

TEACHING SECONDARY **GEOGRAPHY**



AS IF THE PLANET MATTERS

A **David Fulton** Book

JOHN MORGAN

Teaching Secondary Geography as if the Planet Matters

Young people are growing up in a culture where they are increasingly surrounded by images and warnings of environmental 'crisis'. In recent years, climate change, food security, the destruction of biomes, natural disasters and the challenges of a rapidly urbanising world have all become significant issues. More recently, the economic crisis has raised questions about the viability of the high-mobility, high-consumption lifestyles associated with advanced capitalist societies.

Schools are important places where young people can learn about and begin to understand these complex questions, and school geography is a subject that focuses on all of the above issues. However, this thought-provoking text argues that, in its present form, the simple models of people and environment found in school geography serve to inhibit understanding of the causes of environmental problems, and that there is an urgent need to promote approaches to curriculum development that, drawing from advances in human and environmental geography, can help students understand the nature of the contemporary world.

Features include:

- examples of suggested teaching activities;
- questions and activities for further study;
- detailed case studies;
- sources of further reading and information.

The true worth of a school subject is revealed in how far it can account for and address the major issues of the time. The issue of the environment cuts across subject boundaries and requires an interdisciplinary response. Geography teachers are part of that response, and they have a crucial role in helping students to react to environmental issues and representations.

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Teaching School Subjects as if the Planet Matters

Series Editors: John Morgan (University of Bristol and Institute of Education, London) and Sasha Matthewman (University of Bristol)

We live in a time when there are serious questions about the ability of the planet to sustain current levels of economic development. Future generations are likely to face a bleaker environmental future and will need to learn how to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change. However, despite the obvious importance of these issues, most schooling continues with little direct engagement with questions of environmental change.

The true worth of a school subject is revealed in how far it can account for, and respond to, the major issues of the time. This series aims to inform teachers about environmental issues and offer inspiration for teaching lessons with critical environmental awareness. It asserts that only by helping pupils to recognise and understand the multi-dimensional nature of these issues will they be able to contribute to society's attempts to deal with rapid natural and human-induced environmental change.

Teaching Secondary Geography as if the Planet Matters

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Introduction

People can't change the way they use resources without changing their relations with one another. For example there are dozens of ways to economize energy: some would stop the rich wasting it, others would freeze the poor to death. Forests or beaches or country landscapes can be conserved to be enjoyed by many, by few, or by nobody. Rich and poor can be made to contribute very fairly or very unfairly to the costs of reducing pollution. Old city streets and neighbourhoods can be conserved for the people who live in them, or they can be conserved by methods which drive those people out, bring richer people in and make speculative fortunes for the richer still. How to conserve is usually a harder question than whether, or what, to conserve.

(Stretton, 1976: 3)

This book has its origins in the late 1980s. At that time in Britain, there was a surge in media interest in environmental issues. A range of global environmental events, including tropical rainforest deforestation, acid deposition, desertification and the greenhouse effect, all stories that had rumbled on through the decade, now seemed to come together to create a 'perfect storm'. In March 1989, *The Sunday Times* magazine had a cover that posed the question, 'The Earth is dying. What are you going to do about it?' I remember that cover because I had just started out as a geography teacher and I used it in my lessons on 'the environmental crisis' (a significant number of pupils at that time were aware of, and concerned about, environmental issues). Macnaghten and Urry (1998) confirm that during the late 1980s, 'the environment had become firmly established as a major issue of British politics and culture'. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's 1988 speech to the Royal Society argued that global environmental issues were an important concern; membership of environmental campaigning organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth soared; and Elkington and Hailes' (1988) *The green consumer guide* was published (within a year it had been reprinted eleven times and sold 350,000 copies).

But there was a particular way of thinking about the environment that was problematic for geography teachers. It tended to suggest that the 'cause' (and therefore the 'solution') of these environmental issues was individuals. As *The Sunday Times* magazine article explained:

You damage the earth just by living on it. You burn fossil fuels – petrol, oil, coal – and huge amounts more are burnt by those who supply you with goods and services. You create waste, which has to be buried, burnt, or discharged into the sea. You accept the profits of investments which are trading on Third World poverty and putting further strain on already over-stretched resources. You buy goods from farms and factories whose ill-effects from chemical wastes range all the way from dead fish to dead people.

In those early days as a geography teacher, I was very concerned to find ways to counter this view that individuals were to blame for environmental problems, and the implication that they could just as easily solve them through better consumption choices. In developing teaching approaches, I was inspired by the work of Ron Johnston (1989), David Pepper (1984) and, especially, John Huckle (1988), whose geographical perspective insisted on the importance of understanding that environmental issues were as much about people's relations with one another as about people's relationships with the environment. As Hugh Stretton (quoted overleaf) states: 'People can't change the way they use resources without changing their relations with one another.'

It was significant that I was attempting to develop this approach to geography teaching in the days prior to the introduction of a National Curriculum; as I argue later in this book, one of the effects of that educational innovation was to shift responsibility for curriculum construction away from teachers, and instead to encourage teachers to see themselves as experts in 'learning'. While this is important, the effect has been to make it difficult for many teachers to read and think deeply about the nature of the subject – geography – they teach. That is why the emphasis in this book is on teaching – I am concerned with what geography as a discipline has to say about people–environment (or society–nature) relations, and what that means for curriculum development.

This focus on the perspectives of geography as a subject is ever more important at a time when teachers are urged to teach about climate change and sustainability. Before we rush into devising schemes of work and activities to 'deliver' these curriculum aims, surely it is important that we understand how geographers themselves conceptualise these topics?

In the past two decades, geographers working in this area have continued to develop understanding of the relations between society and nature. However, while in the 1980s human geographers were strongly influenced by models of political economy, the 1990s and 2000s were characterised by a 'cultural turn', and it became less common to think of the existence of a pre-existing and pristine nature capable of objective and detached study by geographers. Since the publication of Neil Smith's (1984) *Uneven development*, human geographers have explored the idea that nature is a social production. For those working from a political economy perspective, this 'second nature' is produced in the process of accumulation of wealth. For others, adopting a broadly constructionist approach, nature is a 'text' that is produced and interpreted in different ways. In general, geographers are nowadays ready to recognise that there is no single 'nature', but rather multiple 'natures'.

It will be helpful to offer a few caveats before introducing the chapters that make up the book. First, rather than adopting an approach that focuses on geography, it might be thought better to make use of the broader terms ‘education for sustainable development’ or ‘environmental education’, or the emerging field of ‘ecopedagogy’. While there is useful work emanating from these fields of study, this book responds to the fact that, in the UK, for the moment at least, teachers define themselves as geography teachers, history teachers and so on. While some may wish that teachers would be prepared to give up some attachment to their subject disciplines, this book starts from a recognition that geography teachers spend a good deal of time and energy becoming geographers, and seeks to build on that investment and enthusiasm. As readers will see, contemporary geography is a far from enclosed and insular field of study.

Second, alert readers may have already recognised a tendency to use interchangeably terms such as ‘environment’, ‘nature’, ‘people’ and ‘society’. This reflects the fact that these terms are all used in the literature reviewed. To seek purity and consistency of terms would have limited the opportunity to make links between different parts of the literature. In any case, we are sufficiently attuned these days to the power of language, so it is significant when geography texts use words like ‘society’ rather than specific terms such as ‘capitalist society’; or speak of ‘people’ rather than recognising the existence of ‘social classes’. In this book, I try to be attentive to the subtle variations in how terms are used.

Third, the book does not claim to provide geography teachers with a comprehensive survey of contemporary geography’s approach to ‘nature’ or ‘environments’. Excellent treatments exist already; for starters, I would recommend Huckle and Martin (2001) *Environments in a changing world*; Castree (2005) *Nature*; Robbins *et al.* (2010) *Environment and society*. My aim has been to write a book addressed specifically to the field of geographical education. The chapters that follow are written to address the concerns of geography teachers who seek to develop approaches that help students to understand the making and remaking of society and nature.

The chapters

Section one: Contexts

Chapter one sets the scene for the book as a whole, setting about the ‘battle for ideas’ which, I argue, should be the concern of geography education. The chapter explains how, under successive New Labour governments from 1997 to 2010, schools were encouraged to teach pupils about issues of climate change and sustainability in order to help them to play their part in overcoming the problems associated with climate change. This ‘state-sponsored’ environmental education provoked a backlash from those who argued that the state’s involvement in this area is anti-educational and represents a diminished view of humanity’s drive to transform nature to increase wealth and well-being. The chapter then considers a recent publication by Jonathan Porritt (2005), a leading figure in the British green movement, which argues the case for a capitalist solution to environmental problems. It concludes with a discussion of those who suggest that what is needed is a transformation of capitalist societies in ways that encourage more

relaxed, less consuming lifestyles. Though the arguments discussed in [chapter one](#) do not exhaust the range of positions available, they serve to make the point that any discussion of environmental issues cannot be divorced from wider questions of how economy and culture are organised, and this is where geography education can make a contribution to pupils' knowledge and understanding of environmental issues. It is these relations between society and nature that are the focus of the rest of the book.

[Chapter two](#) discusses the development of environmental perspectives in the school curriculum. It argues that, while environmental education had its origins in the pre-Second World War period, it was shaped in significant ways by the processes of modernisation that transformed the both the landscapes of Britain and the experience of living in Britain from the mid-1950s to early 1970s. These changes – with the emergence of the motor car and fast road systems, slum clearance and new forms of architecture, and the development of New Towns – were disorienting to many, and led to cultural movements to make sense of (and sometimes resist) the changes. In this period, a distinctive form of 'environmental geography' appeared, one that encouraged pupils to develop 'an eye for the urban country'. [Chapter two](#) argues that, while environmental geography was concerned to develop responses to pupils' own localities and environments, in the 1980s there emerged a form of environmental education that adopted a more holistic, global perspective. This came to influence how environmental education was understood, and at times was based on a critique of the school subjects and curriculum, which it viewed as part of a mechanistic worldview. Finally, the chapter notes the way in which education for sustainable development was seen as an intrinsic part of the broader project of 'environmental modernisation' from the mid-1990s.

[Chapter three](#) serves as an introduction to the variety of ways in which geography as an academic discipline has conceptualised the relationship between society and nature. The chapter provides some important background to the types of approach – largely based on political ecology and the social construction of nature – that inform the analysis of geographical themes in the middle chapters of the book.

Taken together, the three chapters that make up [section one](#) of *Teaching Geography as if the Planet Matters* provide an argument about the importance of the subject as an intellectual resource for helping students understand the relationship between society and nature.

Section two: Themes

This section comprises of five chapters, each of which deals with a theme or themes that are commonly taught in school geography. The aim of the chapters is quite simple: to discuss how each topic might be reviewed to develop more theoretically informed approaches that allow for greater understanding of the processes that shape society–nature relations. This does not mean that the chapters share a common format. Each one attempts to develop an argument that, it is hoped, will be recognisable to school geography teachers. They are starting points for further study and analysis. In this sense, the chapters in this section have a clear pedagogical intent. The references cited will, it is hoped, provide the impetus for further study and reflection. This, in my experience, is how teachers develop intellectually robust approaches to teaching geography.

[Chapter four](#) takes the form of an analysis of recent GCSE and AS level specifications, and examines the way they represent the topics of natural hazards and consuming resources. The chapter starts with reference to some earlier critiques of school geography, and asks whether the criticisms that were made in the 1980s about the perspectives offered still hold true.

[Chapter five](#) is concerned with the food question. It starts with a discussion of how earlier teaching of the ‘geography of agriculture’ changed in the light of the shift from a productivist to post-productivist agricultural system from the mid-1980s onwards. The chapter suggests that this opened up the space for a broader discussion of the cultural politics of food, and provides examples of this type of approach. The chapter contains a discussion of recent moves to change the food culture of schools, and suggests how a geographical approach can offer a wider perspective on these issues. The chapter thus points to ways in which geographical knowledge can be applied outside the classroom.

[Chapter six](#) recognises that the world is increasingly urbanised, yet the teaching of urban geography in schools tends to focus on social rather than environmental concerns. The chapter is intended as an introduction to work in urban studies, which recognise the way in which urban nature is produced as part of the political economy of cities.

[Chapter seven](#) is concerned with the teaching of economic geography in schools. Too often, it suggests, school geography offers pupils simplistic and ideological representations of economic processes. In addition, many geography teachers feel ill equipped to address questions of economic theory. The chapter provides an account of the changing nature of economic geography, paying particular attention to shifts in the nature of capitalism. This approach, it is hoped, will allow teachers to contextualise their teaching of economic geography. The chapter ends on a note of speculation, since it is clear that the financial crisis of 2008 has resulted in the end of one dominant way of producing economic space – neoliberalism – yet it is unclear what comes next. The chapter invites teachers to explore alternatives with their students.

The final chapter in [section two](#) discusses the issue of how to teach about climate change to ensure pupils have a strong sense of how it is linked to global economic systems, based on the notion of climate capitalism. This is supported by a short discussion of how systems of mobility might be transformed in the face of climate change and the need for reduced carbon consumption. This leads into a final section on the implications of teaching ‘Anthropocene geographies’, where humans play a crucial role in shaping Earth systems.

Section three: Practices

This section contains one chapter and a short conclusion, which situate the arguments in this book within the wider context of the development of school geography teaching. Together, these provide an account of how, over time, geography teachers have come to lose control of the curriculum, and assess the prospects for teachers to develop the type of disciplined geography teaching discussed in this book. Though the signs are not always promising, a realistic understanding of the relationship between society and schooling suggests that the advent of a ‘post-progress’ world offers significant space for geographers to engage pupils with the battle for ideas with which we started this book.

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Section one: Contexts

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Geography teaching and the battle for ideas

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with what I term the ‘battle for ideas’ in geography education. It argues that geography teachers in schools are faced with the challenge of helping young people to make sense of important arguments at a time when the politics of nature are coming to take centre stage in economic, political and cultural life in the affluent world. It is tempting to seek to justify the focus of this chapter, but I think it is beyond doubt that ‘environment’, ‘nature’ and ‘sustainable development’ are already firmly embedded in the language of education and curriculum. For example, the QCDA’s (2009) publication *Sustainable development in action* indicates how the environmental challenges society is facing are reflected in official curriculum discussion:

We need to find a way to live on earth that enables all people to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy quality of life, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Most experts agree that our current mode and rate of development on earth is not sustainable. The way we are living is over-taxing the planet’s supply of natural resources – from fresh water supplies to fish stocks, from fertile land to clean air. In addition, the inequalities between peoples, both within countries and across the world, are growing.

(QCDA, 2009: 4)

These quotations demonstrate the extent to which the arguments of environmentalists have come to occupy the mainstream of informed educational thinking. Sustainable living is enshrined as a key element in children’s educational entitlement:

Learning about sustainable development can help young people to understand the needs and rights of present and future generations, and to consider the best ways to tackle interrelated challenges such as climate change, inequality and poverty. It can

also motivate learners to want to change things for the better – whether that’s on their doorstep or on the other side of the world – equipping them with the skills, knowledge, understanding and values that are crucial to envisaging and creating a sustainable society and future.

(QCDA, 2009: 2)

The QCDA publication makes special mention of the issue of climate change, echoing the New Labour government’s view that this represents ‘one of the greatest challenges facing our generation’.¹ It argues that cutting the levels of greenhouse gases we produce is one of the most important steps necessary to slow climate change:

Learning about climate change at school has inspired many children and young people to take their messages to the wider community to try and bring about change. They believe that the key to success lies in working as a community and that we can all be part of the solution.

(QCDA, 2009: 5)

This statement makes it clear that learning about sustainable development requires making the link between theory and practice, and appears to encourage forms of ‘environmental citizenship’ (Dobson and Bell, 2005).

A further indication of government concern for learning about sustainable development was the decision of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2007 to distribute to all schools a pack entitled *Tomorrow’s Climate, Today’s Challenge*, which contained a copy of former US Vice-President Al Gore’s film *An Inconvenient Truth*. The guidance produced for teachers of science, geography and citizenship stated that the film has had a big impact and that it ‘has a huge potential for engaging pupils on a complex subject’. It notes that the film is based on four central scientific hypotheses, all of which ‘are regarded as valid by the great majority of scientific opinion worldwide’. However, the advice warns, at times Gore presents evidence that does not accord with the scientific mainstream, and the guidance is designed to help pupils assess the ‘validity and credibility of different information sources’. Here, then, is an example of concern to develop forms of scientific and sustainability literacy, being able to understand, interpret and, if necessary, challenge popular representations of environmental issues.

To summarise this section: since 1997, education for sustainable development has become an integral part of the National Curriculum and an important element in school improvement, with the aim that all schools are Sustainable Schools by 2020. These developments should be seen as part of the UK government’s wider attempt to bring about environmental modernisation. Advice and guidance on how to deliver these initiatives is available (see www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools).

Geographers against progress?

At this point, we should acknowledge that not everyone welcomes the moves to introduce learning for sustainable development in schools, and some argue that this state-sponsored promotion of sustainable development and action on climate change is anti-educational. For example, Austin Williams' (2008) book *The enemies of progress*² includes a chapter called 'The indoctrinators', which argues that 'critical thinking has been redefined, especially around the "givens" of sustainability and environmentalism':

Now there is an automatic assumption of a prior knowledge that climate change is the problem and the only point of classroom learning is a fine-tuning exercise to work out what to do about it. From nursery to university, from science to geography, education has primarily become a route for teaching political environmentalism.

(Williams, 2008: 74)

Williams provides examples of attempts to teach environmental messages in schools. These include:

- a year 6 science project exploring 'the role of the caretaker, the amount of oil used by the school, and the school's fuel and electricity bills' as part of a sustainable science project
- the Designs of the time (Dott) programme targeted at year 8 pupils, which asked them to 'redesign some aspect of their school making it more user-friendly, with less impact on the environment and the planet's natural resources'.

For Williams, these represent a 'brazen attempt to manipulate children into the new green morality'. He concludes that:

Education has become less of an arena to learn, to be challenged, to critically analyse, to develop abstract thinking, and to lay the ground rules for a genuine sense of intellectual enquiry, and instead has become a means of winning the hearts and minds of a compliant future generation. Unfortunately, this means that any lessons that could be learned are missed in the blinkered attempt to see everything in a framework of the morally-loaded sustainability orthodoxy.

(Williams, 2008: 79)

Thus *The enemies of progress* is concerned with what the author sees as society's loss of belief in the idea of progress:

The future, today, is regularly viewed with foreboding, experimentation is frequently discouraged as unnecessarily risky, and progress itself is presented as a fallacy. Man has gone from being a solution, to becoming seen as the problem.

(Williams, 2008: 2)

Similar arguments are made by Worldwrite, an education charity that describes itself as committed to global equality. It is critical of what it regards as an anti-modern, tentative approach to the solution of problems such as global poverty and underdevelopment. It explains that its slogan, 'Ferraris for all', means demanding the best for everyone:

[...] this means recognising that our peers globally are not different from ourselves and should equally enjoy a great life. This requires we campaign for freedom from toil, hardship and a struggle to survive, to allow us all the freedom to learn at the highest level, to exercise our creativity, advance new knowledge and impact upon society. To make this possible, we support and promote aspirations for the best of everything for all, and campaign for global equality. We want the best of all worlds and this means standing up for unfettered growth, serious development and freedom.
(Worldwrite website, www.worldwrite.org.uk)

Worldwrite's Critical Charter is called 'Time to ditch the sustainababble' and argues that there is a strong link between economic development and living standards. It argues that calls for the countries of the South to undertake 'sustainable development' will inevitably mean that people are denied the lifestyles and living standards enjoyed by those in the affluent North, which were achieved by what they call 'serious development':

If we are serious about our intention of helping the world's poor to have decent living standards, we must ditch the absurd notion of sustainable development and put serious development on the agenda instead. Serious development means industry, infrastructure and the best possible environment to live in – just as the West itself enjoys.
(Ibid.)

These concerns are expressed in a more local context in an edited book, *The future of community (reports of a death greatly exaggerated)* (Clements *et al.*, 2008). Alastair Donald's chapter, 'A green unpleasant land', starts with a quote from the influential green spokesman Jonathan Porritt (whose arguments are discussed later in this chapter), stating that 'sustainable development and community participation must go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other.' However, Donald suggests that community participation is defined in a particular way, meaning that individuals have to demonstrate their environmental citizenship by being seen to consume ethically and recycle in public. This represents an important shift in how communities traditionally have undertaken collective tasks. In the past, Donald says, environmental problems would be resolved at the level of society:

If we wanted to live in neighbourhoods in attractive but flood-prone riverside locations, we designed flood barriers; cars may have polluted the city air but improved engine design meant we could enhance our mobility and develop more extensive networks of friends and acquaintances.

(Donald, 2008: 26)

Today, says Donald, the opposite seems to be the case. We choose to build on less attractive locations and seek to limit our freedoms to the local community. Donald is a convenor of ManTownHuman and wrote a manifesto, 'Towards a new humanism in architecture' with Austin Williams as a co-author.³ The authors are in favour of an architecture 'that imposes its will on the planet' and against architecture that 'treads lightly on the earth'. It is in favour of building more, in the knowledge that we can, and should, rebuild later. This ambitious vision for architecture is in stark contrast to what the authors see as a 'culture of decline', which questions whether we should be building at all:

With half the world's population living in cities, where is the sense of exhilaration in the creative urbanisation of the planet for 7, 8 or 9+ billion? Such a dynamic moment in history demands maximum engagement, but architecture has become paralysed in its growing acceptance of the Malthusian environmental orthodoxy that humanity is a problem. Rather than an opportunity for creative improvement, rapid urbanisation is frequently presented as symbolic of the problems of over-population and the dangers this creates for communities and the environment. Lacking the confidence to impose principles, ideals and a sense of purpose, architects commonly defend virgin green fields over the expansive reach of the metropolis. 'Sprawl' and 'suburbia' have become euphemisms for irresponsible expansion as opposed to a representation of a creative dynamic.

(Donald *et al.*, 2008: 5)

Dick Taverne (2005) makes a similar argument in relation to science in his book *The march of unreason: science, democracy, and the new fundamentalism*. The 'new fundamentalism' is the widespread acceptance of green ideas and public mistrust of Western science. This is reflected in the vogue for organic farming and homeopathic medicine, and concerns over genetic modification. For Taverne, this contributes to a mood of anti-science (especially that funded by business corporations), and undermines faith in the scientific promise of enlightenment and wealth creation.

Finally, in his book *The moralisation of tourism*, Jim Butcher (2003) argues that even the relatively simple and innocent pleasures involved in taking a holiday are being made an object of moral concern, as Western tourists (especially those involved in mass tourism to places such as Benidorm and the Costa del Sol) are required to adopt an apologetic stance for their presence, and learn to consume environments and places in ways that are environmentally aware. As a result, he argues, our holidays 'have become a vessel into which we are encouraged to pour environmental angst and fears of globalisation'. In contrast, he regards tourism as one of the benefits of modern development:

The growth of mass tourism has been a mark of real progress in modern society. Many can travel abroad for leisure when only a couple of generations ago foreign travel was a rarity for most people. New opportunities have opened up as the holiday companies have expanded to ever more destinations. This has not been at the expense of those hosting the growing numbers of tourists.

(Butcher, 2003: 139)