

GUEST COMMENT

Environment — Geography — Environment*

The environmental theme among geographers is very old. Methodologists have usually found it indefensible, but its exponents are not daunted. It resurfaced quite chronically in Sydney, Australia, during 21–26 August 1988 at the 26th International Geographical Congress†—healthy as ever, but in a changed condition.

Half-a-century ago, the study of the geographical environment was seen as essentially spatial. It comprised the various components of physical geography—such as geomorphology, climatology, and (in a few cases) bio-climatology. It dealt with macroscopic things that were mappable. Geography was concerned, in those empirical days, with the visible elements of the environment—the things that the field geographer could see for himself or herself. The ensemble was patently inadequate—courses on soils, for example, rarely dealt with the microbiota. But it seemed reasonable and even satisfactory at the time.

Today we view the environment from a vastly wider perspective. The biologist now dominates the insights, and the biogeochemical cycles (still not in the index of many a geography textbook!) loom larger than the climatic classifications and deductive geomorphology of yesterday's geography. The discipline has had to enlarge its perspective, as the agenda for the above-mentioned Congress showed. Geographers did not lead the way towards this wider approach; the initiative lay with such pioneers as Vladimir I. Vernadsky, G. Evelyn Hutchinson, and the evergreen Editor of this Journal, Nicholas Polunin. But the Sydney agenda showed clearly that environmental thought has come close to unifying many of the old categories of physical geography, and has forced them to take very seriously the holistic, *Biospherical* vision of the human environment.

* Contributed by an eminent climatological geographer who prefers to remain anonymous.—Ed.

† See the account in our next issue.—Ed.