Bringing a Geographer's Perspective into the Public Imagination. The Crow River Watershed: An Annotated Atlas

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The geographical atlas is an invaluable tool we can use to expand our knowledge of the world. This atlas in particular aims to provide perspective, advance knowledge and stimulate new questions about the connections between people and environments of the Crow River Watershed. This atlas is not only about the people and places of the Watershed; it was produced with them and for them too. This atlas is thus noteworthy as a form of public scholarship.

Public scholarship refers to research that informs and is informed by the public good. This type of scholarship endeavors to create knowledge that contributes directly to the “public imagination.” We can think of this as a term that describes people’s common sense understanding of the world in which they live. Public scholarship is different from basic research, which reflects scientists’ curiosity about essential questions, such as “how did the universe begin?” The answers to such questions offer no direct contribution to the public good. As a departure from basic research, it is the intention of public scholarship to “join serious intellectual endeavor with a commitment to public practice and public consequence.” Public scholarship is thus meant to produce knowledge and insights that are immediately practical and useful.

The scholarship in this atlas makes a practical contribution to the public imagination by bringing a geographical perspective to the examination of contemporary issues in the Watershed. We hope that such a perspective proves useful for thinking about the relationships between people and their environments in the Crow River Watershed. Furthermore, we hope that this atlas identifies the public virtues of thinking geographically and types of insights that a geographical perspective offers.

Geographers document the distributions of phenomena over the landscape and analyze the processes that explain the patterns they observe. Yet, the landscape is a peculiar thing. It is at once “patently obvious and terribly mystified.” Landscapes are patently obvious because they are seemingly self-evident. For instance, as Emily Goodman explains in Chapter 2, commercial properties in the Watershed cluster around large population centers. Similarly, Ashley Nepp describes in Chapter 3 the process through which the City of Hutchinson replaced a conventional dam with a fish ladder. Indeed, the essays in this atlas as a whole document that people and...
places in the Watershed are responding to the pressures of growth and change. So far, such statements as these are unremarkable, if not obvious. But if you ask why and how questions, the self-evidence of the landscape begins to break apart. In this way, the landscape is terribly mystified. It is not obvious why commercial properties cluster where they do, nor is it obvious how the fish ladder in Hutchinson came to fruition, for example. Geographers may focus on the obvious characteristics of the landscape, but the explanations and interpretations they give are by no means self-evident. The geographical perspective focuses on understanding the local history and the internal and external relationships of a place that combine to shape the lay of the land. This perspective enhances people’s ability to see what makes places unique and what connects them to other places. As the essays in this atlas show, some connections are not at all obvious. Indeed, geographers also focus on the inconspicuous characteristics of the landscape. For example, in Chapter 3, Robyn Schindeldecker describes the public and nonprofit organizations that manage the Crow River Watershed. These organizations are not visibly present on the landscape, but their efforts are evident, once you know what to look for. More importantly, Schindeldecker shows that these organizations play an important role in contributing to the health and welfare of the people and the natural environments in the Watershed. In this way, Schindeldecker’s essay, in addition to others, raise awareness of the conditions, people and forces that animate and affect the social and natural environments of the Watershed in ways that are not immediately evident. Whether they focus on explaining the obvious or accounting for the inconspicuous, the essays in this atlas all aim to be useful. This atlas features research that helps the public think about some of the contemporary issues facing the people and environments of the Crow River Watershed. These issues are economic, demographic, social and environmental in nature. To be sure, the essays cover a diverse set of topics in this endeavor. But the essays are all connected by a commitment to promoting greater understanding of—and attention to—specific conditions, developments, and relationships that affect communities in the Watershed. In order to increase the usefulness of the atlas, many of the scholars who contributed essays consulted with community members and leaders in the Watershed. This allowed the scholars to ensure the relevance of their research and include the voices and perspective of people living in the Watershed. The research that they conducted should prove useful in one of two ways. On the one hand, some of the essays offer explanation of where developments are taking place, why, and indicate some of the implications of these developments. The essays of this sort are thus aimed at enriching the public imagination by informing pertinent questions and helping to raise new questions that ought to be answered. On the other hand, some of the essays analyze how a specific community or organization in the Watershed was able to create change in deliberate and intentional ways. The essays of this sort are hence aimed at providing the public imagination with a model of action that other communities may chose to follow or adapt. We hope these two approaches provide valuable resources that the people and organizations of the Crow River Watershed can use to gain perspective and take informed action. In the end, the essays in this atlas are united by their commitment to inform people in straightforward language about matters of concern to the public good. Indeed, by bringing a geographical perspective into the public imagination, we intend to offer an atlas that enhances people’s ability to make informed decisions about the future of the Watershed. As the adage goes, change is inevitable, but progress is optional. We thus hope that the materials in this atlas provide people in the Crow River Watershed with information and insights necessary to effect change in intentional ways that mark progress and improvement in the public good.

Sources