

Introduction

Geography is the study of the physical and human phenomena on the earth. The central concern of the discipline is to describe the patterns of the spatial distribution of these phenomena and to seek an explanation, or to study the reasons behind the occurrence of such patterns over time and space. These phenomena are for example, volcanic and block mountains, climate, soils vegetation, animals, water bodies (rivers, lakes, oceans,) land use systems, population distribution, urbanization, among other. By patterns is meant how these various features are arranged over geographical space. Such space could be the earth itself, the biosphere (the biologically inhabited part of the earth), the continents, geographical regions and countries. Geographers recognize the fact that differences exist in the way in which these physical and human features are distributed over the earth. These differences can be studied and understood within the context of the changes that have occurred over time. The time-frame for such changes can be in terms of geological epochs or periods spanning over millions of years, or it can be in terms of hundred, or tens of years. Changes also occur over much shorter periods of time such as over a year, a season, or even a day, and these too are of interest to the geographer. Differences that occur in the way in which geographical phenomena are distributed over space or over geographical areas should be explained. The spatial level of these areas can range from macro levels such as the planet earth, the continents, regions and sub-regions, right down to the micro level of ecological habitat, site and ecologic niche. For example savanna grassland, a desert, a forest along a river or a forested mountain can all be described as ecological habitats. Within such habitats are found smaller units or areas, the sites or ecological niches, occupied by various species populations of plants and animals. The term site usually describes the location of plants, while the term ecological niche usually denotes the place occupied by given animal species populations within the habitat. Geography therefore explores the reasons behind the existence and distribution of all these features in different areas during different times. Another aspect that concerns the geographer is the examination and analysis of the relationships and interactions that exist between various geographical phenomena. In other words, the study of geography also incorporates an understanding of the cause-effect relationships between various factors. For example if we regard vulcanicity as a cause, then as geographers we are interested in knowing its effect on vegetation, on soils and indirectly on climate. We may also want to understand the effect of soil erosion (as a cause) on land productivity, or the effect of altitudinal change on temperature, and so on. Of course a given effect can be attributed to more than one cause.