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Team: Canada

Participating Year(s): 2018,2019

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The Meaning of Geography to Me

Geography to me means going outside and being able to extract some of the information and richness that is embedded into the seemingly mundane things that we see everyday. Every vista presents an infinite number of questions (e.g. Why was this town built here and not somewhere else? Why does this type of tree grow here but now 1 km to the west? How much flooding would I expect in this part of town during a heavy rain event?). Being able to answer just some of those questions makes life a lot more interesting, at least in my opinion.

Geography also means being able to take a step back and think about the world at scales much larger than ourselves, such as a city, a region, or even the entire world. Through careful observation and abstraction at these scales, we can piece together how the world works, from natural systems like climate, to human-made ones like the economy, to the interplay between these natural and human systems. From there, we can downscale again and inform our observations of the day to day by thinking about how those systems and that interplay affect different areas of the Earth.

Impact of iGeo Preparation on my Life

Preparing for and competing in iGeo gave me the occasion to learn more geography and build a richer understanding of the world, helped me make lifelong friends from nearly every part of the world, and allowed me to pursue my passion for geography beyond high school.

Participating in iGeo helped me learn about the world in a variety of ways. Firstly, to qualify for Team Canada, students are required to design and conduct their own field study on a topic of their choice. I always chose to do field studies related to environmental geography, so iGeo gave me the chance to build my skills in identifying trees, soils, and even benthic macroinvertebrates (water bugs), and piecing that information together with other data to be able to read a landscape. Secondly, competing in an Olympiad obviously requires quite a lot of reading and revision beforehand, so iGeo incentivized me to go to the library and read books and atlases and do the hard work required to understand geography. Lastly, participating in iGeo allows you to study and experience the geography of new places firsthand (in my case, Quebec City and Hong Kong), which is always the best way to learn geography.

One of the most lasting impacts of iGeo for me was the lifelong friendships I made at the competition, both within my own team and with participants from other countries. I've kept in touch with all my teammates from past years and many of us have worked together to mentor the next generation of Canadian iGeo participants. I've also formed friendships with people living in all parts of the world, and we've done everything together from charity mapathons to watching basketball games to just hopping on Zoom to catch up.

Finally, participating in iGeo gave me the ability to pursue my passion for geography for the rest of my life. In Canadian high schools, geography is often not seen as an employable or rigorous degree, and thus all my friends chose to pursue other subjects. Participating and medalling in iGeo has helped open doors for me in the world of geography, from scholarships to job opportunities, and gave me the background knowledge to thrive in my studies and work. This has allowed me to continue my journey of learning about the world without having to worry as much about what I will do after I conclude my studies.

Ideas for Promoting Geography

I think the first step to promoting geography is identifying misconceptions about the subject. Some that I have encountered include "geography is mostly memorization" (one that likely stems from geography bees and other geography trivia competitions), "geographers are not technologically savvy" (since many high schools do not teach GIS), and "you can't get a job with a geography degree", something that is very clearly not true, given the number of careers available for geographers in Canada alone (e.g. GIS technicians/analysts, planners, researchers, field technicians, etc.).



I believe that these misconceptions can be tackled by a coordinated effort involving academics and industry professionals to introduce geography to high schools or expand the number of geography course offerings available, modernize curricula to include basic instruction in GIS to make geography appeal to the current generation of digital natives, offer more field experiences to high school geography students, and build more connections between high departments in secondary schools and local universities.

Suggestions for the iGeo

In recognition of the growing role that GIS plays in understanding the world, and the democratization of GIS technology through open-source projects like QGIS, I think it might be useful to start testing participants on some basic GIS-related concepts and encouraging participants to familiarize themselves with GIS technology before the competition. It also might be fun to have a practical intro to GIS lab as one of the side activities at iGeo, not as a marked event but just as a learning experience.

On another topic, it might be fun to organize some virtual alumni events. The participants from my years have organized a few on our own, but I think formal ones would be fun and well attended. I think cultivating an active alumni community could be a great resource for any initiatives relating to promoting the discipline of geography.

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