

A Tipping Point for Geography

This year, I have been encouraging geographers to be more visible, engage in issues of public concern, and explore new opportunities to make a difference in the world. Climate change is an unusually important issue for geography because it cuts across almost all of what we study. Furthermore, to borrow an image from the climate literature, geographers are now at a "tipping point" from which we could either step up and make important contributions or hang back and lose opportunities to inform decisions.

The effects of climate change are place-based. For many Americans, climate change is an abstract construct, seemingly far away in space and time. In east Tennessee, for example, water is generally plentiful, a few degrees of temperature change can go unnoticed, and the ocean lies beyond the mountains. But in a country in which over half of the population lives within 20 m of sea level and a world in which over 100 million people live within 1 m of it, the effects of rising sea level clearly call for more attention from geographers, educators, and decision-makers. Geographers have traditionally led research and teaching to connect the dots between scales and locations, between local and global, and between people and their environments. Now we face a pressing need to do so.

In geography, issues associated with climate change are not just the business of climatologists. The combined expertise of geographers across the discipline is needed to inform responses to such looming problems as food insecurity, water shortages, threats to coastal cities, climate refugees, the spread of infectious diseases, and major changes in energy use. In my home department, we recently listed our courses that relate in some way to climate and climate change. Beyond the obvious (e.g., climatology, water resources), we discovered that most geography courses have connections to these themes.

Many climatologists are geographers, and many geographers, even those who do not self-identify as "physical" geographers, have taken a course in meteorology or climatology. Most of us have learned enough about climate to teach basic elements of climatology in introductory physical and human geography courses. Plus, our colleagues, our journals, and our meetings keep us exposed to this important issue. Even with limited formal training, our understandings of the repercussions of climate change outdistance those held by the general public. At the very least, we understand that last winter's weather neither confirms or refutes the predictions of climate change.

Those of us who do not profess to be climate experts may, in fact, hold the best position from which to explore arguments, predictions, evidence, and logical choices with students and community leaders. The climate change knowledge gap motivated me to add a new course on climate change and human response. This has not been my area of greatest expertise, but it is an area of immense need. In teaching this course, I expect to learn much more about potential options for adapting to climate change and to help future citizens process scientific information, cope with uncertainty, and understand geographic relationships that shape the world (sounds good, don't you think?).

A new course is a local-scale effort. Geographers also need to be involved at national and international levels. Kudos to the AAG staff for obtaining observer organization status for the AAG at the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, and to those geographers who attended and shared their experiences [<http://aag-cop15.blogspot.com>].

Back in the U.S., geographers have participated in all four panels of "America's Climate Choices," an ambitious study, requested by Congress, on what can be done to limit the magnitude, adapt to the impacts, better understand climate interactions with human and ecological systems, and inform effective decisions and actions related to climate change.

I invite you to attend the Presidential Plenary session on "America's Climate Choices" at the AAG Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. The session, at 6:30 pm on Wednesday, April 14, will feature geographers appointed to each of the panels of this influential study of the National Academies. Speakers

will be geographers Marilyn Brown (limiting themagnitude), Tom Wilbanks (adapting), Billie Turner (advancing the science), and Diana Liverman (informing decisions and actions).

As you contemplate the national contributions of these distinguished geographers, I invite you to also consider the distance between the national scale of their activity and the local scale, where expertise is gained and leadership is developed. Are we, in the discipline of geography, effectively training and preparing the next waves of national leaders?

It's not just about climate science. The climate science train has left the station. The next train, now pulling out, is the human response train. We can't afford to miss it. We can seize this opportunity to make relevant and visible contributions in the arena of climate change, or we can let others fill that void. At stake is our identity as a discipline that relates human activity to environmental opportunities and environmental changes.

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AAG Annual Meeting Program is Available Online

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