

Geography Awareness Week to highlight the importance of place

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Local geography experts hope that an upcoming event will help Canadians to better understand the importance of this subject in their daily lives.

Geography Awareness Week (from Nov. 13-17) is an international event that has been held elsewhere before but this year marks Canada's first professional involvement.

Dr. Barry Wellar, resident of Glabar Park and recently retired member of the University of Ottawa's geography faculty, is spearheading a publicity effort by the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG).

"The general purpose and general concern in the geography community across Canada is that many people, probably in the order of 25 to 30 years of age and older, really don't understand how much geography has changed since they went to school," he says.

In particular, Dr. Wellar says that CAG hopes to shed light on the complex, multi-disciplinary nature of the field, which goes far beyond drafting maps. It has expanded over the last several years, he notes, to encompass statistical mathematics, economics and information technology.

Secondly, Dr. Wellar says, experts in the field want to spread the word on how geography can help Canadians better understand their own country.

"We have a very large country relatively speaking. As a consequence, we have a great diversity in our geography, which means this is not an easy place to manage; it's not an easy place to understand. We have relationships from one area to another which are very different because you can go within several hundred miles, or certainly less than 1,000 miles, through three or four or five weather zones, for example, from very cold to very hot."

Geography is also not often recognized as being a vital part of planning where we live, says Dr. Wellar, adding that its significance has changed as much as the field itself.



Ottawa geography experts are using the upcoming Geography Awareness Week events to illustrate the role it plays, or should play, in everyday planning decisions.

"What a lot of geography is concerned with is, where do we put things? We've been very casual, it seems. We've just sort of put things wherever we felt like doing it and we've put an awful lot of things, for example, too close to waterways. One of the consequences of that is that they've, in effect, become polluted."

With all this in mind, Dr. Wellar says he and his colleagues hope the inaugural Canadian Geography Awareness Week will spark a "year-round exercise by Canadians to think more carefully about how we treat the geography of this country. Just because we have a lot of it doesn't mean we can be casual about it."

Mid-week, organizers are planning a one day focus on geographic information system (GIS) technology. What may make GIS Day (falling on Nov. 15, this year's will be the seventh in Canada) an easy sell is the fact that, as Dr. Wellar points out, Canadians can take pride in this country's pioneering leadership in such technologies.

"GIS technology in many ways was initially developed in Canada; Canada's

been a leader in the development of it and in the application."

Carleton University will be hosting a GIS Day open house for local youth and Heather McAdam, GIS co-ordinator at the university's library, says part of her intent is to reveal the wide range of career opportunities to potential future geographers.

"(GIS) not only started in Canada, it started in Ottawa," she says. "We have a real history with this. Carleton and Ottawa U have major programs."

"Geospatial technology is considered the fastest growing technology sector in the world," she adds. "If you think of Google Maps, Google Earth; Microsoft is coming out with a competitor to that. They're putting billions of dollars into this. There's obviously something happening with this."

For more information, please see www.cag-acg.ca.