

**Citation for Harm J. de Blij, Ph.D.
2006 Recipient of the George J. Miller Award
for Distinguished Service to Geographic Education**

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Being a geographer in the United States during the past several decades has inevitably meant taking on a cause. That cause is a product of the systematic marginalization of the discipline in K-12 education, the closing of geography departments at some of the nation's leading universities, and the neglect of the discipline at many of America's liberal arts colleges—and even some of its prominent public universities. The social implications of these educational failings serve as the principal rallying points for the cause: an American population largely ignorant of the nature and significance of differences from place to place; largely unaware of the intertwined relationship between humans and their environment; and largely unfamiliar with even the most basic cultural, economic, political, and environmental patterns that shape life on Earth. More recently, the cause has been given urgency by growing recognition that a democratic society with a geographically disabled population is at risk in an age of expanding globalization, far-reaching geopolitical shifts, and accelerating environmental change.

Although becoming a geographer inevitably entails enlistment in the fight against geographical ignorance, some geographers embrace the cause more fully and more effectively than others. When one looks across the landscape of American professional geography over the past several decades, Harm Jan de Blij stands out as someone who has championed the cause of geographical literacy with extraordinary passion and commitment; who has brought unsurpassed oratorical and writing skills to bear in its service; and who may well have helped a larger audience understand its nature and significance than any other living member of the country's geography guild. It is thus fitting and appropriate that the leadership of the National Council for Geographic Education has decided to give the George J. Miller Award to Harm de Blij.

For Harm, geography is not simply a vocation; it is a passion. As those familiar with his wonderful little book, *Wartime Encounter with Geography*, know, that passion was forged during a chaotic childhood in the Netherlands of the early 1940s when a map on the wall showing the Allied advance across Europe signaled hope, and when atlases and geography books became an important outlet for the imagination of a young boy trapped in a Nazi-imposed nightmare. It was fueled by the inspired teaching of Eric de Witte at the Beams Lyceum, and it was sustained by the opportunity to explore far-away places that came when Harm was a young teenager and the de Blij family moved to South Africa so that Harm's father could take up the position of first violinist in the Johannesburg City Orchestra.

Harm stayed in South Africa through college—studying geography of course—and he then made the fateful decision to come to the United States to pursue graduate work at Northwestern University. The move proved to be a permanent one, and in the process Harm consigned himself to a lifetime of chronic mispronunciation of his last name. You know what I mean – deBlee, deBleigh, and my personal favorite, de Bildge. Harm breezed through Northwestern, earning both masters and doctoral degrees in geography in four years. His African experiences had clearly made an impression. Harm's dissertation focused on geomorphic processes in Swaziland. He also developed an interest in environmental issues in Sub-Saharan Africa; his first publications on such matters appeared in the *Journal of Geography* when he was a graduate student.

From the word go, the breadth of Harm's geographical imagination was in evidence. For Harm, the excitement of geography lies in the connections the discipline makes between disparate things; the importance of geography comes from the insights a place-based perspective offers to big questions about where we have come from and where we are going. Harm has thus never been content simply to adopt a narrow sub-disciplinary label and move forward. Instead, he has ranged far and wide across the marvelously variegated terrain of geographical inquiry. Even early in his professional career, Harm's intellectual wanderings were broad-ranging: physical geography, environmental geography, urban geography, and regional geography. But these would soon broaden further to encompass political geography, the geography of wine, and much, much more.

Moreover, his regional interests kept pace with his topical interests. The world became Harm's laboratory, and he took every opportunity to get to know it

Harm's academic career began in earnest at Michigan State University. From there he went to the University of Miami, and eventually to Georgetown University, where he held the George Landegger Chair in the early 1990s. As a member of the academy, Harm has taught countless students, produced a succession of scholarly publications, and engaged in the types of service activities typical of successful academics. I could spend the rest of the evening reciting specifics, but I would miss the main point. As everyone in this room surely knows, we are here to honor Harm because he has masterfully parlayed his passion for geography, his yearning to grapple with big issues, and his communication abilities into a career of extraordinary reach that has been of signal importance to the cause of geographic education. Among other highlights, that career has seen the production of a remarkable array of pedagogic materials for students, valuable and effective work for organizations seeking to promote geographic education, and unrivaled success in taking geography's message to the general public.

Allow me a few words about each of these matters. On the pedagogic front, perhaps no living geographer has reached more students through writing than has Harm de Blij. Harm's publications range from his best-selling *Geography: Realms, Regions and Concepts* to highly successful texts on human geography, political geography, physical geography, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Harm launched almost all of these on his own, and then—to use his human geography book as an example—he showed uncanny good taste in selecting co-authors as the books developed and flourished (I'm thinking of people like Erin Fouberg, of course). Harm's textbooks, together with his atlases and other writings, have galvanized the interest of a generation of students in the discipline of geography.

In support of the geographic education cause, Harm has also devoted significant time and energy throughout his career to supporting the work of this and other like-minded organizations. During the first half of the 1970s he was on the Executive Board of the NCGE and edited the *Journal of Geography*—even as he served as Secretary of the Association of American Geographers. Appreciating the richness, appeal, and potential of the approach to geography the National Geographic Society was embracing in the 1980s, Harm became Editor of the newly launched journal, *National Geographic Research* and served on NGS's Committee on Research and Exploration. The American Geographical Society also benefited from his contributions—first as contributing editor for *Focus* and then as a member of its Council.

Of all Harm's contributions to geographic education, the piece that stands out most vividly in the minds of many is his success in reaching the wider public. The platforms for this success have ranged from the studios of ABC television's *Good Morning America* program, to the podium of the Chautauqua Institution, to a recent, highly successful, trade publication of Oxford University Press, *Why Geography Matters*. Beyond these, literally millions of people have been exposed to Harm's insightful geographical analyses during his stints as an NBC news analyst, through his work as author and commentator on two editions of a high-profile PBS series, and by virtue of his participation on the public lecture circuit. (Don't ever challenge Harm to a competition telling war stories about flying; you can't possibly win.) None of these opportunities simply materialized; they came as a result of Harm's commitment to geography and his unique gift in sharing it with others. In the process, Harm has given the geographic education cause a gift of inestimable value. As a mutual non-geographer acquaintance said to me recently, "before I met Harm, I had no real interest in geography. I now think geography is one of the greatest and most important subjects around."

On a personal note, I might add that Harm's enthusiasm for geography is not simply something that is on display for the public. It is part of his essence, and I have been a happy beneficiary. I always love hearing from Harm after his travels because he cares enough to share his thoughts and incites. I am grateful for that, as I am for the encouragement, help, and friendship he has shown me through the years.

The honors and awards Harm has received reflect his many and varied accomplishments: Presidential Achievement Award, Association of American Geographers; Distinguished Geography Educator, National Geographic Society; Honorary Fellow, American Geographical Society; honorary doctoral degree, Michigan State University; honorary doctoral degree, North Carolina State University. And then there is my favorite of

his awards: Le Prix d'Economie et Legislation Vitivinicole, de l'Office International de la Vigne et du Vin. When a major French wine organization gives a medal to someone named de Blij, you know the guy must have done something right.

Harm has long been a celebrated member of the NCGE as well, and given the breadth and scope of his contributions and accomplishments, it is fitting that the organization honor him with its longest standing, most prestigious award—an award that, since 1932, has recognized an individual whose career has embodied significant service to the discipline of geography, to geographic education, and to the NCGE. It is thus my distinct pleasure and privilege to present the 2006 George J. Miller Award for Distinguished Service to Geographic Education to Harm Jan de Blij.

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