Is it Time for an AAG “Developing Regions” Membership Program?

For years, the AAG has talked about the need to provide support and lower cost memberships to geography departments and geographers in the poorest regions of our world. We do maintain a limited fund to subsidize occasional fee waivers on an ad hoc basis, but it is not a large fund nor widely implemented geographically. Our association’s financial foundation is now strong, and as a result perhaps we can afford to share some of our membership benefits more broadly with those who do not have the resources to access our journals and other membership benefits through normal channels. I believe it is time that we take action to establish a systematic, clear, and workable program to make low cost membership in the AAG available to those geographers and also to geography departments in the developing world that might wish to access our publications and other membership benefits.

With the concurrence and support of AAG officers and the Council, I have begun the process of developing a conceptual outline for how such a program might be structured and implemented. Based on conversations we have had with geographers from many of the poorest parts of the world, there seem to be needs which must be met at both the geography department level and at the individual geographer level within these regions. One example of how a “developing regions’ membership program might be structured and priced is illustrated below.

Such a program, of course, would also have to define explicitly which countries comprise “developing regions” and would be eligible to participate. Several organizations, including the United Nations and the World Bank, generate economic data and national poverty rankings based on fairly widely accepted criteria, generally per capita income. These rankings could form useful starting points, however imperfect, for beginning the program. While it is important that we consider this question of definition carefully, we should not let the impossibility of arriving at the perfect definition of “the poorest regions” prevent us from moving forward at all.

Example: Developing Regions Departmental Memberships

Upon written request, the AAG might grant eligible geography departments or programs in developing regions a departmental membership for a small fee (e.g., perhaps $40 per year), renewable on an annual basis. This departmental membership package might include the following benefits:

- One hard copy of all AAG quarterly publications, the Annals of the Association of American Geographers and The Professional Geographer for the departmental library
- One hard copy of the monthly AAG Newsletter for circulating among faculty and students
- Reduced rate on other third party geographic journals offered by the AAG
- Reduced prices on AAG publications (according to normal individual membership benefits)
- Free listing in the AAG Guide to Geography Programs
- In addition, a departmental membership might allow the department to add individual faculty as individual AAG members for a small incremental rate (such as only $10 per year per person), to receive full individual membership benefits, except that journals and newsletters would be provided online, in digital format only, not in hard copy. Reduced rate

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Past President’s Address: “Land, Life, and Environmental Change in Mountains”

Richard Marston’s Past President’s Address at the 2007 AAG Annual Meeting in San Francisco will explore one of the greatest challenges facing mountain scientists: the need to separate environmental change due to human activities from change that would have occurred without human interference. Linking cause-and-effect is especially difficult in mountain regions where physical processes can operate at ferocious rates and ecosystems are sensitive to rapid degradation by climate change, resource development, and land use/land cover change. Pressure is increasing for resource development in mountains, home to 600 million people and the source of water for half of the world’s population. In addition, highland inhabitants are more vulnerable to natural hazards and political-economic marginalization than populations elsewhere.

This presentation will highlight special insights that geographers offer to understanding human impacts on mountain landscape stability. First, modern techniques of measuring rates of geomorphic change help place the human factor in perspective and explain spatial variability of natural hazards. Second, scientists and policy-makers have come to realize that most problems require training, experience, and expertise in understanding both physical and human systems. The propensity for collaboration within our discipline and with practitioners from other disciplines serves geographers well for understanding the human impact in mountains.

Third, the mixed methods and theories we employ—quantitative and qualitative, positivist science and critical theory, muddy boots field work linked with GIScience—together position geographers to resolve the debate over human triggered physical landscape change in mountains and explain the frequent disconnect between the findings of mountain science, policy making, and resource management.

Marston’s address will illustrate the complex feedbacks between biophysical and human phenomena from the growing international community of mountain scientists, in which geographers play an influential role, plus his own work in the Himalaya-Karakoram, the French Alps, the Rocky Mountains, and the coastal ranges of Oregon and southeast Alaska. Studies of slope stability, floods, and river incision in the Himalaya of central Nepal and the Garhwal Himalaya of India demonstrate the need to avoid potential pitfalls if we are to separate human impacts from background variability. We must recognize the place-dependency of processes, take care before extrapolating cause-effect relations from one place to another, and recognize the contrasting sensitivity of landscapes to disturbance. Mountain landscapes can respond to outside induced disturbances—human or natural—in opposite ways at different times and places. Mountains function differently as a whole than would have been understood by adding-up the individual effects of multiple physical and human variables. The International Year of Mountains (IYM) in 2002 spawned a variety of efforts to raise the awareness of the values of mountain regions and build on the IYM motto, “We are all mountain people.”

Marston will deliver his Past Presidential Address on April 19, 2007, immediately following the AAG Banquet. The address is open and free to all meeting attendees.

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- Online access to AAG publications, the Annals of the Association of American Geographers, The Professional Geographer and AAG Newsletter
- Reduced registration fees (member rates) at the AAG Annual Meeting and other AAG-sponsored meetings
- Reduced rate on other third party geographic journals offered by the AAG
- Reduced prices on AAG publications (according to normal individual membership benefits)
- Option for hard copy journals or newsletter for incremental fee, to cover cost of production and especially shipping

The examples provided above are illustrative of what could be done now, with the new financial strength of the AAG, and with our current online technologies. They are only one approach, but are included here to give a concrete idea of how such a program might be implemented. They also are administratively fairly easy to implement.

Greater international networking, information sharing, and interaction is becoming increasingly common in the work and lives of most geographers, both in so-called “developing regions” and in wealthier countries. As both the AAG membership and the attendance at our
This year’s Geography Awareness Week, November 13-17, was a busy one. Many schools, individuals, and geographic organizations including the Association of American Geographers sponsored or participated in activities to support geography and geographic education. GAW has been held every year since 1987 during the third week of November to celebrate “geography awareness” and promote the importance of geography in the U.S. and Canada.

The AAG began the week with a National Public Radio broadcast on Monday about the importance of geography and the exciting place the discipline currently finds itself. AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson was featured on the NPR program “The Kojo Nnamdi Show,” along with Mark Monmonier from Syracuse University, John Hanke of Google Earth, and Christian Nold from University College London. A recording of the one-hour show is available for use or distribution online at www.wamu.org/programs/kn/06/11/13.php#12176.

Other AAG Geography Awareness Week activities included outreach booths highlighting geography and the student activities of the My Community, Our Earth project (MyCOE) at the USDA and George Washington University. Focused on “Geographic Learning for Sustainable Development,” the MyCOE program is an AAG-led partnership to encourage youth to use geographic concepts and tools to address local issues of sustainability (www.aag.org/sustainable/).

The AAG also participated in several related activities during the week, including an AAG co-sponsored U.S. Geological Survey symposium on natural hazards and a meeting of the Society of Women Geographers.

The My Wonderful World campaign, a five-year public engagement and outreach initiative to promote geographic literacy supported by the AAG, National Geographic Society, and others, celebrated the week by highlighting Africa with resources, games, and an interactive Google Earth quiz of “Africa IQ” at www9.nationalgeographic.com/mywonderfulworld/docs/gaw.html. A daily blog on the site also explored different facets of Africa’s geography (with links to related sites and tools).

If you have any Geography Awareness Week news you’d like to submit, please contact us at newsletter@aag.org so we can include your event in an upcoming issue.

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Annual meetings have grown in recent years, international geographers’ participation in the activities of the AAG has grown at an even faster rate than that of domestic U.S.-based geographers. With over 5,500 attendees already registered for the AAG Annual Meeting to be held in San Francisco next April (2007), nearly 25% are from countries other than the U.S., up from approximately 20% during the past few years. Yet most of our current international membership and participation is still from the wealthier countries in Europe, Asia, and North America.

An AAG developing world membership category would recognize the obvious: that vastly different financial resources are available in different parts of the world. This proposed new category of membership, while recognizing the more extreme financial needs of geographers in the very lowest income countries, is not wholly inconsistent with the AAG’s current general membership fee approach for the U.S. and other wealthier countries, which also recognizes income level differences among individual members in establishing membership fees.

And, of course, encouraging greater participation of geographers from the “developing regions” of the world in activities and networks of the AAG has the potential to enrich the experience, research, and scholarship of the AAG and its current members in myriad ways, providing benefits to us far exceeding the financial subsidies we might extend to our colleagues in some of the poorest regions of the world.

I look forward to receiving your thoughts, suggestions, and ideas on this proposal.

Doug Richardson
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Additionally, at time of press, reports from schools, geography organizations, and individuals who held special events for Geography Awareness Week were beginning to roll in. Among the reports was news that Canadian geographers were featured in the article “Geography Awareness Week to Highlight the Importance of Place” in the News EMC. The article discussed geography and geography awareness and noted local events including a Carleton University hosted GIS Day open house for local youth on career opportunities in geography. Also the University of Kansas Geography Department reported record attendance of 266 at their third annual Globe-O-Mania trivia bowl. The GeoClub and Geography Graduate Student Organization-sponsored event attracted mostly undergraduates and non-majors who answered geography-related questions.