

GEOGRAPHY ACTION PLAN at SPEAKER'S HOUSE 27th November 2007

The following speech was given by Michael Palin as guest of honour at the reception at the Speaker's House to celebrate the successes of the Action Plan for Geography to date. The event was kindly organised by the Ordnance Survey, in association with the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and the Geographical Association. Michael is warmly thanked for allowing his speech to be published by all three organisations and on the Action Plan website.

Since helping to launch The Action Plan for Geography at the Royal Geographical Society in February of 2006, I've been involved in another long geography lesson – this time called *New Europe*, covering twenty countries in the eastern half of our continent – crossing some extraordinary landscapes and talking to a rich diversity of people about their lives, memories and hopes for the future.

My BBC travels began nineteen years ago with *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and I remember that after years as one of the *Monty Pythons* a lot of people saw presenting travel documentaries as an inexplicable, even traitorous betrayal of my comic roots. Now of course all the comedians are doing travel programmes. Griff Rhys-Jones, Victoria Wood, Robbie Coltrane and Paul Merton, and that's this year alone.

As far as I was concerned, by agreeing to take on *Around the World in Eighty Days* all those years ago, I was merely seizing the opportunity at the tender age of 45, to re-live, albeit on a somewhat grander scale, the field trips which I undertook as part of geography lessons at school. Indeed it was the field trips which first attracted me to Geography – the chance to get out of the school buildings, being a no-brainer at the time. Despite growing up in Sheffield, at the very heart of the iron and steel industry most of the field trips I remember were of a confectionery nature – Bassetts Liquorice Allsorts factory (where I was fascinated to learn they used carrots for colouring) and Terrys of York being outstanding. Players Cigarette factory was another special treat, only available to Geography pupils, though we eleven-year olds felt quite put out that the teachers all got free packets of fags and we were given ash-trays!

But my Geography teacher – John Hall – with whom I still correspond – was also able to make me appreciate the world closer to home. Sheffield and its hinterland was a dramatic place to grow up, an eye-catching landscape of steep hills, fast-flowing streams, bleak moorland, crags, gorges, dams, rocks, caves, and in the heart of the city – huge foundries flashing fire and flame.

Excited and stimulated as I was by what I saw around me, I extrapolated the Derbyshire countryside into an international landscape – and the appeal of the Alps or the Andes, the Victoria or Niagara Falls, the great plateaux of Tibet, and the great rivers of India and Africa was a constant presence in my childhood imagination. Thanks to John Hall, I was given an early appetite for

finding out about my surroundings – what they were and why they were there – which remained deeply ingrained from schooldays onwards.

It's not over-egging the cake to say that a sense of Geography pervaded and enriched my life – it's made any journey, however long – even a few miles by train out of London, into something unique and appealing. The way the landscape lies, the changes made as human occupation spreads across that landscape – the state of the weather, the architecture, it's all more fascinating if you know something about it. Of all the courses on the school curriculum, I found Geography the most appealing, it seemed to me then, and seems to me now, to refresh the parts other subjects just couldn't reach.

Its relevance as a subject could hardly be greater these days as we enter a period of profound and unprecedented climate change. As never before, geographers are being asked to help us understand the implications of global warming in every area of our lives, from not leaving taps running while we clean our teeth, to where we should build our houses. And any debate is now a global one as we are in an era of extraordinary access to our planet – literally, by the relative ease of air travel and virtually, by the internet and the huge amount of information now freely available.

The British, in part because of their Empire, in part because of scientific curiosity and in part because of their being an island race, utilising that least congested of travel modes – the sea – were always curious about the outside world and I think we still are. You only have to look at the proliferation of travel guides and travel sections or the applications to the RGS for grants to go on hair-raising expeditions, or indeed the number of comedians doing travel series to know that we still like to know about the world.

Whether we're better at understanding what we see and whether travel opportunities are making us more aware of the people in the countries we visit is a debate in which geographers are intimately involved. And yet, something has been going wrong. As travel opportunities grew the evidence pointed to less, not more, interest in Geography. The expansion of our world view was apparently accompanied by a corresponding contraction in the numbers of those teaching and learning Geography in our schools.

The Action Plan for Geography was drawn up to try and correct this and I'm delighted to hear that it has already begun to turn the tide. But there is still a huge task ahead to restore Geography to its rightful position in curricula, and I think that the nub of the issue is to find ways to present Geography not as a dryly academic discipline, but as something which is seen as relevant, lively, stimulating, adventurous and well, to be honest, fun. Now I'm not suggesting we re-name Geography – "Holidays", but so long as the subject dwells on lateral moraines and the distribution of sheep in the South Island of New Zealand, one can understand why eyes might stray from the schoolroom through the windows to the world outside. What we must do is to impress upon pupils that Geography is as much about what you see outside, as what you learn in the classroom. The looming storm in the sky, the wind turbines on the horizon, the satellite hovering above which can enable you to travel

across the globe on a computer screen, not to mention the unforgettable images of floods and hurricanes that we see on our televisions.

We must show that all this is Geography and what's more Geography will also help us understand: mountain gorillas and wild tigers and why they face extinction. That Geography is the way to understand the thrills of white-water rafting or hang-gliding – that Geography will help you to talk to your Polish or Slovakian neighbours or understand what Live Aid is all about. Then suddenly it becomes more than a subject. Geography becomes the knowledge. The knowledge of the Planet, and how everything works and how it's all inter-connected.

It becomes what geography has always been for me – a fusion of the power of imagination and the hard truths of science – geography becomes sunsets and eclipses, mountains, dreamlines, dancing dervishes, painted churches.

Geography is all about the living, breathing essence of the world we live in. It explains the past, illuminates the present and prepares us for the future.

What could be more important than that?

Michael Palin
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