



---

---

## The European Geonight: how to reconcile academic and popular geography

**Antoine le Blanc<sup>a</sup>, Massimiliano Tabusi<sup>b</sup>, Alexis Alamel<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale, Dunkerque, France

<sup>b</sup> Università per Stranieri di Siena, Siena, Italy

Email: antoine.le-blanc@univ-littoral.fr

Received: November 2018 – Accepted: December 2018

### Abstract

In 2017, the French National Geographical Committee initiated the first “Night of Geography”, also called “Geonight”, in Paris and a dozen other French cities. The overall event was a success, with a great diversity of the public and organizers, with hundreds of people attending local events. The second edition of Geonight took place on Friday, April the 6th, 2018, and was expanded on the European scale. Around 80 events took place. In France, 25 events were spread throughout the country; there were 37 in more than 20 Italian cities, 14 in Hungary, and further events in other countries such as Portugal, Spain, Greece, and others. The general goals of the project are to put forward geography and geographers, to give the greater public a chance to better grasp the various facets of geography, and to make geographical research more accessible. The baseline is that the proposed events should, whenever possible, be free of charge and open to the public. These events and their success derive from a specific diagnosis and raise some questions. Why is geography so little known and under-appreciated? Why is it that geographical studies do not receive more attention, even if a variety of extremely well publicized topics belong to these geographical studies, such as climate change, natural hazards, geopolitics, as well as cartography and geolocalization? Finally, how can geographers overcome these obstacles?

**Keywords:** Geonight, Night of Geography, CNFG, EUGEO, Event, Diffusion

### 1. Geography: an unexplored, under-appreciated discipline yet vital

Geography is not often used as a tool to understand and help implement concrete actions in today's societies. As mentioned in the updated International Charter for Geographical Education published by the International Geographical Union in 2016 (IGU-CGE, 2016), geographical education is not often considered to be fundamental by the public. This can be seen as a

paradox, since its applications are everywhere.

We believe there is a need to better inform the public about geographical research and its applications, but also, fundamentally, to involve more individuals in geographical practices. This is less about top-down information, and more about participatory geography.

Geography is part of everyday life; it is fundamental in social practices. People live fuller lives when understanding their environments – this

is the crux of the issue. Yet people fail to link this to geography, perhaps for lack of communication but also because geographers do not always assert their claims on ideas, tools, and actions that have been widely used by engineers, urban planners, and computer scientists, etc.

At times, people do not link geography to their need to better understand their spaces, (e.g. risks attached to living in a flood-prone plain or a landslide-prone territory). Geographers know that they can provide a better comprehension and management of contemporary urban phenomena and challenges such as migrations, social issues, urban transportation, and spatial justice; but do other categories of the population perceive the usefulness of geography?

Geography is a participatory science: people use it without even knowing it. For instance, individuals contribute to mapping cities through their moves and behaviours, through their phone applications and geolocalization, through their online comments on recreational places. Participatory, open source, and online cartography is one of the biggest revolutions of today; it links everyday life to scientific research, and geography is at its core; but few people label this as geography.

## **2. From the image of an old-fashioned science to a relevant, modern way of understanding today's challenges**

Geographers not only deal with a variety of subjects, but do so through a wide range of formats and tools. It is a pity to see geography reduced to one or two situations or specific methodologies. In some countries, geography is seen as an economic science, something very abstract, relying on numbers and figures and codes, mapping these numbers, playing with formulae, and imagining evolutions through numbers. In other countries, like France, geography is often associated with history, and with the idea of an old-fashioned science, relying on the memorization of the location of spaces, cities, rivers, and borders. It is associated with dusty libraries and, sometimes, with muddy field trips. Typically, geographers are considered outdated; they are perceived to wear old clothes and have

an immense capacity regarding the memory of names and places. Few people see this as useful or relevant for modern challenges. There might be some truth in this image! Clearly, however, this is not only a partial portrayal but an outdated one. Geography is characterized by variety and by an intrinsic link to everyday life.

Furthermore, virtually all types of the public can connect to, consider, and modify geographical issues. This includes, for instance, young children who learn to move, analyze and manage space, to control it. They map it in their own way, and they modify it.

Learning this is already acting on it: hence, it is of crucial importance that geography and geographers become better known and better appreciated, as such, to a younger audience. This is not only to increase the visibility of geography, it has a much deeper impact. It is a way, for people in general, to improve their quality of life. Knowing better one's geography, is, very simply, living better.

In order to reach this goal, geographers need to show that geography is relevant and capable of bringing solutions to contemporary challenges. Geography takes on climate change and sustainable development, the gendered production of space, the role of senses and emotions in the structure of communities and their territories, ephemeral territories, underground culture spaces, political and ideological constructs, free zones at various scales, natural and social risks management, and so on. Geography uses not only letters and figures, but also photography, videomapping, satellite, drone images, etc.

So, how do we get past all these paradoxes? How do we better inform the public of the variety of geographical research and applications, and how do we reconnect academic geography and popular, real, lived, mostly unnamed geographies? These are the main questions and objectives of the European Geonight.

## **3. What is the Geonight?**

The Geonight project was launched in 2016 in France (the first events held in 2017), in order to highlight the variety of geography and geographers, to make geographical research more

accessible, to reconnect academic geography to popular geography, to disseminate events throughout Europe, and to balance urban centralization of academic events.

During the first two editions of Geonight, a few criteria were implemented so as to give unity and meaning to a project that is, by design, participatory. This was disseminated in various cities and countries. For instance, the events took place during evenings and nights. This was coherent with the idea and title of the project, but also the underlying objective must be highlighted: it was designed to welcome various kinds of the public, not only academics or the families of geographers. Organizers were also invited to put forward unusual, creative aspects of geographical sciences.

Geographical sciences are not exclusive to indoor activities; hence, Geonight events combined indoor and outdoor activities. Indoor events were meant to foster exchanges and togetherness, with workshops that were varied: from the academic (conferences, exhibitions, round tables, etc.) to the more creative (buffets, multisensorial geographical games, performances, etc.). Organizers presented jobs linked to geographical education, GIS software and new technologies, future endeavors and original geographical projects, etc.

Other events were to take place outside; small fieldtrips and urban walks were organized with a variety of purposes: perception analysis, benchmarking, drawing and mapping, interviews, photography, etc.

This was also a discovery for many academics. At night, geography changes. In fact, many geographers are not familiar with geography at night. We rarely interview people at night. We rarely examine rocks and rivers in nighttime conditions. In addition, it is usually not convenient to draw a sketch of a landscape when there is no light, and colors are dimmed.

The yearly online reports made available on CNFG and Eugeo websites (see references) highlight these issues and also the limits of some actions. For instance, some cities that had planned to participate decided not to do so for a variety of reasons – lack of funding, lack of volunteer time, hierarchy of academic projects, pressure to

publish, and so on. So there is a need to better explain the goals in terms of geographical education and research impacts. In the reports, it is clear that Geonight events have had impacts on the perception of who geographers are and what they do, how geography can provide jobs, how it may help change the world at various scales.

Geonight was initiated and promoted by the French National Geographical Committee, but from the start it has been meant to be decentralized and participatory. One of the fundamental objectives is to shed light on the creativity of local initiatives and the variety of people, institutions, and associations that may be concerned and would like to participate in geographical events. Therefore, any project that matches the essence of Geonight can be considered a Geonight event. As an example, local organizers can set up a geographical café in the evening, or a short thematic walk through the city; they can also put together a larger event involving diverse scientific presentations.

International coordination is managed by a small committee constituted by members of Eugeo and designated coordinators, preferably one for each country participating. This coordination aims to offer support and information, but does not necessarily organize or evaluate actions.

Budgets can be maintained at a low level, since the goal of the Geonight relies on openness and flexibility. Events can be located outside, in cultural or academic institutions, in cafés, or in any place that has free access. Technical materials can be lent by research laboratories, universities, or sponsors. Students and associations can volunteer to help with logistics and assistance to the public. Communication costs are minimal when relying on the use of academic networks and social media. However, some costs (e.g. security issues) could be paid by local organizers. Consequently, it is necessary to mobilize research labs and possible sponsors, and to ask for public subsidies. This, in turn, will give more visibility to the events; more generally, it should be highlighted that these costs accrue benefits: people's perceptions on geography and geographers evolve, more people can get involved (e.g. students, professional stakeholders, etc.), and participants have the opportunity to

enjoy themselves while understanding how diverse geography can be.

After the first two editions, Geonight organizers were able to determine a few issues that needed improvement, related to communication and coordination mostly, both internal and external. The variety of actions, actors, and locations could lead to misunderstandings or workshop failures. Hence it was decided to strengthen general coordination for the third edition, and to try and make a better use of online information and cooperative tools.

Also, the authors of this paper plan on doing a field research during the next Geonight, based on a survey that is currently being prepared. The goal is to understand better what happens during Geonight events in various participating countries, how these events may change the vision participants have of geography and geographers. Results should be published at the end of 2019.

#### **4. EUGEO support and the Geonight project at the European scale**

To describe the involvement of Eugeo in the Geonight event, it is necessary to take a small step back in the history of the Association. As Montanari and Nicolai underline (2004), Eugeo started its activities as an Association electing its first board in 1996, two years after a first pioneering meeting in Rome (1994). At that time, it was already clear that it was “necessary to reposition geography at the center of the European debate, recuperating the connection between the discipline and the different types of users and scientific operators”; between geographers and the public there was a sort of “barrier of information and communication which had to be removed in order to increase the exchange of ideas and to spark the mass media’s interest in the valuable themes of education and geographical research” (Montanari and Nicolai, 2004, p. 4). Consistent with this objective, the Eugeo Bylaws (1997) states that “the purpose of the Association is to stimulate the progress and the dissemination of geographical sciences in Europe” (art. 3), and two of the three goals explicitly formulated by Article 4 are: “to promote research and education in the field of geography” and “to establish, to carry out and to support projects and studies

corresponding with its purposes, and to initiate all necessary actions for their dissemination through public communications and publications”. As seen in these brief notes, Eugeo has been working since its foundation to facilitate the cooperation between geographical associations and geographers at the European scale, and to strengthen the public perception of Geography itself. This challenge has been mainly tackled by at least three kinds of activities. The first one is to facilitate the exchange of information and practices between the associations that are Eugeo members, as well as the implementation of joint activities. The second activity is the organization, every two years, of a large Eugeo Congress for which the participation of young geographers is particularly encouraged, not only from Europe but from all over the world. This favors the Association's connection with geographers and geography enthusiasts, capturing the most advanced elements of the geographical research; it facilitates the exchange of new ideas and gives opportunities for networking within an informal atmosphere. The third kind of activity is a strong and continuous connection of Eugeo with the global scale. In this framework, for example, Eugeo has established a longtime cooperation with IGU network, in order to share the best geographical praxis and to support the definition of new objectives and activities, also in the perspective of being able to reinforce the perception of geography in society.

An interesting example, which also connects with the objectives of the Geonight, is the collaboration between Eugeo and the IGU (in particular the Commission on Geographical Education) for the drafting of the new International Charter on Geographical Education (IGU-CGE, 2016). In fact Eugeo has been an active part in the process (Ottens, 2013; van der Schee, 2014; Tabusi, 2016) since the Eugeo Congress in Rome (2013), which was an important opportunity to formulate the Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe (a joint declaration by Eugeo, IGU, IIG and Eurogeo: see De Vecchis et al., 2013). After the Congress in Rome, a series of meetings (Utrecht, Malta, Krakow in 2014, Budapest in 2015) offered the opportunity to discuss the drafting of the principles enunciated in the charter, for which Eugeo was able to make an

active and appreciated contribution. The new ICGE contains many references to the importance of geography in our societies and the need to work towards a more widespread perception of the potential of the discipline, considered indispensable for an active and responsible citizenship and to understand many contemporary challenges, suggesting to invest time and resources also beyond classrooms. To reach its goals the charter explicitly mentions the important role of geographical societies, associations and professional network structures, and states: “The visibility of the discipline and appreciation of the significance of geography in education requires a higher media profile. Professional networks locally, regionally, nationally and internationally should be encouraged to engage the public in their work” (IGU-CGE, 2016, p. 14).

For all these reasons it is easy to understand how the presence of geography in society and a better diffusion and perception in public opinion are historically among the main objectives of Eugeo. This is why Eugeo, with its President Zoltán Kovács, the Association’s Executive Committee and General Assembly, enthusiastically welcomed the idea of a Night of Geography, designed and organized in France on 2017 by the French National Geographical Committee, giving its full support for the spread of the event on a European scale in the 2018 edition.

## 5. A few examples from the 2018 European Geonight

*France* – In France, around twenty cities participated in the 2018 edition of the Geonight. After the first edition in 2017, there was an increase of the number of department of geographies and of the overall number of participants. The wide range of activities proposed to the public made it a very successful series of events. For instance, in Dijon, the spotlight was put on the regional specificities such as the gastronomic heritage, which included a tasting of the local products. In Paris, participants enjoyed an orientation race throughout the city as well as an exhibition on the history of cartography and an urban fieldtrip in the “City of Lights”. In Clermont-Ferrand, the public was given the opportunity to enjoy walking and cycling

fieldtrips, drawing competition, doctoral theses’ presentations, and live radio debates. In Dunkirk, over 85 people attended a comedy club where students and teaching staff presented the discipline aspects with a humorous spirit. Finally, the Geonight in Lyon offered simultaneous activities, including urban walks showing gentrification processes in the city, several conferences and debates, poster and photo exhibitions, and collective mapping.

*Italy* – In Italy, 37 events were organized in 22 cities. There were conferences on little known geographies related to music and literature, urban walks in abandoned and empty spaces, as well as photographic and documentary exhibitions, from Roma to Naples, from Padua to Milano and throughout the country: around 10,000 people took part in the events organized by Italian geographers and their Departments and Associations (see <http://www.ageiweb.it/nottedellageografia/>). On average, 270 people attended the events with a peak flux of participants of 800/1000 during the biggest event. The overall success of these events was also followed carefully by national media including TV, radio, and newspapers which largely spread the word through many outlets.

*Hungary* – In Hungary, 14 events were organized, of which 4 occurred in the capital city, Budapest, and the rest in 10 other cities across the country. The Hungarian Geonight was marked by several categories of organizers: geography departments, secondary schools, tourist sites, an NGO, and a virtual location. The activities proposed to the public ranged from urban walks at sunset to guided excursions through nature with a campfire, conferences, photo exhibitions, a photo contest, and a popular quiz game. The latter involved 229 people. Altogether, it is reported that 819 people took part of the Geonight, averaging about 60 attendees per event.

*Portugal* – The 2018 Geonight in Portugal was festive. In Porto, narrative field trips retracing the nocturnal dynamic and the history of the city were organized. These field trips were followed by a celebratory picnic. Overall, 60 participants took part in Porto’s activities. In Lisbon, two field trips were organized. The first one invited participants to walk through an old industrial area of the city, highlighting the development of nocturnal activities. The second event consisted of a bike

tour through the network of bike lanes to discover Lisbon's night landscape. In total, 40 people participated in the events organized in Lisbon.

*Greece* – Greece's geography departments organized events in Mytiline (Aegean University), on the island of Lesbos, and in Athens (the National Technical University of Athens and Harokopio University). The main objective was to make geography known to a broader public and to enhance the learning and the appreciation of geography. At the Aegean University, several activities were organised simultaneously and throughout the night with an estimated number of participants reaching over 500. The event started with a musical theme which lasted throughout the night, followed by a tour of the geography department. Children also contributed to the evening by showing their representations of the Earth and its inhabitants through several painting activities. At the National Technical University of Athens, several activities were set up: from discussions regarding recreational spaces and the "imageability" in Athens, to games proposing to explore the city beyond the visible. Several workshops offered insights on the diversity of geographical subjects, including presentations on Eratosthene's measurement of the planet, circular economy, and the functioning of weather stations. In total, the events that took place in Athens held over 300 participants.

*Spain* – In Spain, many events were organized in Barcelona, Tarragona, Sant Llorenç del Munt, and Grenada. Numerous activities were proposed to the public, such as: a photographic contest, the screening of a documentary on the sovereignty of the seas and oceans, a field trip in Grenada showing its social reality and its relationship with the urban configuration of the city, a geographical dinner and festive gathering in Barcelona, and a presentation on the project of the recovery of the abandoned village of Masia de Castelló where geographers explained their roles and visions.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper aims to address the under-representation of geographical topics in the general population. Geography as a discipline does not seem to garner the attention that it could (should?) receive by those who are not experts. Geographers could also be held responsible for this lack of interest due to under-engagement with the public. Organizing events such as Geonight is a first step in the right direction. After two years of implementation, Geonight has become a popular display of the geographical discipline to the general public. For instance, over 10,000 people gathered in Italy to participate in the activities held for Geonight 2018. In France, 25 cities participated with much fanfare. The variety of events piqued the interest of a wide spectrum of the population, including young children. This population represents the future of the discipline. Geonight events differ from traditional representations of geography, such as in a childhood education setting, by offering a different avenue for learning and interacting with geography. Finally, Geonight's events have proven to diminish the gap between the general public and the actors in the geographical discipline. The effects of this relationship will see positive results in the future as the general public becomes more engaged with geographical topics, and therefore Geonight should be established as a longstanding annual initiative. The organization of Geonight is ever-evolving and can be implemented in further countries; this is one of the objectives of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Night of Geography, which will occur on April the 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

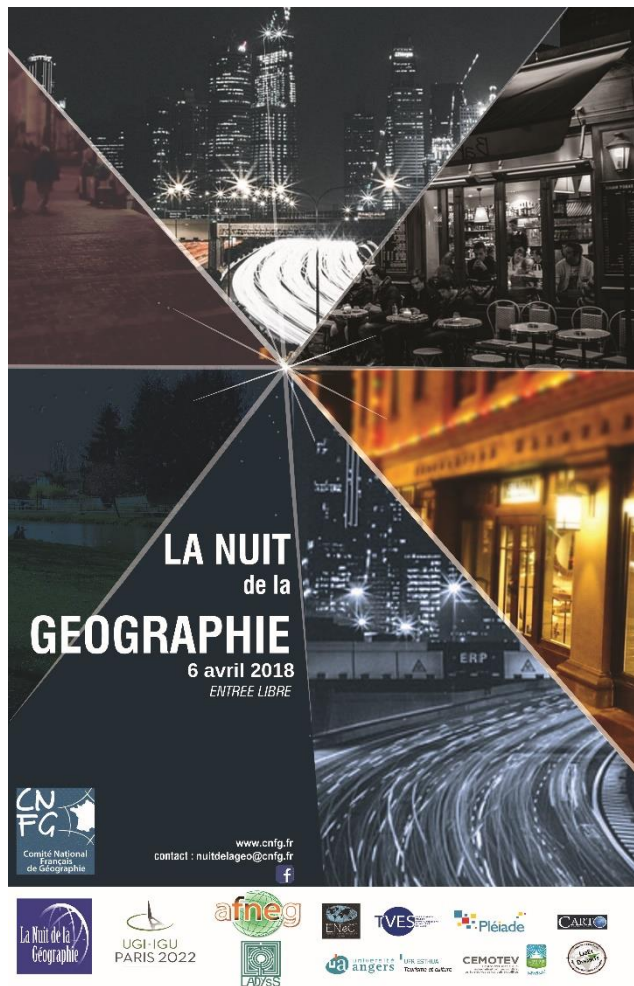


Figure 1. GeoNight in France.



Figure 2. GeoNight in Italy.



Figure 3. GeoNight in Greece.

### Acknowledgements

The paper is the result of the collaboration and common reflections of the Authors. More specifically, A. le Blanc wrote paragraphs 1, 2 and 3; M. Tabusi wrote paragraph 4; A. Alamel wrote paragraphs 5 and 6.

### References

1. De Vecchis G., Donert K., Kolosov V., Ottens H. and van der Schee J., "Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe", *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-READING)*, 2, 2, 2013, pp. 101.
2. EUGEO, "Memorandum and Articles of Association", 1997, [www.eugeo.eu](http://www.eugeo.eu).
3. IGU-CGE, *International Charter on Geographical Education*, IGU, 2016.
4. Montanari A. and Nicolăi H., "EUGEO: Aims, development and organization 1994-2004", *Belgeo*, 1, 2004, pp. 5-16.
5. Ottens H., "Reflections on Geography Education in Europe", *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-READING)*, 2, 2, 2013, pp. 97-100.
6. Tabusi M., "EUGEO Commitment to Geographical Education: from the Rome Declaration to the New International Charter on Geography Education", *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-READING)*, 2, 4, 2015, pp. 115-119.
7. van der Schee J., "Looking for an international strategy for geography education", *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-READING)*, 1, 3, 2014, pp. 9-13.

Geonight by Eugeo:  
[www.eugeo.eu/nuitgeo-geonight.html](http://www.eugeo.eu/nuitgeo-geonight.html).

Geonight by the CNFG:  
[www.cnfg.fr/actualites/nuits-de-la-geographie/](http://www.cnfg.fr/actualites/nuits-de-la-geographie/).