

## POSTAGE STAMPS IN GEOG-ED David R Wright [ex-UEA, Norwich]

*This is not an article about collecting stamps!*

*By all means encourage students to collect stamps if you wish, but the significance of postage stamps is much wider than this. This article focuses on the educational potential of stamps.*

In PHILIPS CHILDREN'S ATLAS, this is how I summed up **'Why postage stamps?'**

This was written for 7-12 year olds, yet the concept applies to all, from 3 to 99 years:

*'You can learn so much from stamps! These stamps tell you the official language of Ghana, and show you Ghana's flag. The 10np stamp tells you the name of Ghana's main port, and shows you the cranes at the port. The 6np stamp shows you the dam on the River Volta, and tells you the name of the dam.'*

### Think of a '3 second' challenge

Every teacher knows this challenge (though not its name). So often, we have a '3-second' reaction to a photo or a map or a graph:

**'BORING'** or - just sometimes - **'interesting'**.

The postage stamp designer faces the same challenge as the teacher: will anyone want to look at this stamp for more than 3 seconds? A well designed stamp goes for impact: just what we need in classrooms! Stamps take up little space - yet can have a big impact.

### The 'realness' of the stamp

Stamps are chosen and approved **in** the country (with few exceptions). Contrast this with photos - often taken by visitors from far away. This is a major benefit: postage stamps from faraway countries do not 'see the whole world through western eyes'. However, 'bad news' will not often be shown!

*Here are some examples of stamps I have used to illustrate an important Geographical theme or message.*

#### 1- The 'flavour' of the country

Look at the beautiful Islamic art of some of

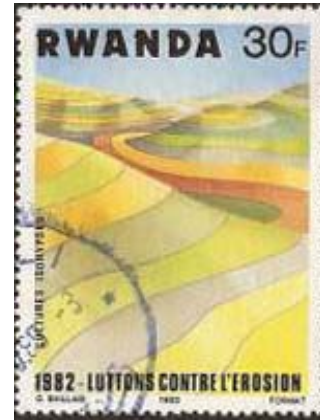


Pakistan's stamps, or the themes from Asian history and geography on stamps of Thailand or Indonesia – the Indonesian stamp shows FOUR faiths.



## 2- Develop Agriculture

Contour ploughing is not just something in a textbook! It comes alive on colourful stamps from Rwanda, with the slogan 'Let's fight erosion'. Challenge assumptions! I was amazed to see how Afghanistan had peaceful farming in the past... We get so much bad news; sometimes postage stamps can show GOOD news.



## 3- Which Crops are important?

One stamp from Jamaica summed up **four** major crops... it's NOT all sugar and bananas!



St Vincent showed us how bananas are grown and prepared for export.

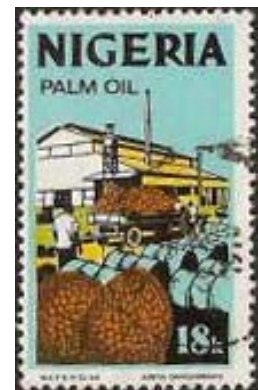


The Gambia showed cassava – an important but unfamiliar tropical root crop.



Nigeria shows us how to 'tap' natural rubber.

Pakistan boldly proclaimed 'WE EXPORT THE BEST JUTE'!



4- What are the Agricultural Products used for?

*See extract from Philip's Children's Atlas*

New Zealand had several stamps showing farming and the product... trees for timber; butter and hides from cattle etc. In one sense, the message is obvious - but the powerful images help to reinforce the concept of 'value-added' through the processing of raw materials.

5- Is 'logging' acceptable?



A Canadian stamp had a vivid image of trees turning into planks of wood.

Several tropical colonies used to show logging' as an activity on their stamps, with no suggestion that it is a destructive, unsustainable activity. Look at the 1 cent stamp from Sarawak (now Sabah - part of Malaysia), and the 1/- stamp from Nigeria.



In 1954 QE2 was happy to have her portrait beside destructive logging. How times have changed!

More recently, Ghana showed a STUMP on a stamp – a vivid image of the destruction of the tropical rain forest.



## 6- Environmental Messages



'PROTEGE  
LOS  
BOSQUES'  
– *protect the  
forests* – on  
stamps from  
Honduras  
and from  
Spain is a  
powerful message, when linked with the twin images on  
these stamps.



The response to a Spanish stamp with the bold slogan 'PROTEGE EL MAR' could be 'So it's not just British teachers that go on and on about conservation'. There is extra power in a slogan that is easy to translate! There are many more stamps of this type – they are well worth finding.



## 7- Mining...

.... has often been shown as triumph of man over the environment....it's up to us to ask questions.

Colonial stamps show the devastation in tin-mining in Malaysia and Nigeria, with no questions raised. Would stamps like this be acceptable today? The Nigerian stamp was even overprinted 'ROYAL VISIT 1956'!



8- Energy questions



Atomic – or solar? Or both?  
India has shown both types on  
her stamps.



Bhutan shows 'Hydel' power – most impressively

New Zealand has Geothermal power – the picture  
changes to a geological cross-section.



9- Family planning.

No need to impose our views: stamps from India and Pakistan have set the agenda very  
helpfully. It is much better to study and discuss a local slogan.



10- What is a country?

Not as simple as it seems - students can be quite muddled.

Stamps can help to clarify this: 'The Canaries' and Majorca are part of Spain and they use Spanish stamps. Crete, Rhodes etc are part of Greece; they use Greek stamps.



However, Cyprus and Malta are independent countries and so have their own stamps.



A few places are still colonies – this explains the Queen's portrait on Gibraltar and Falklands Islands stamps.

In the West Indies, Guadeloupe is PART OF France – this is why there is a French stamp with a view of Guadeloupe.

*see extract from Philip's Children's Atlas*

We can also find stamps of 'fake' countries - does 'Manama – dependency of Ajman' really exist?



## 11- 'New' Countries

[NB These countries are NOT 'new' to teenagers! But most of them are unfamiliar to adults and to children]

The 14 countries that broke away from the USSR, and the 7 countries of ex-Yugoslavia, all issue interesting and colourful stamps:

they try to explain themselves to the world through their stamps. Even Macedonia has issued over 500 stamps!



There are surprises on the stamps – look at the ICE below the happy seal from Turkmenistan.

Problems of inflation are famous on the stamps of Germany in the 1920s; more recently, the numerous zeros on the stamps of Belarus et al also show big problems with inflation.



## 12- Maps on stamps...



...can show different world viewpoints...South Africa is much nearer to Antarctica than to North Africa! Perhaps we 'knew' this fact – but for me it only registered when I saw this postage stamp.

Fiji published a stamp with a world map centred on Fiji; an interrupted Pacific-centred map - a fascinating alternative view of the world.



The UN logo often appears on stamps - a zenithal map, centred on the North Pole.



Rare - but fascinating - is a map centred on the South Pole - there's so much ocean in the Southern hemisphere, and so little land.

More surprising are world maps on stamps of tropical countries [eg Thailand], with BIG Arctic and small Tropics - why do they 'undersell' themselves?



## 13- Illuminating the present by understanding the past...



A stamp labelled 'Postes Ottomanes' (Ottoman Empire/Turkey) is overprinted 'IRAQ IN BRITISH OCCUPATION' in the 1920's'. This stamp helps us explain aspects of today's geography, as well as the past...

14 Trace a line of longitude

I followed the Greenwich meridian from North Pole to South Pole, and found stamps of 8 countries. I developed interactive activities from these stamps: you are welcome to use them with your students. The postage stamps can be easily enlarged to full-screen size.

See: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/ontheline/schools/stamps/stampin.htm>

15 Trace a line of latitude

I 'followed the equator' - and found 34 countries with postage stamps telling me about their part of the equator! There's even snow on a mountain in East Africa!

By contrast, the Arctic Circle only passes through 8 countries: see the 'Arctic' section of the RGS website.

*There is much more to say! But I hope that these suggestions indicate that there is much scope for linking postage stamps to enhance our understanding of Geography. Enjoy!*

David Wright's website, with activities for students, is [www.dandjwright.co.uk](http://www.dandjwright.co.uk). He is the co-author of 3 atlases (with RGS logo on them) which use some postage stamps as illustrations. The atlases are for young children – but the images on stamps are relevant to people of all ages:

Phillips Early Years Atlas (2009)

Phillips Infant School Atlas (2009)

Phillips Children's Atlas (reprinted 2009)

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