Presidential Plenary Session: Geography’s Contribution to Resource Management

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AMERICAN GEOGRAPHERS interested in human/environment interactions as applied to resource management have a rich history upon which to draw. George Perkins Marsh’s work *Man and Nature* (1864) brought attention to the fact that humans can have major negative impacts on natural resources. His work and that of others following the same path inspired an international symposium in Berkeley nearly a century later. The symposium resulted in the compilation *Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Thomas, 1956). With the impetus of Earth Day and increasing concern about environmental issues, another notable conference was held at Clark University that produced *The Earth as Transformed by Human Action* (Turner *et al.*, 1990).

Given this traditional concern with human/environment interactions and the emphasis on changes effected by humans, a logical step is to ask, “What are geographers’ contributions to resource management?” Our meeting’s location at Humboldt, a known “hotbed” of environmentalism, offered the perfect opportunity to discuss this question. I invited three valued colleagues to present their views at the President’s Plenary Session. Not only did each offer insightful, thought-provoking talks, but they also took time from their hectic schedules to revise their talks for publication in this volume.

The three presenters offer disparate views at different scales. Nancy Wilkinson looks at the question from a predominantly local, case-study perspective. She points out both strengths and weaknesses of an education in geography in fitting students for careers in water resources management, and raises questions about how to address the balance between the need to be able to grasp the “big picture” with the need for specific skills and specialized knowledge.
Les Rowntree investigates the relationship between geography and environmental studies departments in the APCG region. He suggests that geography departments, in many instances, have missed opportunities due to complacency and a firm belief that, as geographers, “human/environment issues” are, by right, our domain. Les recommends revisiting our strengths and actively pursuing strategies of “collaboration and cooperation” in order to play a critical role in resource and environmental issues in the future. Chuck Hutchinson addresses the question from an international or global perspective. Chuck focuses on a specific problem with known physical and social dimensions—famine. He then discusses the contributions of three geographers in shaping “current efforts to anticipate famine” and hence alleviate suffering.

Nancy, Les, and Chuck each recognize qualities common to geographers, including the abilities to think holistically and spatially, to consider myriad social and physical factors and recognize patterns, and to look at environmental or resource issues from a long-term perspective. From the question “What are geographers’ contributions to resource management?” a more critical one arises, “How can we, as geographers, better gird ourselves for the struggle to modify and soften our transformation of the earth?”

References Cited