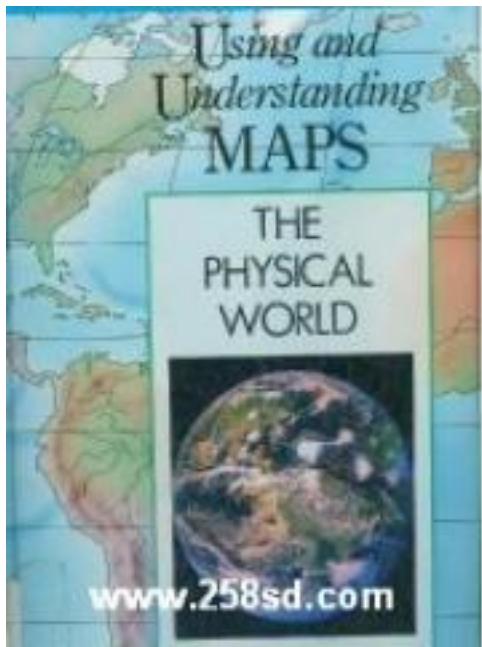


The Physical World



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We inhabit a fascinating and mysterious planet where the earth's physical features—life-forms and the diversity of human culture conspire to produce a breathtaking environment. We don't have to travel very far to see and experience the wealth of this diverse planet; in fact, we don't have to travel at all. Everywhere images of the world are abundantly available in books, newspapers, magazines, movies, television and the arts. We could say that everywhere one looks, our world is a brilliant moving tapestry of shapes, colors and textures and our experience of its many messages -- whether in our travels or simply by gazing out into our own backyards -- is what we call reality. Geography is the study of a portion of that reality. More so, it is the study of how the physical and biological components (rocks, animals,

plants and people) of our planet are distributed and how they are interconnected. Geographers seek to describe and to explain the physical patterns that have evolved on the earth and also to discover the significance in the ways they have evolved. To do this geographers rely on maps. Maps can be powerful images. They convey selective information about vast areas of an overwhelmingly cluttered world. The cartographer or mapmaker must carefully choose the theme of a map that is what it will show knowing that a good map will convey the essence of information while at the same time making the information easy to comprehend. This volume and its companions in UNDERSTANDING AND USING MAPS are about the planet we call earth and the maps we use to find our way along its peaks and valleys. Each volume displays map images that reveal how the world is arranged according to a specific theme such as population industries or the endangered world. The maps in each volume are accompanied by an interesting collection of facts -- some are rather obvious others are oddities. Yet all are meant to be informative. Along with a wealth of facts there are explanations of the various attributes and phenomena depicted by the maps. This information is provided to better understand the significance of the maps as well as to demonstrate how the many themes relate. Names for places are essential to geographers. To study the world without devising names for places would be extremely difficult. But geographers also know that names are in no way permanent; place names change as people change. The recent reunification of Germany and the breakup of what was the Soviet Union -- events that seem colossal from the perspective of socioeconomics -- to geographers are simply events that require the drawing or erasing of one or a few boundaries and the renaming of one or several land masses. The geographer is constantly reminded that the world is in flux; a map is always in danger of being rendered obsolete by a turn in current events.

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