

Geography

Shaping Australia's Future



Summary for policymakers

Geographical thinking and research is guided by the core concepts of space, place and environment, intertwined in various ways through other important concepts of interconnection, time and geographic scale. Geographers undertake research at various timescales, ranging from hours to hundreds of thousands of years, at particular geographic scales, from local neighbourhoods to the global environment. Geography and geographers recognise the concept of scale dependency—that the past affects the present and that both influence any likely future—and the interconnectivity of geographic scales.

Geography: Shaping Australia's Future is a strategic plan for Australian geography prepared by the National Committee for Geographical Science. The plan presents the state of play of geography as a discipline in Australia and provides a unified vision for Australian geography over the next decade.

The plan offers a framework for engaging research, teaching and industry that aligns strategically with contemporary social, economic and environmental challenges of our region.

Key messages:

- Addressing twenty-first century 'wicked problems' of sustainable development, climate change, regional development, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss necessitates an increasingly whole-of-government, industry and academia approach. The breadth and depth afforded by geographical understandings to these problems strongly positions Australian geographers to provide evidence-based research—informing and advancing innovative policy and practice.
- Given the need for an integrated approach, it is recommended that the Australian governments at all levels better understand how geography as a discipline enhances complex, multi-sectoral policy decisions by integrating knowledge across natural and built environments, society and the humanities through its unique perspectives of space, place and the environment.
- Key recommendations identified in the plan are:
 1. That the significant role that geography plays in schools, universities, research organisations, government and industry, and the contribution of the discipline to Australia's society and economy, is enhanced, and that there is an opportunity for geographers and other stakeholders to build the discipline and demonstrate its pivotal role in academia, school curricula and community.
 2. That the work of Australian geographers is increasingly cited and referenced in policy and strategic documents, and that there are a greater number of scholarships for graduate geography students to pursue research in government priority areas.
 3. That the National Committee for Geographical Sciences works with the Academy and other stakeholders to enhance school geography education (for example, by encouraging or making compulsory geography study to Year 10).
 4. That the Australian Bureau of Statistics recognises geography as a discipline in both the Fields of Research Codes and the Field of Education Codes. Not doing so places geography at a disadvantage compared to other disciplines, weakening its identity both within and outside universities.

Geography matters

As a community, Australian geography focuses on solving issues and threats affecting the wellbeing of people and places, both in Australia and for our Asia–Pacific neighbours.

Applying geographical understandings allow us to integrate knowledge about the natural world, society and the humanities through the perspectives of space, place and the environment. This plays an important role in shaping strategic directions, policy formation and public education.

The plan: an overview

The first two chapters explain geography as a discipline, including its structure and status in Australia. The subsequent chapters reflect ten research areas based on priorities identified by Australian federal governments over the last five years and other important areas of Australian geographical research, covering:

- environmental change and human response
- land, water and food
- health and wellbeing
- the economy
- the Asia–Pacific region
- natural hazards
- rural and regional Australia
- the cities
- coastal and marine environments
- geographical information systems and science

The final chapters review the vital position of geography in schools and outline the roles of public geographical societies. The report outlines the four major challenges for the discipline in Australia, drawing on previous chapters to suggest appropriate responses and future directions:

Geography matters for policy and governance

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a plan of action for people, the planet and prosperity. Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 associated targets integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

The goals address a variety of wicked problems related to human–environment interactions (environmental degradation, climate change, sustainable management of natural resources, fresh water scarcity and loss of biodiversity), which to address require integrated solutions and collaborative work across disciplines.

The broad focus of the SDGs across fields such as climate change, disaster response and access to services, health and food security represent a unique opportunity for Australian geographers to contribute to the global discourse of sustainable development.

Future challenges for geography

Challenge 1: To increase the contribution of the discipline to progress towards environmental sustainability

Challenge 2: To increase the contribution of the discipline for the improvement of human wellbeing

Challenge 3: To raise the level of geographical knowledge and understanding within the Australian population

Challenge 4: To improve the visibility and integrity of the discipline

Further reading

National Committee for Geographical Sciences (2018). *Geography: Shaping Australia's Future* (Australian Academy of Science)

Available online, with appendices, at www.science.org.au/geography-australias-future