biomes, and landforms are. Now consider how infinitely more diverse and amazing people are. This motivates me to try to make a positive difference in people's lives each day through geography education and beyond.

I believe that we are all learning from each other and I feel privileged to be in this field. Geographers are good at speaking to our own, but I encourage you to publish what you are doing in venues outside of geography to let others know what you are doing. Follow your dreams and help others to shine and to be their best. Don't use technology for technology's sake, but use it to enhance what you are doing and to understand

the world in a deeper way. Use that understanding to get involved and make a difference in your community and in your world!

Dr Joseph Kerski serves as Education Manager for Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) in Colorado USA. He served for 21 years as Geographer at the US Geological Survey and at the US Census Bureau. Since 1994, he has taught GIS in traditional and online settings at universities and secondary schools. Joseph holds three degrees in geography and fosters and supports educational partnerships among private industry, professional societies, government, higher education, informal education, and primary and secondary schools. He conducts training in geotechnologies, creates curricular materials focused on spatial thinking and GIS in education, and conducts research in the effectiveness and implementation of these technologies in education. Joseph usually can be found in close proximity to a map, a set of spatial data, a latitude-longitude intersection, a guitar, or a cave.