

Geography In The News™

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Lineback



APPALACHIA: A PHYSICAL, ECONOMIC OR POLITICAL REGION?

Appalachia is an enigmatic region that has been defined by its physical, economic and political characteristics. Defining its boundaries politically allowed it to become the focus of development programs that appear to have been successful in helping to reduce poverty over a large portion of the region.

Only one of these delimiting factors—politics—draws a definitive line around the region. Understanding the utility of the role of the geographic term "region," however, can be demonstrated by examining a brief geography and history of Appalachia.

The entire special issue of the *Journal of Geography* recently was dedicated to Appalachia, bringing to the classroom an interesting array of facts, perceptions and maps about the region's environment, people and politics (March/April 2005).

The Appalachians are part of an ancient mountain range and adjacent uplifted and deformed physical landforms extending from central Alabama through New England and Newfoundland, Canada. Many of the sub-

regions of the Appalachians have been worn down by erosion, leaving rolling landscapes, such as the Piedmont of North and South Carolina. Other parts, particularly including parts of the Appalachian Mountains and the Appa-

lachian Plateaus, however, remain rough and rugged, making transportation laborious and slow.

The isolation of the more rugged parts of the greater Appalachian region led initially to its settlement by poor Scotch-Irish settlers who found the cheap land an attraction. The commercial mining of coal in the Plateaus in the late 1800s and early 1900s, however, helped diversify the population as miners of all nationalities and ethnicities rushed in seeking work. But as mechanization flourished in the mid-1900s, miners were laid off and poverty in much of the isolated portions of the region deepened.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, federal attention was directed at some of the economic problems of the Appalachian region. The Works Projects Administration (WPA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) helped employ thousands of Appalachian laborers.

By the mid century, it became clear that none of the existing programs was the panacea for the problems of the Appalachians. The Appalachian Redevelopment Act of 1965 established the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and began drawing boundaries

13 states from Mississippi to New York.

Many scholars questioned ARC's politically drawn delineation of Appalachia, as its boundary had been gerrymandered by politicians, sometimes to include marginal counties and sometimes to exclude them. Nonetheless, its delineation provided a geographic "container" of sorts that allowed the ARC to apply development methodologies across the ARC-defined region and to assess and compare progress in low-income counties across time.

Initially, average per capita incomes in most the counties in ARCs Appalachia fell below two-thirds of the national average. ARC's programs particularly focused on the most distressed counties, dealing with unemployment, poverty rates, infant mortality and municipal-level infrastructure, including safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal.

Efforts paid off. By the 2000 census, only the core of the region and a few outliers remained below this poverty definition. Included among the most depressed counties were the coal mining counties of Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia and the predominantly black agricultural counties of northern Mississippi and Central Alabama.

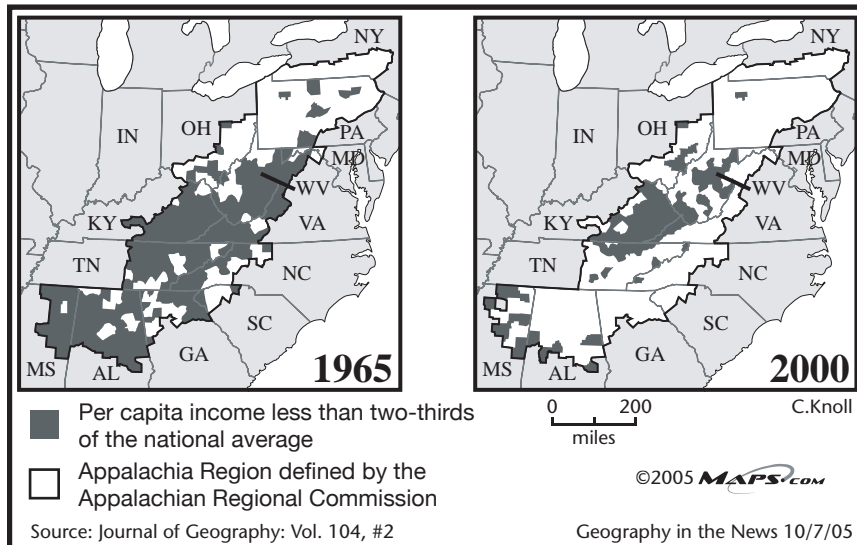
The ARC process of delineating the Appalachia region and focusing resources on its problems is a fundamental development strategy that has made a major difference in one of the country's rural trouble spots. We should now see similar development strategies utilized in other underdeveloped part of the United States, as well as other regions of the world.

Appalachia is "not out of the woods," but focusing development strategies on a region has considerable merit.

And that is Geography in the News™. October 7, 2005. #801.

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Appalachia's American Dream



Sources: *Journal of Geography*, March/April 2005, Vol.104, No.2.

around the region to stimulate private investment and to merge the region's economy with the national economy. The delineation process was completed in 1967 and included 397 counties across