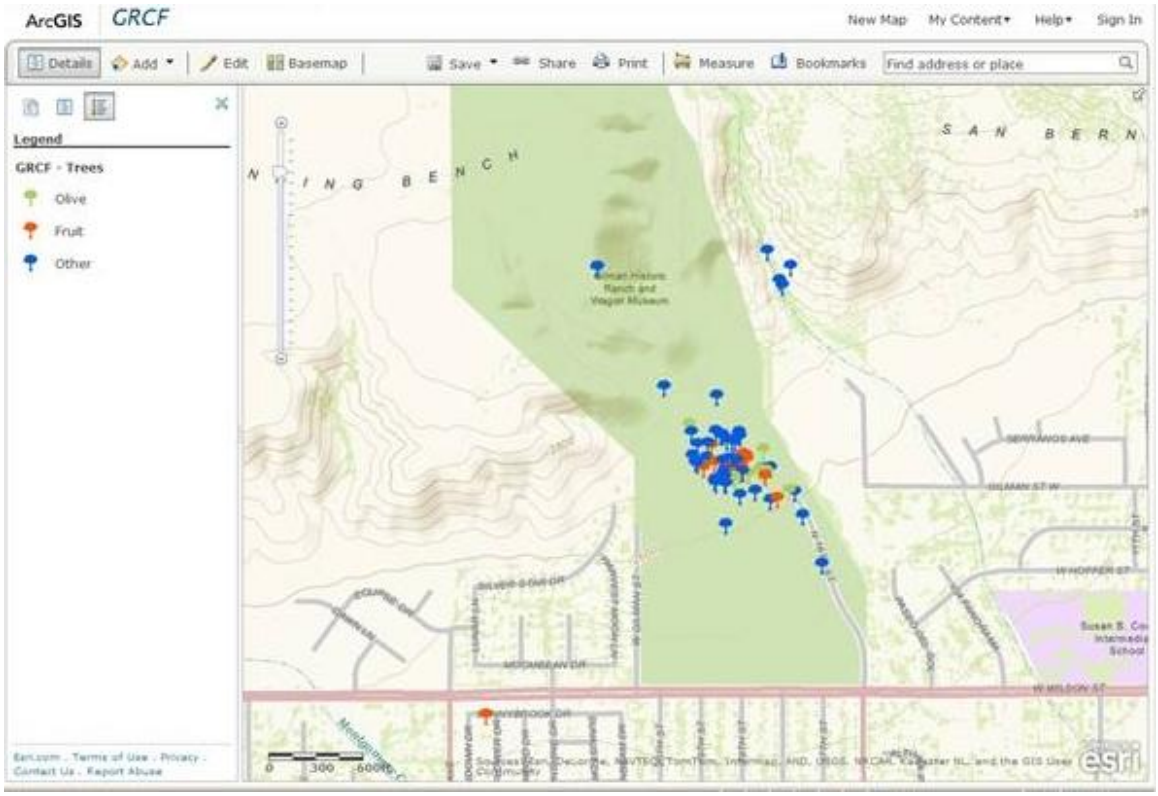
From Observations, Curiosity, and the Spatial Perspective to Asking Questions

In my last column, I argued that one's senses, curiosity, and the spatial perspective are essential for understanding our world and for making the most out of field experiences. In this column I wish to make the case that these three things guide the questions you ask. And the questions that you ask are most important thing about any investigation, and about learning.

I also believe that you must be comfortable with the fact that in our complex world, some of the questions cannot be answered without additional investigation, and that some of the questions indeed may never be fully answered. In our world of instant information and standardized testing, quick and easy answers are difficult for many students—and sometimes, instructors—to accept.

Consider a recent video I made on the beach on the coast of the Caribbean Sea where I asked a series of geographic questions. I considered issues in physical geography including sediment transport along coasts, beach sand, storm surges, and hurricanes, and issues in cultural geography including the pros and cons of developing resorts along coasts. I could partly answer some questions I posed in a few minutes, while others I left open for students and instructors to discuss in class.

The questions you ask determine what data and information you will collect, what devices you require, and what methods you will use. We certainly have more means of collecting data than ever before. I believe that geographers from Eratosthenes to Davis would have been thrilled to have and use the tools we have today. We also have an expanding number of ways to map field-collected data. Some of these ways even allow for something that many of us have longed for years to be able to do—to collaboratively and simultaneously gather data in their real-world coordinates by a group of students while out in the field, and have that data automatically appear on a continuously updating map. These can be done using the Student Data Mapper or from shared Google spreadsheets as developed by my colleague Tom Baker, or via editable feature services using ArcGIS 10.1 and ArcGIS Online as shown in the image below.



Yet unless we are curious, using our senses, asking insightful, thoughtful questions, and using the spatial perspective, the effectiveness of even these tools will be limited. What are some of the means you have used to foster good questions to be grappled with?

--Joseph Kerski, Esri Education Manager.

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