

Teaching maritime naming issues in U.S. high school geography

Doug ANDERSEN*

The United States educational system is a complex landscape of locally controlled school systems influenced by state and national politics and the often conflicting interests of individuals and communities and the nation as a whole. Without a national curriculum in the U.S., there is no standard way that sea naming issues or maritime territorial conflicts between states are taught. In addition, educational materials such as textbooks and atlases are developed by private companies. Thus, what is taught in individual classrooms is often influenced by the decisions of publishing and media companies. In addition, most teachers are unaware of the complex historical and cultural background of naming and territorial issues such as the *East Sea* and *Dokdo* Island. However, national standards documents such as *Geography for Life*, 2nd Edition and the *Advanced Placement Human Geography Curriculum Articulation* (2015) provide guidance on how maritime naming issues could be addressed in U.S. high school Geography.

THE US EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A HISTORY OF LOCAL CONTROL

One of the most significant differences between the United States public educational system and that of South Korea is the history of local control over education in the United States. While South Korea has a national curriculum framework developed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, curriculum decisions in the United States are made by individual states and school districts.

The U.S. Constitution (written in 1787 C.E.) does not discuss education, as the idea of a compulsory public educational system for all children did not exist at that time. Education was considered the responsibility of the family, local organizations (such as churches), or communities, rather than the federal government.

That is not to say that the national government was not interested in education. Both the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 granted federal land to new states and territories to be held in trust to financially support education. Thus the national government encouraged education, but left the implementation and decisions

* Geography Teacher, Oak Canyon Jr. High School, Lindon, Utah, U.S.A.

to local organizations. This policy was codified in the 10th Amendment to the Constitution in 1791: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” Since education was not specified in the Constitution, it was reserved to the States.

Over the next century, as public schools were established and compulsory attendance laws were developed, local school boards were organized to regulate and manage schools and curriculum. In 1867 a national Department of Education was established, but its mission was to collect information on schools and teaching that would help states establish effective school systems.

One important result of the history of local control in US education was the creation of school districts. A school district is a locally controlled system that provides public education for students in levels K-12 (ages 5-18). School districts range in size and scope. Some districts are for primary grades only, some for secondary, and some are unified to cover K-12 education. Some districts are responsible for one city while others may have jurisdiction for many cities depending on the location. School districts have elected officials (school boards) to regulate and manage schools. They, in turn are regulated by state or local governments or boards. Today there are over 14,000 school districts in the United States. Traditionally, school districts have had a large influence over curriculum decisions within their districts and there have been wide differences in curriculum from district to district.

While states and school districts may receive money from the federal government, US code prohibits the federal government from imposing curriculum requirements on states or school districts:

No provision of any applicable program shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system, or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other printed or published instructional materials by any educational institution or school system, . . .

THE TEACHING OF GEOGRAPHY IN U.S. SCHOOLS

With a history of local control over education, and the prohibition of federal control of education in the United States, the teaching of Geography varies from state to state. In 2013, the Gilbert M. Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education conducted a review of geography requirements across the United States. They found that all 50 states have geography strands or standards included in their social studies curriculums, but only 17 states had a stand-alone geography class required at the middle school level. At the high school level, 10 states have a geography course required for graduation. Of that number, 7 are combined history and geography courses. In addition 16 states are “local control states,” meaning the state does not require a geography course, but local districts have the power to decide on coursework for graduation.

TREATMENT OF SOUTH KOREA OR MARITIME NAMING ISSUES IN GEOGRAPHY OR SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

In a search of state standards in a database compiled by Teachinghistory.org, “South Korea” is specifically mentioned in eight state geography or social studies standards. However, the majority of times South Korea appeared in the documents was in state history standards referencing the Korean War or Cold War, or geography standards for place location or comparative economic systems.

In the same database, a search the term *East Sea* showed no matches. When the *Sea of Japan* was searched, it was specifically mentioned in two state curriculum standards. In the 7th Grade Social Studies Standards of Georgia, students are asked to locate selected features in Southern and Eastern Asia. The Korean Peninsula is included on the list. But the sea between the Korean Peninsula and Japan is specifically listed as the *Sea of Japan*. Similarly, *Sea of Japan* is explicitly included in a list of locations for 6th grade Massachusetts students to identify on a world map.

While “South Korea” and *East Sea* are not included in Virginia’s curriculum standards, the term *East Sea* is found as an essential knowledge of location and place. In the 2008 World History and Geography standards, Virginia opted for the dual names of *Sea of Japan* or *East Sea* between Japan and Asian mainland” in a standard about Japan.

PUBLISHING AND MEDIA COMPANIES APPROACH TO MARITIME NAMING ISSUES

Without specific state standards on dealing with maritime naming issues, or standards that perpetuate names like the *Sea of Japan*, teachers often rely on materials provided by private publishing or media companies. The old adage “seeing is believing” may be the only way teachers and students deal with toponyms or hydronyms. As a personal anecdote, I had been teaching high school Geography for over 10 years before I ever heard of the alternative name for the *Sea of Japan*. The textbooks, atlases, and globes used in my classroom were all labeled *Sea of Japan*. I was unaware of any alternative name or why South Korea disputed the name.

With great effort extended by South Korea, the name *East Sea* is now appearing on materials from many private publishing and media companies. Most notably, the National Geographic Society adopted a dual naming policy of *Sea of Japan* followed by *East Sea* in parentheses “when scale permits.” Google Maps seems to follow this same policy, with *Sea of Japan* as the only name showing until the U.S. user zooms to a scale showing 50 miles or less. Only then does *East Sea* show in parentheses under *Sea of Japan*.

Perhaps the most noted change in policy was passed by the Virginia state legislature and signed into law by Governor Terry McAuliffe in 2014. The law requires all textbooks approved by the Board of Education in the state to identify the waters between Japan and the Korean Peninsula as both *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan*. Similar legislative efforts were attempted in Georgia and New York.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING MARITIME NAMING ISSUES IN U.S. HIGH SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY

Dual naming policies for disputed names on a map is an improvement, but it does not necessarily follow that teachers will teach the complex issues behind disputed hydronyms or other types of maritime territorial conflicts. The 2015 Virginia History and Social Science Standards of Learning Curriculum Framework asks students to explain “how different cultures use maps and place names to reflect their regional perspectives.” Although not specifically listed, the standard provides teachers the opportunity to use the *East Sea* or other naming disputes as case studies to achieve the learning standard.

In my view, the greatest opportunity for teaching maritime naming issues in U.S. high school Geography is to demonstrate to American teachers that topics such as the *East Sea* naming issue or the Dokdo territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan are rich and engaging case studies for existing geography standards.

Although the United States does not have a set of geography standards mandated by the national government, there is a national standards document produced by a consortium of private, professional, and non-profit groups. The National Council for Geographic Education administered grants involving the Association of American Geographers, National Geographic Society and American Geographical Society to create a national standards document for Geography. Numerous committees involving public-policy, education and business leaders, professional and academic geographers, international geographers, environmental education experts, and writing groups were created. The final outcome was a document entitled “Geography for Life” published in 1994 identifying 18 National Geography Standards centered on six “essential elements.” The six essential elements include: the world in spatial terms, places and regions, physical systems, human systems, environment and society, and the uses of geography.

The National Geography Standards were revised in 2012. Like most state or district standards, there is no specific mention of naming issues like the *East Sea*, but there are general standards where these issues can be taught. For example, in the 2012 National Geography Standards, Standard 4 is entitled “The physical and human characteristics of places.” The 8th Grade knowledge statement for the concept of place reads, “The student knows and understands personal, community, and national identities are rooted in and attached to places.” The student performance statement adds, “Therefore, the student is able to explain how personal, community, or national identities are based on places.” Certainly, the national identity of South Korea is directly tied to places like the *East Sea* and Dokdo and a case study featuring South Korean maritime naming and territorial issues would help U.S. students better understand the physical and human characteristics of places on a global scale.

Another natural connection to the National Geography Standards is Standard 6: “How culture and experience influence people’s perceptions of places and regions.” The 8th Grade knowledge statement for the perception of places and regions reads “People’s different perceptions of places and regions are influenced by their life experiences.” The student performance statement continues, “Describe examples of how perceptions of places and regions are based on direct experiences (e.g., living in a place, travel) and

indirect experiences (e.g., media, books, family, and friends).” Under “Changes in the Perception of Places and Regions” the knowledge statement states, “Perceptions of places and regions change by incorporating multiple direct and indirect experiences.” The student performance statement follows, “Therefore, the student is able to analyze the ways in which people change their views of places and regions as a result of media reports or interactions with other people, as exemplified by being able to describe the changing views people may develop about places featured prominently in the news and analyze the effects of different sources of information that may cause people to change their views of a place or region.” Once again, South Korean maritime naming and territorial issues would be a perfect case study to help students understand how the title *Sea of Japan* brings up negative feelings about Japan’s colonial legacy in Korea.

Another promising opportunity to include maritime naming issues in U.S. high school Geography is in the Advanced Placement (AP) Human Geography curriculum. AP Human Geography is one of the fastest growing subjects offered by the College Board, with nearly 160,000 students taking the exam in 2015. The AP program allows high school students to take a college level class in high school, and if they pass a national exam, earn college credit. AP Human Geography has a national curriculum articulation and schools must pass an audit process in order to use “AP” on the class title. The most recent curriculum articulation (2015) provides a number of opportunities to teach maritime naming issues and territorial disputes. The first topic in the curriculum includes the following learning objective and essential knowledge, “Use concepts such as space, place, and region to examine geographic issues: Geographical issues including problems related to . . . conflict and cooperation among countries . . . and planning and public policy decision making.” Once again the *East Sea* and territorial disputes like Dokdo provide teachers with an engaging case study in conflict and cooperation and public policy.

Perhaps the strongest connection to teaching maritime naming and territorial issues is in the fourth topic of the AP Human Geography curriculum articulation--Political Organization of Space. One enduring understanding reads, “Spatial political patterns reflect ideas of territoriality and power at a variety of scales.” Learning objectives include, “explain the concepts of political power and territoriality” and “evaluate the nature and function of international and internal boundaries.” Essential knowledge statements include the following:

- Political power is expressed geographically as control over people, land, and resources.
- Territoriality is the connection of people, their culture, and their economic systems to land.
- Boundaries are defined, delimited, demarcated, and administered.
- International boundaries establish the limits of sovereignty and can be the source of disputes.
- Boundaries can influence identity and promote or prevent international or internal interactions and exchanges.
- The Law of the Sea has enabled states to extend their boundaries offshore, which sometimes result in conflicts.

As an AP Human Geography teacher, I developed a lesson dealing with the maritime territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan over Dokdo. In the lesson, students evaluate different lines of evidence, including toponyms, occupancy, and historical maps, to determine the relative strength of Japan and South Korea's claim over the islands.

CONCLUSION

The hope for teaching and learning about maritime naming issues in the U.S. high school Geography classroom is not to include more specific content standards about the *East Sea* or maritime territorial disputes, but to help American educators see that these issues can be used to dynamically illustrate the geographic principles and content that are already in the National Standards or AP Human Geography curriculum articulation documents. As they do so, their students' geographic understanding will be increased as they are able to apply their knowledge from a local to global scale.

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