

# Lesson 1

## The Five Geographic Themes

### Objectives

- To identify the five geographic themes
- To use the five geographic themes to analyze the effect of human and natural intervention upon the earth's surface

### Notes to the Teacher

This lesson develops the five geographic themes as outlined by the National Geographic Society. It is important for students to integrate the geographic themes into their study of geography, history, economics, and ecology because the themes help students understand the meaning of the world around them.

This lesson takes students through the five geographic themes so that they can identify the themes and use them to analyze the relationship among systems and processes on earth. Using the five themes, students solve a problem related to a current situation. They make a decision about the problem by analyzing the geographic information they have gathered and predicting the effects of their decision on the earth.

### Procedure

1. Show pictures of various parts of the United States where humans have settled and changed the environment. (Arid areas where many people have settled—Arizona, New Mexico, California, Colorado; Arctic areas—Alaska; wet, lowlands—Florida; highly populated areas such as New York City, Boston; and other locations.)
2. Brainstorm how people interact with their environment. Discuss how people build dams to divert water to dry regions, use fill dirt to reclaim swampy lowlands for building, scar the Arctic soils to build oil pipelines, build concrete highways in cities along with high office towers and apartment buildings over soil that could be used for agriculture, etc. Have students explain how these activities change the earth and what these effects have to do with the future of the earth and its population of people and animals.

3. Use **Handout 1** to introduce the five geographic themes. Discuss each of the themes, using the examples provided. Select some other examples for students to locate in a student atlas. Have students give *Location*, absolute and relative, and tell what they know about its *Place*, *Human-Environment interactions* there, and examples of *Movement* and *Regions*.

**Example:** *Japan*

#### Location

Absolute— $38^{\circ}$  N,  $138^{\circ}$  E

Relative—*East of Korea, Southeast of China, West of California, in the Pacific Ocean*

#### Place

Physical characteristics—*rugged, mountainous, and archipelago*

Human characteristics—*large population, little diversity of culture, speak Japanese, willing to work cooperatively/dislike competition*

#### Human-Environment interactions

*Only a small part of the country is level and easily farmed, so inhabitants terrace the hillsides to produce food. They have few natural resources so they import oil and other resources to use in their successful manufacturing processes.*

#### Movement

*Many Western ideas including baseball, rock music, Western clothing styles, and Christian religions have entered Japan since World War II. Japanese culture has been influenced greatly by this movement of Western ideas.*

#### Region

*Japan is part of Eastern Asia. It is an archipelago—volcanic mountaintops protruding from the waters of the Pacific Ocean. People were farmers and fishermen until manufacturing became such an important part of their lifestyle. This region produces most of the world's electronic products and cars and markets them in many countries throughout the*

*world. Japan's culture, until World War II, remained the same over the centuries when westerners began to be an influence.*

4. Distribute **Handout 2** and discuss the problem, making sure students understand the task.
5. On a map, locate Santa Fe. Student atlases are a useful resource. Find out about the place and the region. Do the same for Lake Michigan; Chicago, Illinois; and Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Distribute **Handout 3** and the map, and have students circle these places.



6. Divide the class into small groups of four or five students per group. Have them use encyclopedias and/or library books about states to find out about the Human-Environment interaction and movement in Santa Fe. (For example: What kind of culture is there? What are the social and economic backgrounds of the residents? What kinds of industry/business do they have? Why might more people want to live there?)
7. Have one half of the groups prepare arguments that support the attempt to get water from Lake Michigan with the other half of the groups preparing arguments against getting water that way, using their knowledge of the geographic themes to support their arguments. Students should be able to discuss the effects of their plan upon Santa Fe, Michigan, and Canada. (Political and international considerations should be listed in students' rationale since losing water from the Great Lakes would affect not only all the Great Lakes Region but Canada as well.) Have students use **Handouts 2** and **3** to prepare their arguments.
8. Have students present their arguments to the class and, at the conclusion of all the groups' presentations, have the class vote on the issue: Is it wise to move the resource, water, from the Great Lakes to an arid state in the southwest? Would you support such an action—yes or no? Why or why not?

### **Enrichment/Extension**

1. Organize a formal debate on the following question:

Resolved: We should move water from its original source to drier regions to support a larger population base. Other issues can be debated.
2. Use the geographic themes to look at other places, charting them out to examine other issues that are particular to them.

## Geography's Five Fundamental Themes

Examine the following:

### Location

This tells “where” and “why” something is found on the earth. There are two ways to discuss the location of a site:

- *Absolute location*—This is the *exact* position of a place on the earth’s surface. Latitude and longitude are used to name its position.
- *Relative location*—This is where the location of a site is in relation to other sites that influence us. Knowing what else is near a site and how those areas influence a location explain “why” things are located in particular spots.

### Example

- *Absolute location*—42° N, 82° W, Cleveland, Ohio
- *Relative location*—Cleveland is located on the southern shore of Lake Erie and at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River. Water transportation was the only way to transport heavy goods in and out of the area during its settlement period. Later, its location on Lake Erie made it a hub for national and international trade.

### Place

Every spot on the earth can be identified by its physical and human characteristics. If the physical and human characteristics of a place are known, then one can understand better the relationship between people and their environment. Place tells what it is like at that spot.

- *Physical characteristics*—The landforms, bodies of water, climate, soils, natural vegetation, and animal life that form the natural environment are the physical characteristics of a place.
- *Human characteristics*—The population of a place, architectural styles, kinds of economic activities, types of recreational activities, languages, religions, social and political organizations, etc., make up the human ideas and the activities that give shape or character to a place.

### Example

Cleveland, Ohio, sits on a lake plain, but there are deep valleys created by the same glacier that formed Lake Erie. The city is surrounded by forests that have been preserved as park lands. The downtown area has tall buildings with the Key Corp Tower on Public Square being the tallest building in the state of Ohio. There is a great variety of housing in and around the city, varying from historic Greek Revival and Victorian architecture to ultra-modern structures. Many new buildings like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame have been built to interest visitors in the city.

### **Human-Environment interactions**

Because there are good things and bad things about a place, humans have learned to change the environment to meet their needs based upon their cultural, social, and/or economic backgrounds. Their level of technology affects people's ability to effect change. This helps us understand the relationship between people and the environment.

#### **Example**

The Cuyahoga River that divides the city of Cleveland in half has provided the city with not only a way to transport goods in and out of the city, but people have used its water to supply the industries that line its banks. These same industries eventually polluted the water, and people had to change their ways and clean the water so that the fish would stop dying and the water could be used. In Cleveland's early days, people settled along its shores but soon learned that the mosquitoes that shared the space caused them to be ill. They moved to higher ground to build their homes, and used the river for industry.

### **Movement**

People in one place communicate and trade with people from other places. Transportation of people, ideas, and goods among places demonstrates global interdependence. This explains "how" and "why" places are related to one another.

#### **Example**

In the 1940s, many African Americans moved to Cleveland because there was work for them in the industries that were booming in the area. They came from the South where prejudice and poverty kept them from employment. Cleveland still has two major automobile firms (Ford and Chevrolet) that manufacture car parts. These goods are sent all over the nation as well as to other countries.

### **Regions**

Considered to be the basic units when studying geography, regions are identified by a characteristic that is common within a given area. To define a region, human characteristics (farming, mining, manufacturing), physical characteristics (mountains, plains, etc.), or both may be used.

#### **Example**

The Region where Cleveland is located is usually considered part of the Midwest. When people talk about this region, they mention the prosperous farming, manufacturing, and business activities that take place. Geographically, the major portion of this region was affected by the last glacier leaving behind lake plains in the northern sections and hilly regions in the southern sections where the glacier stopped.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Joint Committee on Geographic Education of the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers, *Guidelines for Geographic Education* (Washington D.C.: Association of American Geographers, 1984), 3–8.

## Five Geographic Themes

Read the following problem. Use reference material from the library about Santa Fe, New Mexico, to complete the chart.

The residents of Santa Fe, New Mexico, want their population to grow, so they must find an additional source of water. Their location in a desert region makes this a serious issue. Mr. Alvarez, the local chairman of the city resources committee, has discovered that the only alternative is to have water piped in from somewhere other than the Colorado River (because too many states are already using its water). Could Lake Michigan's water be piped to Santa Fe?

Location  
Absolute

Relative

Place

Human-Environment interaction

Movement

Regions

## The Five Geographic Themes

Locate and circle the following places: Santa Fe, New Mexico; Lake Michigan; Chicago, Illinois; and Toronto, Canada.

### The United States



### Canada

