



An Introduction to
**Physical Geography
and the Environment**

Fourth edition



Pearson

Edited by
Joseph Holden

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Physical Geography
and the Environment**



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Joseph Holden

School of Geography, University of Leeds



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Preface to the fourth edition xv
 Contributors xvii
 Editor's acknowledgements xviii
 Acknowledgements xix

Part I: The role of physical geography 1

1 Approaching physical geography 3

Part II: Continents and oceans 27

2 Earth geology and tectonics 29
 3 Oceans 53

Part III: Past, present and future climate and weather 77

4 The Pleistocene 79
 5 The Holocene 108
 6 Atmospheric processes 137
 7 Contemporary climate change 175
 8 Global climate and weather 195
 9 Regional and local climates 229

Part IV: Biogeography and ecology 251

10 The biosphere 253
 11 Ecosystem processes 277

12 Freshwater ecosystems 298
 13 Vegetation and environmental change 323

Part V: Geomorphology and hydrology 345

14 Weathering 347
 15 Slope processes and landform evolution 377
 16 Sediments and sedimentation 407
 17 Soils 429
 18 Catchment hydrology 465
 19 Fluvial geomorphology and river management 493
 20 Solutes and water quality 525
 21 Drylands 557
 22 Coasts 584
 23 Glaciers and ice sheets 625
 24 Permafrost and periglaciation 656

Part VI: Monitoring and management 675

25 Monitoring environmental change 677
 26 Dealing with hazards and environmental change 719

Glossary 736
 Bibliography 763
 Index 795

Preface to the fourth edition xv
 Contributors xvii
 Editor's acknowledgements xviii
 Acknowledgements xix

Part I: The role of physical geography 1

1 Approaching physical geography 3
 1.1 Introduction 3
 1.2 Historical development of physical geography 5
 1.2.1 Physical geography before 1800 5
 1.2.2 Physical geography between 1800 and 1950 6
 1.2.3 Physical geography since 1950 8
 1.3 Scientific methods 10
 1.3.1 The positivist method 10
 1.3.2 Critique of the positivist method 11
 1.3.3 Realism as an alternative positivist approach 12
 1.3.4 Benefits of multiple scientific methods in physical geography 13
 1.4 The field, the laboratory and the model 14
 1.4.1 Approaching data collection from the environment 14
 1.4.2 Approaching laboratory work 16
 1.4.3 Approaching numerical modelling 16
 1.5 Using physical geography for managing the environment 20
 1.6 Summary 25
 Further reading 26

Part II: Continents and oceans 27

2 Earth geology and tectonics 29
 2.1 Introduction 29
 2.2 The Earth's structure 30
 2.2.1 The interior of the Earth 30
 2.2.2 The outer layers of the Earth 30
 2.3 Rock type and formation 31
 2.3.1 Igneous rock 31

2.3.2 Sedimentary rock 31
 2.3.3 Metamorphic rock 33
 2.3.4 The rock cycle 33
 2.4 History of plate tectonics 33
 2.4.1 Early ideas of global tectonics 33
 2.4.2 Evidence that led directly to plate tectonic theory 34
 2.5 The theory of plate tectonics 37
 2.5.1 Lithospheric plates 37
 2.5.2 Rates of plate movement 38
 2.6 Structural features related directly to motion of the plates 39
 2.6.1 Divergent plate boundaries 39
 2.6.2 Transform faults 41
 2.6.3 Convergent plate boundaries 42
 2.6.4 Hot spots 50
 2.7 The history of the continents 51
 2.8 Summary 52
 Further reading 52

3 Oceans 53
 3.1 Introduction 53
 3.2 The ocean basins 54
 3.2.1 The scale of the oceans 54
 3.2.2 Geological structure of the ocean basins 54
 3.2.3 The depth and shape of the ocean basins 55
 3.3 Physical properties of the ocean 55
 3.3.1 Salinity 55
 3.3.2 Temperature structure of the oceans 59
 3.4 Ocean circulation 60
 3.4.1 Surface currents 60
 3.4.2 The deep currents of the oceans 62
 3.4.3 The weather of the ocean 64
 3.5 Sediments in the ocean 65
 3.6 Biological productivity 67
 3.6.1 Photosynthesis in the ocean 67
 3.6.2 Importance of nutrient supply to primary productivity 68

Contents

- 3.6.3 Animals of the sea 69
- 3.6.4 Pollution 73
- 3.7 Effect of global climate change on the oceans 74
- 3.8 Summary 75
- Further reading 76

Part III: Past, present and future climate and weather 77

4 The Pleistocene 79

- 4.1 Introduction 79
- 4.2 Long-term cycles, astronomical forcing and feedback mechanisms 81
 - 4.2.1 Orbital forcing theory 81
 - 4.2.2 Evidence that orbital forcing causes climate change 82
 - 4.2.3 Problems with orbital forcing theory 85
 - 4.2.4 Internal feedback mechanisms 85
- 4.3 Short-term cycles 89
 - 4.3.1 Glacial instability 89
 - 4.3.2 The Younger Dryas 90
- 4.4 Further evidence for environmental change 91
 - 4.4.1 Landforms 92
 - 4.4.2 Plants 97
 - 4.4.3 Insects 98
 - 4.4.4 Other animal remains 99
- 4.5 Dating methods 100
 - 4.5.1 Age estimation techniques 100
 - 4.5.2 Age equivalent labels 101
 - 4.5.3 Relative chronology 101
- 4.6 Pleistocene stratigraphy and correlation 101
- 4.7 Palaeoclimate modelling 105
- 4.8 Summary 106
- Further reading 107

5 The Holocene 108

- 5.1 Introduction 108
- 5.2 Holocene climatic change 109
 - 5.2.1 How the Holocene began 109
 - 5.2.2 Drivers of climate change during the Holocene 110
 - 5.2.3 The Little Ice Age 116
- 5.3 Holocene geomorphological change 117
 - 5.3.1 Retreating ice sheets 117
 - 5.3.2 Rising seas 118
- 5.4 Holocene ecosystem change 120
 - 5.4.1 Responses of ecosystems to the end of the last glacial 120
 - 5.4.2 Tropical Africa and the Sahara 122
 - 5.4.3 European ecosystems 123

- 5.4.4 Island ecosystems 124

5.5 The rise of civilizations 125

- 5.5.1 Humans at the end of the last glacial 125
- 5.5.2 The beginnings of agriculture 126
- 5.5.3 Social and environmental consequences of agriculture 127

5.6 Human interaction with physical geography 128

- 5.6.1 Out of Eden? 128
- 5.6.2 Deforestation 128
- 5.6.3 Soil erosion and impoverishment 132
- 5.6.4 Irrigation and drainage 133

5.7 Summary 135

Further reading 136

6 Atmospheric processes 137

- 6.1 Introduction 137
- 6.2 The basics of climate 139
- 6.3 The global atmospheric circulation 141
- 6.4 Radiative and energy systems 142
 - 6.4.1 The nature of energy 142
 - 6.4.2 Distinguishing between temperature and heat 144
 - 6.4.3 Radiation 144
 - 6.4.4 Thermal inertia 149
 - 6.4.5 The atmospheric energy balance 150
- 6.5 Moisture circulation systems 150
 - 6.5.1 Moisture in the atmosphere and the hydrological cycle 150
 - 6.5.2 Global distribution of precipitation and evaporation 151
 - 6.5.3 The influence of vegetation on evaporation 153
 - 6.5.4 Drought 153
- 6.6 Motion in the atmosphere 154
 - 6.6.1 Convective overturning 154
 - 6.6.2 The Earth's rotation and the winds 155
 - 6.6.3 Long waves, Planetary Waves and Rossby Waves 156
 - 6.6.4 Jet streams 159
- 6.7 The influence of oceans and ice on atmospheric processes 161
- 6.8 The Walker circulation 163
 - 6.8.1 El Niño Southern Oscillation 164
 - 6.8.2 North Atlantic Oscillation 166
- 6.9 Interactions between radiation, atmospheric trace gases and clouds 167
 - 6.9.1 The greenhouse effect 167
 - 6.9.2 A simple climate model of the enhanced greenhouse effect 167
 - 6.9.3 Radiative interactions with clouds and sulfate aerosols 170

- 6.10 Geoengineering 173
- 6.11 Summary 174
- Further reading 174
- 7 Contemporary climate change 175**
 - 7.1 Introduction 175
 - 7.2 Climate change 176
 - 7.2.1 Long-term change 176
 - 7.2.2 Recent climate change and its causes 177
 - 7.2.3 Predictions from global climate models (GCMs) 180
 - 7.2.4 Critical evaluation of the state-of-the-art in GCMs 182
 - 7.3 The carbon cycle: interaction with the climate system 184
 - 7.4 Mitigation 186
 - 7.5 Destruction of the ozone layer by chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) 187
 - 7.6 The future 189
 - 7.7 Summary 193
 - Further reading 194
- 8 Global climate and weather 195**
 - 8.1 Introduction 195
 - 8.2 General controls of global climates 196
 - 8.3 The tropics and subtropics 201
 - 8.3.1 Equatorial regions 201
 - 8.3.2 The Sahel and desert margins 209
 - 8.3.3 Subtropical deserts 210
 - 8.3.4 Humid subtropics 211
 - 8.4 Mid and high-latitude climates 215
 - 8.4.1 Depressions, fronts and anticyclones 215
 - 8.4.2 Mid-latitude western continental margins 219
 - 8.4.3 Mid-latitude east continental margins and continental interiors 220
 - 8.5 Polar climates 221
 - 8.6 A global overview 222
 - 8.7 Summary 228
 - Further reading 228
- 9 Regional and local climates 229**
 - 9.1 Introduction 229
 - 9.2 Altitude and topography 230
 - 9.2.1 Pressure 233
 - 9.2.2 Temperature 233
 - 9.2.3 Wind 234
 - 9.2.4 Precipitation 235
 - 9.2.5 Frost hollows 240
 - 9.3 Influence of water bodies 240
 - 9.4 Human influences 242
 - 9.4.1 Shelter belts 242
 - 9.4.2 Urban climates 243
 - 9.4.3 Atmospheric pollution and haze 246
- 9.5 Summary 248
- Further reading 249
- Part IV: Biogeography and ecology 251**
- 10 The biosphere 253**
 - 10.1 Introduction 253
 - 10.2 Biological concepts 254
 - 10.2.1 What is a species? 254
 - 10.2.2 The naming of species 254
 - 10.2.3 Levels of organization 255
 - 10.2.4 Biodiversity 255
 - 10.3 Patterns of distribution 258
 - 10.3.1 Potential species distributions 258
 - 10.3.2 Actual species distributions 259
 - 10.3.3 Spatial patterns in biodiversity 260
 - 10.4 Terrestrial biomes 261
 - 10.4.1 Equatorial and tropical forests 262
 - 10.4.2 Savanna 265
 - 10.4.3 Hot Desert 266
 - 10.4.4 Mediterranean-type biome 266
 - 10.4.5 Temperate grassland 268
 - 10.4.6 Temperate broadleaf forest 268
 - 10.4.7 Taiga 269
 - 10.4.8 Tundra 270
 - 10.5 Aquatic biomes 272
 - 10.5.1 Marine regions 272
 - 10.5.2 Freshwater regions 274
 - 10.6 Summary 275
 - Further reading 276
- 11 Ecosystem processes 277**
 - 11.1 Introduction 277
 - 11.2 The flow of energy and resources 278
 - 11.2.1 Energy entering an ecosystem 278
 - 11.2.2 Ecological thermodynamics 278
 - 11.2.3 Trophic levels and food webs 279
 - 11.2.4 Biogeochemical cycles 280
 - 11.3 Biotic interactions 281
 - 11.3.1 Mutualism 282
 - 11.3.2 Herbivory, predation and parasitism 282
 - 11.3.3 Commensalism 283
 - 11.3.4 Amensalism 284
 - 11.3.5 Competition 284
 - 11.4 Temporal change in ecosystems 285
 - 11.4.1 Short-term changes 285
 - 11.4.2 Disturbance and resilience 286
 - 11.4.3 Succession 286
 - 11.5 Human impact 289
 - 11.5.1 Degrading ecosystems 289

Contents

- 11.5.2 Urban ecology 294
- 11.5.3 Conservation 294
- 11.6 Summary 297
- Further reading 297
- 12 Freshwater ecosystems 298**
 - 12.1 Introduction 298
 - 12.2 Running waters: rivers and streams 300
 - 12.2.1 River ecosystem geomorphological units 300
 - 12.2.2 Spatial variability of river ecosystems 302
 - 12.2.3 Temporal variability of river ecosystems 308
 - 12.2.4 Human alterations to river ecosystems 308
 - 12.3 Still waters: lakes and ponds 312
 - 12.3.1 Classification of lake ecosystems 312
 - 12.3.2 Spatial variability of lake ecosystems 315
 - 12.3.3 Human influences on lake ecosystems 319
 - 12.4 Summary 321
 - Further reading 322
- 13 Vegetation and environmental change 323**
 - 13.1 Introduction 323
 - 13.2 Fundamentals of how plants respond to climatic variations 324
 - 13.2.1 Light 324
 - 13.2.2 Water 326
 - 13.2.3 Temperature 326
 - 13.2.4 Carbon dioxide concentration 327
 - 13.2.5 Other climatic variables 327
 - 13.3 Observational studies: how we know for sure that vegetation responds to a changing climate 327
 - 13.3.1 The forest/savanna boundary in southern Amazonia 327
 - 13.3.2 The northern tree line 329
 - 13.3.3 Upward march of vegetation in mountains 329
 - 13.3.4 Changes in the timing of flowering 330
 - 13.4 Models for prediction 332
 - 13.5 The complex interaction between human activities and climate change 336
 - 13.5.1 Does atmospheric pollution sometimes benefit plants? 336
 - 13.5.2 How does fire interact with climate change? 336
 - 13.6 Loss of biodiversity 340
 - 13.7 Agriculture and food security 341
 - 13.8 Summary 343
 - Further reading 343
- 14 Weathering and the role of water 350**
 - 14.1 Introduction 347
 - 14.2 Environmental and material controls on weathering 348
 - 14.3 Weathering and the role of water 350
 - 14.4 Chemical weathering 352
 - 14.4.1 Hydrolysis 352
 - 14.4.2 Carbonation 352
 - 14.4.3 Solution 353
 - 14.4.4 Oxidation and reduction 353
 - 14.4.5 Biologically related chemical weathering 353
 - 14.4.6 Products of chemical weathering 354
 - 14.5 Physical weathering 356
 - 14.5.1 Dilatation – pressure release 356
 - 14.5.2 Thermoclasty 358
 - 14.5.3 Freeze–thaw (frost weathering) 359
 - 14.5.4 Salt weathering 359
 - 14.5.5 Biologically related physical weathering 363
 - 14.6 Climatic controls on weathering 364
 - 14.7 Geological controls on weathering 367
 - 14.8 Urban stone decay and lessons for rock weathering 371
 - 14.8.1 Stone decay is multifactorial 373
 - 14.8.2 Rates of stone decay are unpredictable 373
 - 14.8.3 Decay is spatially variable 374
 - 14.8.4 Stress history is important 375
 - 14.9 Summary 375
 - Further reading 376
- 15 Slope processes and landform evolution 377**
 - 15.1 Introduction 377
 - 15.2 Slope profiles 378
 - 15.2.1 Slope length 378
 - 15.2.2 Slope steepness 378
 - 15.2.3 Slope convexity 380
 - 15.3 Hillslope transport processes 380
 - 15.3.1 Chemical transport processes (solution) 381
 - 15.3.2 Physical transport processes 382
 - 15.3.3 Biological mixing 390
 - 15.3.4 Particle movements 390
 - 15.3.5 The balance between erosion processes 396
 - 15.4 Evolution of hillslope profiles 398
 - 15.4.1 Concepts 398
 - 15.4.2 Models 401
 - 15.4.3 Interpreting landscape form 405
 - 15.5 Summary 406
 - Further reading 406
- 16 Sediments and sedimentation 407**
 - 16.1 Introduction 407
 - 16.2 Clastic sediments 408
 - 16.2.1 Classification of clastic sediments 408
 - 16.2.2 Clastic sediment grain shape and texture 409
 - 16.2.3 Sediment transport and sedimentation 409
 - 16.2.4 Products of sedimentation – bedforms 412

- 16.3 Biological sediments 415
- 16.4 Chemical sediments 417
- 16.5 Sedimentation in Earth surface environments 418
 - 16.5.1 Continental environments 418
 - 16.5.2 Coastal and marine environments 420
- 16.6 Response of sedimentation to environmental change 422
 - 16.6.1 Dams and reservoirs 424
 - 16.6.2 Mining 424
 - 16.6.3 Urbanization 425
 - 16.6.4 Sediment management 426
- 16.7 Summary 427
- Further reading 428
- 17 Soils 429**
 - 17.1 Introduction 429
 - 17.2 The components of soil 430
 - 17.2.1 Mineral particles 430
 - 17.2.2 Soil organic matter 430
 - 17.2.3 Soil water 431
 - 17.2.4 Soil air 432
 - 17.3 Soil profile 433
 - 17.4 Soil formation processes 434
 - 17.4.1 Pedogenesis 434
 - 17.4.2 Factors affecting soil formation 437
 - 17.5 Physical properties of soil 441
 - 17.5.1 Soil colour 441
 - 17.5.2 Soil texture 441
 - 17.5.3 Soil structure 444
 - 17.6 Chemical properties of soil 445
 - 17.6.1 Clay minerals and cation exchange 445
 - 17.6.2 Soil acidity 447
 - 17.7 Soil biology 449
 - 17.7.1 The soil biota 449
 - 17.7.2 Factors influencing soil biodiversity 451
 - 17.8 Impact of human activities on soils and soil processes 452
 - 17.8.1 Soil erosion 452
 - 17.8.2 Soil acidification 453
 - 17.8.3 Soil pollution 454
 - 17.8.4 Soil organic matter and carbon 456
 - 17.8.5 Other threats 458
 - 17.8.6 Policy and legislation 462
 - 17.9 Summary 463
 - Further reading 464
- 18 Catchment hydrology 465**
 - 18.1 Introduction 465
 - 18.2 Measuring the main components of catchment hydrology 466
 - 18.2.1 Precipitation 466
 - 18.2.2 River flow 468
 - 18.2.3 Evapotranspiration 472
 - 18.2.4 Soil water 473
 - 18.2.5 Groundwater 475
 - 18.3 Flow paths to water bodies 476
 - 18.3.1 Infiltration 476
 - 18.3.2 Infiltration-excess overland flow 476
 - 18.3.3 Saturation-excess overland flow 477
 - 18.3.4 Throughflow 478
 - 18.4 River discharge 483
 - 18.4.1 Stormflow 483
 - 18.4.2 Flow frequency 485
 - 18.4.3 River regime 488
 - 18.5 Flooding 489
 - 18.6 Summary 491
 - Further reading 491
- 19 Fluvial geomorphology and river management 493**
 - 19.1 Introduction 493
 - 19.2 Catchment processes: energy and materials for rivers 494
 - 19.2.1 Runoff, river regimes and floods 494
 - 19.2.2 Sediment sources and delivery 495
 - 19.3 River channel morphology: measuring rivers 496
 - 19.3.1 Channel networks and slope 496
 - 19.3.2 Channel cross-section: width, depth 497
 - 19.3.3 Channel planform 497
 - 19.3.4 Channel boundary materials 498
 - 19.4 River channel processes: understanding water and sediment movement 499
 - 19.4.1 Water flow and flow hydraulics 499
 - 19.4.2 Sediment movement 500
 - 19.5 River channels: linking channel processes and morphology 502
 - 19.5.1 Long profile 504
 - 19.5.2 River channel cross-sections 505
 - 19.5.3 Channel planform 505
 - 19.5.4 Channel bed morphology 507
 - 19.6 River channel changes: rates and types of channel adjustment 509
 - 19.6.1 Cross-sectional change 511
 - 19.6.2 Planform change 511
 - 19.6.3 Human-induced change 513
 - 19.7 Fluvial geomorphology and environmentally sound river management: living and working with nature 515
 - 19.7.1 River management and the engineering tradition 515
 - 19.7.2 Living with rivers 516
 - 19.7.3 River maintenance 517
 - 19.7.4 Building new river channels 519
 - 19.7.5 River restoration 520

Contents

- 19.8 Summary 523
- Further reading 524
- 20 Solutes and water quality 525**
 - 20.1 Introduction 525
 - 20.2 Solutes: some key controls 526
 - 20.2.1 Solute form 526
 - 20.2.2 pH and redox potential 526
 - 20.2.3 Temperature and pressure 528
 - 20.2.4 The role of particulates 529
 - 20.2.5 Solute fluxes 529
 - 20.3 Solutes within the catchment hydrological system 530
 - 20.3.1 Precipitation 530
 - 20.3.2 Evapotranspiration and evaporation 532
 - 20.3.3 Interception 533
 - 20.3.4 Soil 533
 - 20.3.5 Groundwater 535
 - 20.3.6 Rivers 536
 - 20.3.7 Lakes and reservoirs 536
 - 20.4 The role of hydrological pathways in solute processes 538
 - 20.5 Temporal patterns of solutes 540
 - 20.5.1 Patterns of solutes in storm events: short-term changes 541
 - 20.5.2 Annual patterns of solute concentrations 542
 - 20.5.3 Long-term patterns of solute concentrations 544
 - 20.6 Spatial patterns of solutes 548
 - 20.6.1 Global patterns of solutes 549
 - 20.6.2 Regional patterns of solutes 549
 - 20.7 Modelling solutes and water quality 553
 - 20.7.1 Modelling solutes in catchments 553
 - 20.7.2 Modelling solutes in watercourses 553
 - 20.8 Summary 555
 - Further reading 556
- 21 Drylands 557**
 - 21.1 Introduction 557
 - 21.2 Aridity 560
 - 21.2.1 Drylands 560
 - 21.2.2 Causes of aridity 561
 - 21.3 Dryland soil and vegetation systems 563
 - 21.3.1 Dryland soils 563
 - 21.3.2 Dryland vegetation 563
 - 21.4 Geomorphological processes in drylands 566
 - 21.4.1 Dryland landscapes 566
 - 21.4.2 Rock weathering in drylands 567
 - 21.4.3 Hillslope and channel processes 568
 - 21.4.4 Aeolian processes and forms 571
- 21.5 Environmental change in drylands 578
- 21.6 Summary 582
- Further reading 583
- 22 Coasts 584**
 - 22.1 Introduction 584
 - 22.2 Coastal morphodynamics 588
 - 22.3 Coastal processes: waves 590
 - 22.3.1 Linear wave theory 591
 - 22.3.2 Wave processes in intermediate water 592
 - 22.3.3 Wave processes in shallow water 593
 - 22.3.4 Nearshore currents 595
 - 22.4 Coastal processes: storm surge, tides and tsunami 597
 - 22.4.1 Storm surge 597
 - 22.4.2 Tides 598
 - 22.4.3 Tsunami 600
 - 22.5 Coastal classification 600
 - 22.6 Wave-dominated coastal environments 601
 - 22.6.1 Barriers 601
 - 22.6.2 Beaches 602
 - 22.6.3 Coastal dunes 605
 - 22.7 Tide-dominated coastal environments 608
 - 22.7.1 Wave- and tide-dominated estuaries 608
 - 22.7.2 Estuarine mixing 611
 - 22.7.3 Ebb- and flood-dominance 613
 - 22.7.4 Salt marsh and mangroves 613
 - 22.8 Fluvial-dominated coastal environments 614
 - 22.9 Erosive coasts 617
 - 22.9.1 Rocky coast processes 617
 - 22.9.2 Coastal cliffs 619
 - 22.9.3 Shore platforms 619
 - 22.10 Coastal zone management 620
 - 22.11 Summary 623
 - Further reading 624
- 23 Glaciers and ice sheets 625**
 - 23.1 Introduction 625
 - 23.2 Glaciology 626
 - 23.2.1 Types of ice mass 626
 - 23.2.2 Where do glaciers occur? 627
 - 23.2.3 Glacier mass balance 628
 - 23.2.4 Transformation of snow into ice 631
 - 23.2.5 Glacier thermal regime 631
 - 23.2.6 Glacier water systems 632
 - 23.2.7 Glacier dynamics 636
 - 23.3 Glacial geological processes and glacial sediments 644
 - 23.3.1 Processes of glacial erosion 644
 - 23.3.2 Entrainment and transport 645

- 23.3.3 Deposition 647
- 23.4 The record of glacial change 650
 - 23.4.1 Ice sheet reconstruction 650
- 23.5 Summary 654
- Further reading 655

24 Permafrost and periglaciation 656

- 24.1 Introduction 656
- 24.2 Permafrost processes 657
 - 24.2.1 The distribution of permafrost 657
 - 24.2.2 Ground temperatures and permafrost thickness 659
 - 24.2.3 Reconstructing climate change from permafrost temperatures 659
 - 24.2.4 Gas hydrates 661
 - 24.2.5 Hydrology in permafrost regions 663
- 24.3 Geomorphology of permafrost and periglacial environments 665
 - 24.3.1 Ground ice features 665
 - 24.3.2 Slope processes 670
 - 24.3.3 Loess and aeolian activity 673
- 24.4 Summary 673
- Further reading 674

Part VI: Monitoring and management 675

25 Monitoring environmental change 677

- 25.1 Introduction 677
- 25.2 *In situ* data 678
 - 25.2.1 Satellite positioning systems 678
 - 25.2.2 Telemetry 679
 - 25.2.3 Environmental sensor networks 679
- 25.3 Remote sensing data 680
 - 25.3.1 Platforms 682
 - 25.3.2 Electromagnetic radiation 682
 - 25.3.3 Image data 684
- 25.4 Camera sensors 689
 - 25.4.1 Photogrammetry 691
- 25.5 Multispectral, thermal and hyperspectral sensors 693
 - 25.5.1 Landsat 695

- 25.5.2 Spot 698
- 25.5.3 NASA's Earth Observing System Program 699
- 25.5.4 High-resolution sensors 701
- 25.6 Microwave and ranging sensors 701
 - 25.6.1 Microwave sensors 701
 - 25.6.2 Ranging sensors 705
- 25.7 Digital image processing 710
 - 25.7.1 Digital images 710
 - 25.7.2 Image rectification 711
 - 25.7.3 Image enhancement 712
- 25.8 Summary 718
- Further reading 718

26 Dealing with hazards and environmental change 719

- 26.1 Introduction 719
- 26.2 Types of environmental hazard 720
- 26.3 Characteristics of environmental change 722
 - 26.3.1 The nature of change 722
 - 26.3.2 Rate of change 724
 - 26.3.3 Environmental tolerance 725
- 26.4 Prediction 725
 - 26.4.1 Monitoring 725
 - 26.4.2 Modelling 726
 - 26.4.3 Uncertainty 727
- 26.5 Risk and vulnerability 727
- 26.6 Management tools 727
 - 26.6.1 Mitigation 729
 - 26.6.2 Adaptation 729
 - 26.6.3 Impact assessment 729
 - 26.6.4 Life costing 730
 - 26.6.5 Ecosystem services 732
 - 26.6.6 Engagement 732
- 26.7 Summary 734
- Further reading 735

Glossary 736

Bibliography 763

Index 795

It is exciting being a physical geographer because you learn about environments around the world, how they function, and why they are shaped the way they are. Through this understanding we can see how humans have impacted the Earth and how human activities are influenced by environmental processes. Our understanding of the world is rapidly changing and I am continually amazed at the new discoveries that are made about how the world works.

This new edition provides chapters from 21 contributors who are all international experts in their field. Each of the chapters covers a wide range of material including core principles of the subject as well as new findings from ongoing research. The chapters are fully illustrated using diagrams and photographs from environments around the world. Between them, the contributors have researched in detail every environment on the planet. The chapters provide an unrivalled source of rich information from around the world for all budding physical geographers.

The book seeks to help you understand geographical processes and tackles the interlinkages between processes, places and environments. I hope that the book engages and inspires you and makes you ask new questions about the physical environment. I encourage you to use your geographical skills to seek answers to those questions and to share your discoveries with others.

Scope of the book

Physical geography is of wide interest and immense importance. It deals with the processes associated with climate, landforms, oceans and ecosystems of the world. The Earth has always been subject to changes in these systems and studying physical geography allows us to understand how Earth systems have come to operate as they do today. It also provides us with insights into how they may operate in the future. The impacts that humans have made on the Earth's environments are ever increasing as the world's population approaches eight billion. Thus the Earth's systems will change in the future both naturally and in a forced way through human action. However, it will be crucial to understand, manage and cope with such change and this can be achieved only by understanding the processes of physical geography. This text is aimed at those embarking on a university course and provides an introduction to the major subjects of physical geography.

The book provides a baseline of understanding and additionally it directs the reader to resources that encourage them to develop their studies further and has materials that should be of value throughout a university degree.

Tools used in the book

In addition to providing a rich source of information, the book uses a number of educational tools to aid understanding:

- The book is split into six parts, each with a **part opener** that describes the main themes of that part of the book and the links between the chapters within that part.
- **Learning objectives** clearly outline the purpose and aims of a particular chapter to help locate the reader within the book.
- **Boxed features** explore and illustrate topics and concepts through real-world examples. Scattered throughout every chapter, these insightful applications are differentiated into the following types:
 - case studies;
 - fundamental principles;
 - techniques;
 - hazards;
 - new directions.
- **Reflective questions** invite the reader to think about, and further explore, what they have just read. Useful for consolidating learning, these questions are found at the end of each major section of every chapter.
- A **summary** draws together the key ideas of the chapter, reflecting the learning objectives for that chapter.
- An **annotated list** of five further readings aims to inspire and enable deeper exploration into a topic. The reading lists include important papers as well as textbooks. Longer lists of further reading for each chapter are found on the companion website.
- The **comprehensive glossary** serves as an additional resource to help clarify concepts discussed within the book. Key words defined in the glossary are highlighted in the text the first time they appear in each chapter.

Companion website

The book also has a dedicated **website** at www.pearsoned.co.uk/holden on which there is a suite of other educational resources for both students and lecturers alike.

Lecturer resources

These contain:

- **PowerPoint slides:** a set of slides for every chapter comprising bulleted outlines of core topics and the key figures and images from the main text.
- **Field exercise ideas:** suggestions for activities that can be done in the field.

Student resources

These contain:

- **Multiple-choice questions:** a set of interactive questions for every chapter that allow students to test and consolidate their understanding.

- **Further reading:** an annotated list of further reading material for each chapter.
- **Annotated weblinks:** several hundred annotated additional websites for students to further explore a topic. There are weblinks listed for each chapter.
- **Interactive models for practical learning:** these models give students the opportunity to explore and understand environmental processes and the principles of modelling.

I hope that you are able to use the rich interactive resources that this book provides to further your learning and exploration of the subject of physical geography and the environment.

Joseph Holden
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Maps

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Tables

Table 2.1 from U.S. Geological Survey, www.earthquake.usgs.gov, courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey; Table 4.1 from *Quaternary Environments*, Routledge (M.A.J. Williams, D. Dunkerley and P. de Deckker et al 1998) Table 1.1, p.8, 978-0340691519, used by permission; Tables 7.1, 13.1 from “Global climate and the distribution of plant biomes”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, Vol 359, pp.1465–1476 (F. I. Woodward, M. R. Lomas and C. K. Kelly 2004); Table 12.4 after *Limnology: Lake and river ecosystems*, Academic Press (R.G. Wetzel 2001) pp.41–42, 978-0127447605; Table 17.6 adapted from *The nature and properties of soil*, 12th edition, Pearson Education Inc. (Nyle C. Brady and Ray R. Weil) copyright © 1999. Adapted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River,

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Waller 666t, 670; **Aart Kroon Associate Professor:** 621bl; **Mel Bickerton:** 316, 318; **Mike Church:** 133b; **Mike Crabtree:** 633b; **NASA:** 667, Adam Voiland (NASA Earth Observatory) And Jeff Schmaltz (Lance Modis Rapid Response) 247, Blue Marble: Land, Surface, Shallow Water, and Shaded Topography, Http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/view_rec.php?id=2433572, Geology.com, using Landsat Geo cover data provided by NASA 386t, Hal Pierce (SSAI / NASA GSFC) 468bl, Jacques Desloîtres, MODIS Rapid Response Team, NASA / GSFC 571, Jacques Desloîtres, MODIS Land Rapid Response Team, NASA / GSFC 66, Jeff Schmaltz, LANCE / EOSDIS Rapid Response 205, Jeff Schmaltz, MODIS Rapid Response Team 74, Jeff Schmaltz, Modis Rapid Response Team, Nasa / Gsfc 68, Jesse Allen and Robert Simmon, USGS / NASA 675, Jesse Allen, using data provided courtesy of NASA / GSFC / METI / ERSDAC / JAROS, and U.S. / Japan ASTER Science Team 615tr, Jesse Allen, using Landsat data provided by the United States Geological Survey. 559b, NASA / GSFC / METI / ERSDAC / JAROS, and U.S. / Japan ASTER Science Team 425, NASA / GSFC / MITI / ERSDAC / JAROS, and US / Japan ASTER Science Team, 2002 576tl, NASA / GSFC / MITS / ERSDAC / JAROS, and US / Japan ASTER Science Team 694, NASA / JPL-Caltech / GSFC 474, NASA Earth Observatory maps by Jesse Allen. Natural-color image by Jesse Allen, using Landsat data from the U.S. Geological Survey 387, NASA images created by Jesse Allen, Earth Observatory, using data provided courtesy of the NASA / GSFC / MITI / ERSDAC / JAROS, and U.S. / Japan ASTER Science Team 577b, NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center, data from NOAA GOES 201, NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center 631, NASA's MODIS Rapid Response Team 721, Robert Simmon and Jesse Allen, using Landsat data provided by the United States Geological Survey 579, SeaWiFS Project, NASA / Goddard Space Flight Centre and ORBIMAGE 412, University of Texas Center for Space Research / NASA 630; **NERC 2017:** Permit Number CP17 / 015 British Geological Survey © NERC 2017. All rights reserved 668br; **Nick Berry:** Despina Psarra 264t; **Norwegian Polar Institute:** 641tl, 641tr; **Phil Haygarth:** 436b; **Philip N Owens:** 427; **PhotoDisc:** Alan & Sandy Carey 393; **Planetary Visions Limited:** 54; **Plymouth University:** Professor David Gilvear, Professor of River Science 504l, 507, 520t, 520b, 521tl, 521tr, 521b; **Plymouth University:** Gerd Masselink 595, 604bl, 617tr, 617bl, 617br, 621tl, 621tr; **Professor Roland Gehrels :** 608, 613; **Professor Alexander Milner:** 301 (e); **Professor Chris D Clark:** 94tl; **R Shakesby:** 672t, 672b; **Katherine Helen Roucoux:** 133t; **Royal Agricultural University, Limited:** Dr John Conway 436t; **Science Photo Library Ltd:** British Antarctic Survey 87, Dr. Marli Miller, VISUALS UNLIMITED 357b, Bernhard Edmaier 609r, NASA 653, Planet Observer 615tl, 615b, G. R. Roberts 493; Shutterstock.com: Alsamua 584, Anneka 269t, Artush 265, Asian Images 372t, AuntSpray 79, Lester Balajadia 195, Bikerider-london 40tl, Aleksander Bolbot 123t, BORTEL Pavel - Pavelmidi 357c, Ian Bracegirdle 77, Scott S. Brown 210, Captblack76 330, Stefano Cavoretto 355, cdrw 733, Sam Chadwick 660, Anat Chant 317r, CHEN MIN CHUN 246, Robert Cicchetti 378b, Civdis 625, Cjansuebsri 326, Corlaffra 40tr, Paul Cowan 418, Cpaulfell 47tr, 238, Jack Dagley Photography 237, Pichugin Dmitry 122, 557, Dr Morley Read 498, Marat Dupri 589, Johnathan Esper 124, Oscar Espinosa 347, Feygin-Foto 729, Fotoam 450b, Marzia Franceschini 576tr, Matt Gibson 33,

Goodluz 1, Gyn9037 728, Jorg Hackemann 577t, Alison Hancock 485, Jubal Harshaw 299 (h), Sean Heatley 95, Robert Hoetink 58c, Inavanhateren 243, Incredible Arctic 656, Gail Johnson 651, JPL Designs 233, Kodda 175, Yuri Kravchenko 453, Lafoto 213, Denis Lamshchikov 363b, Radoslaw Lecyk 488, Alexander Mazurkevich 283, Mehdi Photos 411, MyImages - Micha 359, Felix Nendzig 531, Chakkrachai Nicharat 450tr, Luigi Nifosi 27, Brian Nolan 207, Nordroden 657b, Kottenko Oleksandr 345, Tom Olson 569, Mikhail Olykainen 321, Sean Pavone 370b, Duncan Payne 92t, Catalin Petolea 269b, PHOTO FUN 277, Photowind 450tl, Marina Poushkina 3, Svetoslav Radkov 317l, Armin Rose 629, Jason Patrick Ross 229, Scottchan 480, Servickuz 58t, Ralf Siemieniec 370t, Roberto Sorin 719, Calin Stan 251, Topseller 356b, Treasure Dragon 263b, Ljubomir Trigubishyn 377, Barry Tuck 407, Suzanne Tucker 465, Tumsuk 73, Siete_Vidas 267, Rudmer Zwerver 420br; Steve Carver: 420bl; Swansea University: Dr Susan Bevan 642, Professor Tavi Murray 627, Professor Tavi Murray and Professor Adrian Luckman 703; Swansea University, College of Science: Dr. Kilian Scharrer 682bl, 682br, Timothy James, Swansea University 678; The Queen's University of Belfast: Prof. Bernard J. Smith 349 (a), 349 (b), 354, 356t, 357t, 361b, 362, 366, 373, 374; The University of Edinburgh : K.V. Heal 527, M.R. Heal 533t, 537, 541, 544; Ty Parker: 131; University Centre, Svalbard: 657t,

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PART I

The role of physical geography

Figure Pl.1 Physical geographers often collect samples and take measurements from instruments. However, there has to be a justification for taking such measurements and so one should start with a question or hypothesis that data collection in the field, laboratory or numerical model then tries to answer or test.

Part contents

- ▶ Chapter 1: Approaching physical geography

Scope

Scientific disciplines are constantly evolving, adopting new approaches and techniques and moving into previously unthought-of areas. Part I contains a chapter which deals with the development of physical geography as a subject and the sorts of general approaches adopted by physical geographers to understand how the world works. The chapter provides context that explains why we approach the subject in particular ways today. It describes the basic frameworks for studying science and explains the roles of data collection from the natural environment, laboratory work and modelling. It describes the advantages and disadvantages of a range of approaches that we should be aware of when studying physical geography. It therefore sets the scene for the rest of the book by providing the reader with an appropriate grounding in the nature of the subject.

What do we mean by physical geography?

Physical geography is about understanding interactions of processes involving the Earth's climate system, oceans, landforms, animals, plants and people. This understanding requires linking the physical systems together and relating human actions to the physical environment. Of interest to physical geographers are the mechanisms that maintain flows of energy and matter across the Earth. There are components of study which include processes associated with plate tectonics, geomorphology, climatology, glaciology and hydrology that shape the surface of the Earth; the collection of climatic and atmospheric processes acting as one of the ultimate controls on the landscape and biosphere; and the ecological and biogeographical

patterns that characterize the living portion of the Earth. Physical geography involves the application of technology to study these components and changes within them. For example, remote sensing from space provides an aid to monitoring the world's constantly changing natural and human landscapes, the oceans, atmosphere and biosphere.

Geographers often say that they study the 'why of where'. By this they mean that they seek to explain the underlying processes that result in the patterns of natural phenomena and the ways in which humans interact with, and alter, these processes and patterns. In addition to a spatial context, change over time is also a central theme to physical geography.

It is important to be aware of the ways in which physical geographers study physical geography. Some kind of theoretical basis of enquiry is essential in order to allow fair comparisons of results and interpretation of conclusions between different research areas. The scientific methods discussed in Chapter 1 help to form this philosophical foundation. The underlying method does not necessarily mean that all research is done using the same techniques; indeed physical geography utilizes a variety of tools to help understand, measure, observe and predict environmental processes. However, by maintaining a philosophical basis, it reminds us to question the approach we take. In recent years, emphasis has shifted from a position where science represents the ultimate authority informing society, to a realization that science is itself influenced by society, and that many other sources of knowledge must be equally considered. Consideration of the advantages and limitations of a given approach is therefore vital so that we can assess the reliability and usefulness of the conclusions attained.



CHAPTER 1

Approaching physical geography

Joseph Holden

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Learning objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- ▶ describe the historical development of physical geography as a subject
- ▶ understand basic scientific methods
- ▶ evaluate methods for different types of research in physical geography
- ▶ appreciate the advantages and limitations of different approaches to physical geography

1.1 Introduction

The physical environment affects most aspects of our daily lives. It is fundamental to human existence. For example, it determines water availability and water quality, weather and climate, soil systems, potential for agriculture, the risk of landslides or other hazards, and if and how we can travel from one place to the next. Physical geography involves the study of the interconnected features of the Earth (Figure 1.1). It deals with the Earth's climate system, which results from a combination of atmospheric, oceanic, land, ice and ecological processes. It also deals

with a wide range of processes that affect the landscape of the Earth. For example, plate tectonic processes are responsible for mountain building, the movement of the continents, ocean floor spreading, ecological isolation and changing climate. In addition, the landscape is worn down by weathering and erosion processes, many of which are driven by gravity and water (in solid, liquid and gas form). Water also transports nutrients from soils to plants and from rocks and soils to rivers and into the oceans. It transports nutrients and energy around the globe through the oceans and the atmosphere. It moves sediments across hillslopes, catchments and seas. Understanding the variety of processes that link the components shown in Figure 1.1 (atmosphere, oceans, landforms and biosphere) at global and small scales enables improved prediction of future change of the Earth's environmental systems.

A range of tools are available to physical geographers in order to help us understand, measure, observe and predict environmental processes. These include tried and tested methods along with new technologies such as advanced probes and laboratory methods or geophysical and remote sensing tools that allow us to measure the Earth's features and processes remotely. For example, after spending a few minutes taking a series of photographs from slightly different locations around a feature such as a gully, a gravel river bank, a tree or a building it

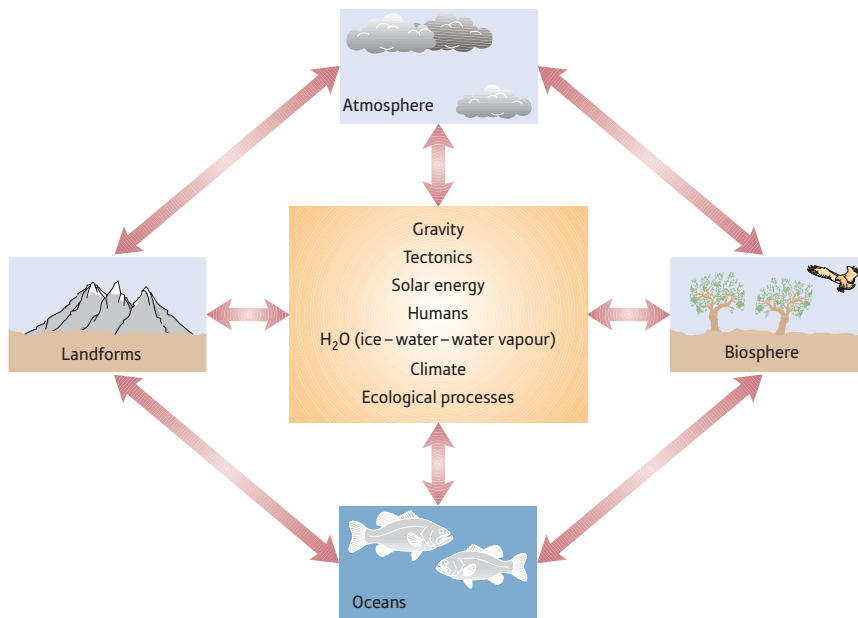


Figure 1.1 Components of the changing environment. The atmosphere, oceans, biosphere and landforms all interact with each other. Important links within the system include H₂O in its different forms, tectonics, ecological processes and humans.

is possible to use freely available Structure from Motion software to produce a 3D image on a computer of the feature and from this image it is possible to measure the dimensions of the feature in high resolution (e.g. to the nearest millimetre) (see Chapter 25). This sort of approach can save a lot of time undertaking painstaking field survey measurements, and has an almost infinite range of applications. Another example might be the growing use of ‘flux towers’ (Figure 1.2), which are ground-based instruments that can measure the net release or uptake of carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane, water vapour or energy across a sampling area such as a large field or a section of forest. These devices may take measurements every second and can be used to tell us whether the landscape is acting as a net sink or a net source of carbon to the atmosphere and also how this varies over days, months and years.

Field study, remote sensing, laboratory work and numerical modelling are all important components of the method of physical geography today. However, each particular approach and method has its limitations. No matter what type of measurement device or approach is used, it is often how it is used and why it is being used in those ways which are important. In other words, scientific approaches have a philosophical underpinning which can be evaluated. There are a range of approaches to science and physical geography and each approach has advantages and disadvantages. It is therefore necessary to understand these methods and their limitations so that we can: (i) evaluate which are the most appropriate methods to use for a given environmental investigation and (ii) fully

evaluate the implications of any given research finding in physical geography.

The approaches that physical geographers have used have varied through time as the subject has developed.



Figure 1.2 A flux tower on a peatland which can be left to run automatically. The instruments on the tower are used for measuring the uptake and release by the landscape of CO₂, energy and water vapour.

In order to understand contemporary practice in physical geography it is therefore necessary to know something about the history and development of the subject. This chapter will briefly describe the way physical geography has developed. It will then move on to discuss how the scientific method has been applied by physical geographers to studies of the environment. The remaining parts of the chapter will look at the principles of and approaches to (i) data collection from the environment, (ii) laboratory research and (iii) numerical modelling, all of which are important methods of physical geography.

1.2 Historical development of physical geography

1.2.1 Physical geography before 1800

The ancient Greeks were interested in the shape and topography of the Earth. Aristotle (~384–322 BC) logically demonstrated using evidence from lunar eclipses (when the Earth's shadow blocks the Sun's light from reaching the Moon) that the Earth was probably spherical. Eratosthenes (~276–195 BC), known as the 'Father of Geography', developed models of the Earth using parallels and meridians and using surveying techniques to determine the circumference of the Earth with amazing accuracy compared to today's satellite measurements. This Greek learning was also passed to Roman geographers, who produced maps and topographic descriptions of places and their history, supporting military expansion, and they also had a philosophical interest in the relations between humans and the environment.

Between the time of the Roman Empire and the sixteenth century, European science progressed very slowly. Often scholars rejected anything that seemed to go against the teachings of the Christian Church. In the Middle East, however, Arab geographers such as Al Muqaddasi (who lived between AD 945 and 988) were pioneering fieldwork whereby observations were given precedence. Indeed Al Muqaddasi stated that he would not present anything unless he had seen it with his own eyes. Such Arab geographers maintained the Greek and Roman techniques and developed new ones. Arab traders travelled throughout Asia, Africa and the Indian Ocean and added a great deal of geographical knowledge to update the classical sources. Any European geographical work was trivial in comparison with the huge amount published by Islamic writers of the Middle Ages. Exploration and learning also flourished

in China with advanced triangulation techniques allowing exceptionally good quality maps of the region to be produced from the first century AD onwards. For the last 2000 years many official Chinese historical texts have contained a geographical section, which was often an enormous compilation of changes in placenames and local administrative divisions controlled by the ruling dynasty, descriptions of mountain ranges, river systems, taxable products and so on.

While science was slow to progress in Europe before the sixteenth century, with the **Renaissance** (~1400–1600 AD) came a renewed interest in the geographical knowledge of the ancients (which the Arab and Chinese scientists had already advanced significantly) and a willingness to test and refine their theories. The European explorations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were part of a major period of invention and discovery. Improvements in measuring devices such as timekeepers and in mapping and printing techniques were combined with a new geographical knowledge about the world. Indeed many of these new technologies had roots in the pursuit of geographical knowledge. For example, methods for accurately keeping time were developed when stable navigation systems that could determine the longitude (east–west position) of a ship were invented. As the Earth is constantly rotating, knowing the time while making an altitude measurement to a known star or the Sun provided data to accurately calculate longitude. The experiences of the explorers had begun to overturn traditional views of those thought to be authority figures (such as leaders of the Christian Church and the theories of the ancient Greeks). For example, new continents were being discovered and the layout of land masses across the Earth was being determined. A fundamental importance (as recognized much earlier by Al Muqaddasi) was beginning to be placed on the role of real-world experience. This meant that determining whether or not there was a Southern Ocean land mass could only be established through experience and not by just reading the works of Aristotle. The importance of experience over authority was a central theme of the development of science during this period. However, it was because geography was inextricably linked to exploration, patriotism and colonization that it was considered an important subject by the society of the time. Geographers were making the key advances in discovering new lands, mapping them, changing people's perception of the shape and size of features of the Earth and bringing potential 'wealth' to nations that conquered and colonized others.

1.2.2 Physical geography between 1800 and 1950

1.2.2.1 Uniformitarianism

Prior to the early nineteenth century the prevailing belief of the western world had been that the Earth was created in 4004 BC. The landscapes of the Earth were thought to be a result of catastrophic events. For example, it was thought that river valleys were scoured out during the biblical flood and that peatlands were remnants of the slime left behind after the flood receded. However, the increasing scientific knowledge acquired between the sixteenth and the end of the nineteenth centuries began to lead to different views developing. One new idea that emerged, for example, was that the Earth's landscapes gradually changed over time rather than simply being affected by one or two sudden catastrophic events. Turner (1757), for example, showed that if you dug a small hole in a peatland, new peat would form in the hole after a few years thereby showing that peat was not the detritus left behind from a major flood. One of the most persistent and influential themes to affect physical geography and especially geomorphology was the *Theory of the Earth* published by James Hutton in 1795 and clarified by Playfair (1802) in his *Illustrations of the Huttonian theory of the Earth*. Hutton and Playfair were scientists who examined the Earth's landscapes and tried to understand their formation. Hutton's theory rejected catastrophic forces as the explanation for environmental features and gave rise to a school of thought known as **uniformitarianism** (Gregory, 1985). The central component of this concept is that present-day processes that we can observe should be used to inform our understanding of past processes that we cannot observe. In other words, many of the processes we can see today are probably the same as those that occurred in the past and so we can infer what went on in the past from understanding contemporary environmental processes. Uniformitarianism propagated the idea that 'the present is the key to the past'. Although this idea was very satisfactory in terms of the processes for understanding the past, of course it cannot be assumed that the rates at which processes operate today (e.g. weathering of rock) are the same as those that occurred in the past. Nevertheless it was still recognized that given enough time a stream could carve a valley, ice could erode rock, and sediment could accumulate and form new landforms. Hutton speculated that millions of years would have been required to shape the Earth into its contemporary form. It was not until the early 1900s and the discovery of radioactivity that estimates of the age

of the Earth became more reliable. Radioactive elements such as uranium and strontium are unstable and decay at a steady rate. Uranium-238, for example, decays into lead-206. Comparing the ratio of these two elements allows us to determine how much time has passed since the uranium sample was pure when the rock solidified. Radioactive decay also gives off heat and we can determine the rate of Earth cooling to determine a time when it formed. The Earth is in fact around 4.6 billion years old. The oldest rocks that have been found on the Earth date to about 3.9 billion years ago.

1.2.2.2 Darwin, Davis and Gilbert

Charles Darwin was a brilliant scientist who collected and organized specimens. He read some of the writings on uniformitarianism and extended these ideas to biology. The theory of evolution suggests that the diversity of species occurs due to continuous, slow modifications to genetic traits over very long periods of time. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* published in 1859 was hugely influential in the field of science and in society in general. Indeed it has often been referred to as the 'book that shook the world'. The book outlined how there could be a relatively gradual change in the characteristics of successive generations of a species and that higher plants and animals evolved slowly over time from lower beings. This evolution occurred as a result of competition within local interacting communities (see Chapters 10–12). Darwin's book helped throw the idea that there was a complete difference between humans and the animal world into turmoil as he reinforced the suggestion that humans evolved from lower beings. With the idea that humans could have evolved from lower beings came the undermining of traditional religious opinions. However, although some religious leaders did embrace Darwinism at the time, the theories were very different from those that had come before. These ideas radically shook a society where, because of the increasing availability of printed books and papers, intellectual knowledge was being transferred in greater quantity than ever before.

Darwin's ideas influenced most areas of science at the time. The idea of 'change through time' was reflected in evolutionary attitudes to the study of landforms following Darwin's own 1842 study of the evolution of coral islands which was particularly influential in relation to the 'cycle of erosion' idea promoted by W.M. Davis (Gregory, 1985). The approach recommended by Davis, who was a very revered geomorphologist, dominated approaches to physical geography from the late nineteenth century

through until the 1950s. Davis suggested in 1889 that the normal cycle of erosion could be used to classify any landscape according to the stage that it had reached in the erosion cycle. He termed this the ‘cycle of life’, which was a rather biological metaphor for landform development. Figure 1.3 shows the **Davisan cycles of erosion**. A youthful uplifted landscape begins to be dissected by rivers. As the landscape matures these valleys become wider and more gently sloping until eventually all that remains is a flat, old landscape (a **penepplain**). The great success of the Davisan approach, dominating popular physical geography for 60 years, was due to the fact that it was simple and could easily be applied by people to a wide range of landscapes. As a result of these ideas people then tried to determine the history of an area by establishing which stage of the Davisan cycle it was in. This approach was also known as **denudation chronology**. While Davis had based his ideas on the case study of the Appalachians in the United States,

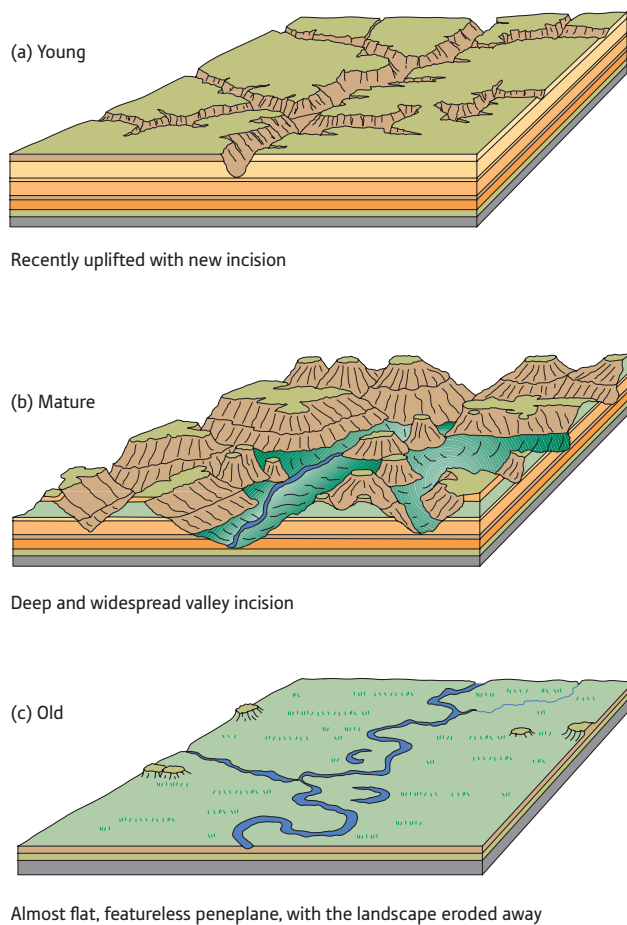


Figure 1.3 The Davisan cycles of erosion: (a) young uplifted stage with very limited incision; (b) a mature stage with deep valley incision and complex topography; (c) an old eroded landscape with few topographic features. (Source: after Davis, 1889)

the Davisan ideas were applied by many to help interpret landscapes across the globe (e.g. Cotton, 1922, applied the ideas to parts of New Zealand and Wooldridge and Linton, 1939, produced a Davisan interpretation of south-east England). In plant geography and ecology a similar influence was being expressed by Clements (1916, 1928) in his concept of succession (see Section 11.4.3 in Chapter 11). It is notable, however, that two themes of Darwin’s work ((i) struggle and selection; (ii) randomness and chance) did not have an immediate impact on physical geography (Stoddard, 1966). Indeed the unique contribution of Darwin’s theory, which was ‘random variation’ whereby random change could occur to species from one generation to the next, did not really appear in work by physical geographers until the 1960s (Gregory, 1985). Nevertheless the theme of evolution provided an historical perspective to physical geography which still dominates geomorphology, studies of soils, biogeography and climatology.

An alternative approach that was advocated at the same time as the Davisan approach was that of G.K. Gilbert. Gilbert, an explorer of the American West, wanted to understand *why* particular landforms developed rather than just classify them as being youthful or mature. In order to understand landform development he recognized the importance of describing physical processes and deriving systems of laws that determined how a landform could change. He attempted to apply quantitative methods to geological investigations. His ideas, however, were not taken on board during an era dominated by the descriptive techniques offered by Davis. It was not until the 1950s that physical geography came to revisit his approach and that Gilbert’s ideas finally won favour. Until the 1950s, therefore, physical geography was largely descriptive and was concerned with regions. It was concerned with the evolution of environments and their classification. There were virtually no measurements of environmental processes involved and if you look at geography books from that period you will see that they are structured by regions and simply describe regional climates, landscapes, resources and trade (e.g. L. Dudley Stamp’s 1949 book *The world: A general geography*).

1.2.2.3 Divisions of physical geography

The early twentieth century saw a number of advances which resulted in identifiable branches in physical geography being developed. Davis and Gilbert helped form the field of geomorphology, while Russian scientists such as Dokuchaev formed the study of soils (pedology)

showing how soil types could be related to climate, underlying materials and shape of the landscape. The branches of climatology and meteorology were beginning to be established, accelerated with the development of the aeroplane and emergent war needs. Researchers such as Clements helped establish biogeographical concepts such as **succession** which enabled ecology–human interaction studies to expand. Broadly, the above fields are still those studied today within the discipline, although the subject of physical geography is ever evolving and there are many interactions between these areas. Some physical geography departments, for example, will form groups around ‘biogeoscience’ dealing with biological and chemical processes and transfers in the water, land, atmosphere and biosphere system.

1.2.3 Physical geography since 1950

1.2.3.1 The quantitative revolution

In the 1950s, European and North American geography was forced to change. It was realized that describing places and putting boundaries around them, where in fact real boundaries did not actually exist, was no longer a useful approach. The 1950s were a time of increasing globalization when more people began to travel by air to far-flung destinations and when television began to show programmes made around the world, thereby opening up people’s experience and views of the world. Global trade was increasing and mass-produced items such as refrigerators, cars and plastic became much-wanted goods. It became more common for people to own goods that were made in other countries (e.g. Europeans buying Ford cars made in the United States). It therefore became evident that there were increasing human and physical interlinkages between regions. It was also a period of modernity in which there was a societal commitment to order and rationality, and to science as the driving force for future developments and improvements in infrastructure and lifestyles. Physical geography needed to maintain its academic status and it could no longer do so within a society that now had a ‘professional’ science (see below). The Davisian cycles of erosion could not be verified from a scientific perspective and furthermore they did not *explain* observations. It was too difficult to measure such slow processes over such large spatial scales. Arthur Strahler, a geomorphologist particularly interested in rivers and landform change, proposed that a new dynamic basis for physical geography should be developed based on

physical real-world measurements. It was also at this time that Hack (1960), a physical geographer, went into the Appalachians (coincidentally the very heart of the Davisian theory) and realized that landscapes were more delicately adjusted and that there was some form of equilibrium between rivers and landscapes. Box 1.1 describes these equilibrium approaches and their limitations.

It was also during this time that the work of G.K. Gilbert was revisited and his approach eventually embraced. This was largely due to the pioneering studies of the hydrologist Robert Horton and the development of his ideas by Strahler and his graduate students, who included Stanley Schumm, Marie Morisawa, Mark Melton and Richard Chorley. The 1950s are often referred to as the time of a quantitative revolution in geography due to the move away from description and towards measurement. Work began to concentrate on smaller spatial scales where processes could be measured during short-term studies.

1.2.3.2 Functional physical geography

However, although quantitative techniques were being employed these were not necessarily those that Gilbert had proposed. The measurements that were being performed in the 1950s and 1960s often did not allow us to evaluate or understand physical processes properly. They tended to be quantitative descriptions rather than the measurement of processes. For example, in 1953, Leopold and Maddock, physical geographers who studied rivers, published results of a survey of streams and rivers in the central and south-west United States. They found that stream width, depth and velocity increased in proportion to the discharge to the power of a given number (e.g. width is proportional to discharge to the power of 0.5; see Chapter 19). As the discharge increased downstream the equations suggested that channel width, mean depth and mean velocity should all increase. These equations could be used to make predictions about the discharge or **hydraulic geometry** of rivers across the world (see Chapter 19).

There are two problems with this approach. The first is that the relationships determined are purely statistical relationships (or functional relationships). In other words, they are just a result of the average value of the width, depth, velocity and discharge of all the rivers that were measured, but this does not explain *why* channel dimensions vary in such a way with discharge. These sorts of statistical relationship do not explain the physical processes. The second problem is that such functional approaches are often not applicable to areas other than the area for which they were determined. This is because

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

EQUILIBRIUM CONCEPTS IN PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

When Hack (1960) completed a field visit to the Appalachian Mountains he realized that rather than there being one long Davisian erosion process whereby rivers wore away mountains over time, there is in fact a more dynamic set of processes operating. He rejuvenated Gilbert's concept of 'dynamic equilibrium'. He suggested that every slope and every channel in an erosional system are adjusted to each other and that relief and form can be explained in spatial terms rather than historic ones. This work suggested that river profiles were never exactly concave. Instead, when sediment from a hillslope builds up in a river it has to steepen itself in order to move that sediment. Once removed, the river may become less steep in profile. In other words, the rivers and slopes would adjust to each other in an attempt to be in equilibrium.

Of course, the nature of equilibrium investigated depends on the time-scale under investigation. Figure 1.4 shows forms of equilibrium over three

timescales (Schumm and Lichty, 1965). Note that over short timescales it may be possible to identify a static equilibrium (no change over time) or a steady-state equilibrium (short-term fluctuations about a longer-term mean value) while over longer time periods the equilibrium might be dynamic (shorter-term fluctuations with a longer-term mean value that is changing).

However, the concept of equilibrium has always been somewhat confusing because different people have chosen to identify different types of equilibrium and because the precise meaning is time dependent. Indeed, equilibrium may be just as generalized and untestable as the Davisian cycle of erosion it was meant to replace. Often it depends on where and when you measure something as to whether it will show equilibrium. Figure 1.5 illustrates this very simply for two systems that in the long term are behaving differently. Because the measurements were done at the times shown in Figure 1.5, it was not possible to identify the nature of the long-term trend and in fact different trends have been

determined from those that are actually occurring in the long term.

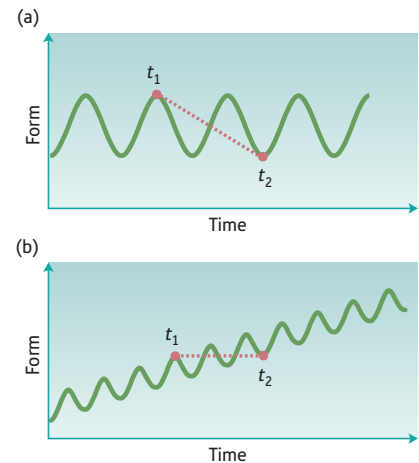


Figure 1.5 The timescale for human measurement makes it very difficult to identify long-term trends and the nature of equilibrium. Here the measurements are taken at two times (t_1 and t_2) for each case. However, because of the timing of the measurements we have incorrectly identified the nature of the long-term change in each case. In (a) we have established a downward trend where there is no long-term trend and in (b) we have identified no change while the long-term trend is upward.

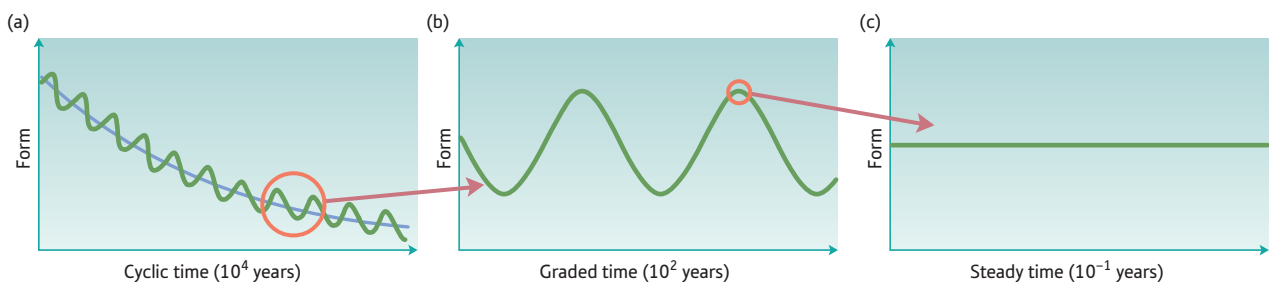


Figure 1.4 Equilibrium over three timescales: (a) dynamic equilibrium; (b) steady-state equilibrium; (c) static equilibrium.

BOX 1.1

local factors can influence the development of a landform (such as geology or tree roots on a river bank holding the bank together and preventing it from eroding) so that it does not conform to the statistical average. Indeed, sometimes it is the unusual cases that we are more interested in

rather than the average. It was for these reasons that Yatsu (1992), a Japanese physical geographer with expertise in rock weathering, accused Strahler himself of 'crying wine and selling vinegar'. This means that he thought Strahler had advocated a new physical geography founded