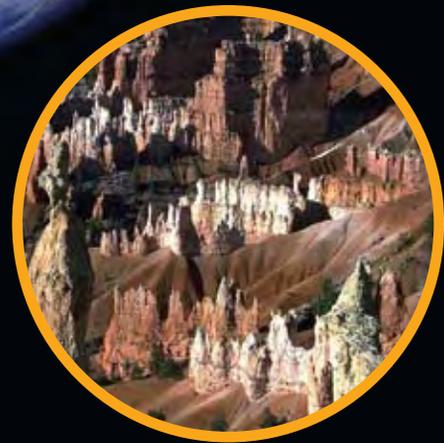
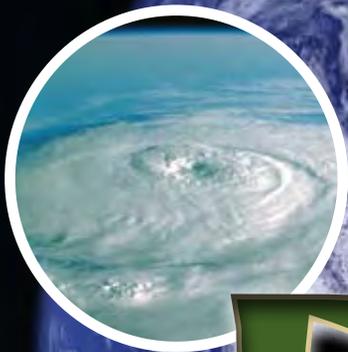


# THE MAGIC OF

# PLACE

BY TOMMY NEWTON





**AS A GEOGRAPHY INSTRUCTOR IN WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY AND CO-COORDINATOR OF THE KENTUCKY GEOGRAPHIC ALLIANCE (KGA), SCOTT DOBLER IS SPREADING THE NEWS THAT GEOGRAPHY IS MORE THAN LOCATING PLACES ON A MAP.**

In an educational outreach role through the KGA, Dobler promotes geographic education at the K-12 and postsecondary levels through educational campaigns, teacher training, professional development, and public events such as the State Geography Bee. Since 2006, Dobler has been working to promote My Wonderful World, an educational campaign developed by the National Geographic Society.

When he's not in the classroom at WKU, Dobler oversees K-12 outreach activities for the Kentucky Climate Center and the Hoffman Environmental Research Institute, both centers in WKU's Applied Research and Technology Program. "My job is to work with my colleagues and to integrate their research into the K-12 classrooms," Dobler said.

His outreach work led to an appointment as state geographer in 2006. He served in that role until January 2007. "I've had a number of wonderful opportunities that range from speaking in classrooms about weather and climate, to presenting research and proposing activities at state and national meetings. I have also met with a

number of experts about including Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in high school classrooms in Kentucky," Dobler said. "I like helping people make good decisions using geography."

Whether it's a college graduate deciding between a job offer in a big city or a rural location, or a government agency deciding on an industrial park location, geography is an important factor, Dobler explained. "Knowing where places are is just the first step. Knowing why is a lifetime journey," he said. "The magic of place can never be explained by an atlas."

Misunderstanding people, cultures, and places has created many problems in the world, Dobler said. "Traveling abroad allows us to realize we have much in common with other people. They face the same problems and deal with the same issues that we do," he said. For example, during a 2007 trip to China with the Hoffman Institute, he learned that rural areas of China are facing many of the same environmental problems as eastern Kentucky where Dobler grew up — problems like raw sewage flowing in streams, and unregulated pollutants being released in the air.

Dobler's involvement with geography began with an interest in meteorology. He attended Morehead State University where he received training in both cultural and physical geography and then received his master's at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

After college, Dobler worked for a GIS firm and as a sales representative selling social studies materials to schools in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. By using the materials in teaching demonstrations, Dobler was able to show teachers the value of what he was selling. "I became fascinated with the teaching of geography," Dobler said. "Teaching became more important than selling." That prompted Dobler to seek teaching positions. He came to WKU in 2000.

As part of his teaching and outreach, Dobler wants students to realize that with a background in geography they can follow any career path. Dobler's interests include computers, finance, economics, woodworking, and music. He is a member of the 202<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky Army National Guard Band and plays the tuba, trombone, euphonium, and banjo. "I was interested in a little bit of everything," he said. "I discovered geography because geography underlies everything."

Geographic literacy is becoming even more important in a global society. Dobler asks his students to relate global climate change to geopolitical issues (such as terrorism), availability of natural resources, and globalization. "Most importantly, geographic knowledge must expand beyond a person's immediate surroundings," Dobler emphasized.

By working with teachers, Dobler hopes to enhance geographic education. Geography used to be taught as a specific subject but now it is taught in several subject areas by science and social studies teachers, according to Dobler.

The Kentucky Mesonet project is one example of providing geographic data (meteorological observations) to schools. Teachers in science, math, social studies, and other areas can use that information in their lesson plans. In the summer of 2007, Dobler coordinated a KGA workshop for teachers on integrating the Mesonet data into their classrooms.

In turn, that aids Dobler in his mission of spreading the news about geography and improving student learning. According to the My Wonderful World website, a National Geographic-Roper survey showed that half of young Americans can't locate world powers like Japan and India and twenty percent can't even find the Pacific Ocean.

"The challenge is to get students' imaginations going," he said. "If you can get the imagination going, the learning will follow." One successful method uses geographic analysis as a thematic approach. Dobler explained, "I introduce the five themes of geography — location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and region — to students and ask them to analyze their hometown using this tool. Once they are familiar with the tool, they can use it to explore other places or ideas."

When students reach college, geographic tools can help them analyze and understand the world around them in whatever field of study they choose. "Geography figures into much of our daily life," he said. "Students often don't understand that." For example, many businesses today ask shoppers for their zip code. "They want to know what region you are from and what goods you are interested in," Dobler said. The company might use this information to check for credit card fraud, but a successful company is also maintaining that geographic-based information for marketing and future development and expansion against its competition, he said. "It's all about survival marketing in today's competitive environment."

And if today's young people are going to survive in a competitive world of globalization, says Dobler, they need to hear the message provided by the knowledge of geography. ■

