



National Geographic Bee turns 20

Each year thousands of schools in the United States participate in the National Geographic Bee using materials prepared by the National Geographic Society. The contest is designed to encourage teachers to include geography in their classrooms, spark student interest in the subject, and increase public awareness about geography.

As the National Geographic Bee celebrated its 20th year, the first four-time state-level winner headed to the national finals this May. Benjamin Geyer did not have far to go — he is the hometown champion. An eighth-grader at the British School of Washington, Geyer represented Washington, D.C., at the 2005, 2006, and 2007 national competitions and took his place with 54 other state-level winners at the 2008 National Geographic Bee held in Washington, D.C., on May 20 and 21.

The 55 fifth- to eighth-graders, ranging in age from 10 to 14, competed for the top prize of a \$25,000 college scholarship and lifetime membership in the National Geographic Society. Second and third prizes were college scholarships of \$15,000 and \$10,000.

The Bee finalists had triumphed over a field of nearly five million students to win their state-level competitions and earn a place in the national championships. They represented the 50 states, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, Pacific Territories, and Department of Defense Dependents Schools.

The preliminary rounds of the National Geographic Bee took place on Tuesday, May 20. The top 10 finalists each won \$500 and advanced to the final round on Wednesday, May 21,

which was moderated for the 20th year by Alex Trebek, host of the television quiz show “Jeopardy!”. The finals were aired nationally on the National Geographic Channel and broadcast by National Geographic Television on public television stations.

In addition to Geyer, four other students taking part in this year’s National Geographic Bee were repeat state-level winners. Erik Troske of Indiana, Milan Sandhu of New Hampshire, and Muta Abiff of the U.S. Virgin Islands took part in the 2007 national contest; Autumn Hughes represented Colorado at the 2006 National Geographic Bee. Among the ten finalists were Hunter Bledsoe (Alabama), Nikhil Desai (California), Benjamin Geyer, William Lee (Massachusetts), Taylor Morris (North Carolina), Isaac Pasley (Missouri), Joseph Perea (Montana), Akshay Rajagopal (Nebraska), Milan Sandhu, and Erik Troske.

A survey of this year’s state and territory Bee winners shows that they have numerous talents in addition to their prodigious knowledge of geography. Many have won math, science, and other academic contests; several play a number of musical instruments; most enjoy a variety of sports. One has written a 57,000-page novel, another is a part-time magician.



Photograph by Kate Baylor, NGS

GeoBee, from p. 17

When the students were asked who they most admire (apart from their parents), the highest number of votes went to Al Gore, Mahatma Gandhi, those serving in the armed forces, and teachers. While the majority of the kids said they were perfectly content being themselves, the president of the United States, U.N. secretary general, and Bill Gates topped the list of other people they might choose to be.

The National Geographic Society held the first National Geographic Bee in 1989. The competition was developed in response to concern about the lack of geographic knowledge among young people in the United States.

And the problem is not yet resolved: A National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study showed that Americans aged 18 to 24 still have limited understanding of the world within and beyond their country's borders. Even after Hurricane Katrina, one-third could not locate Louisiana and almost half could not locate Mississippi on a U.S. map. Only four out of ten were able to find Iraq on a map of the Middle East.

"For the past 20 years, National Geographic has been at the forefront of

promoting geographic literacy among young people. The National Geographic Bee is one of our most popular programs, and it has motivated tens of millions of youngsters to learn about the world," said National Geographic Society President John Fahey.

[Ann Barrett, *National Geographic Communications*]

The 2008 champion

— by Rebecca Carroll

Cochabamba is the third largest urban area of what country? Eleven-year-old Akshay Rajagopal knew, and with the answer—Bolivia—he won the 20th annual National Geographic Bee.

The national finals tested the geographic knowledge of 55 U.S. students in fourth through eighth grade—each contestant was already a winner at the state or territory level. Each finalist is allowed one wrong answer.

"I think I just got lucky," said the Lincoln, Nebraska sixth grader, who said after the contest that he was confident of all his answers except one.

Asked what country lies east of Iran and holds the city of Balkh—the

supposed birthplace of the ancient 13th-century Persian poet Rumi—Rajagopal wasn't sure. With magic marker, he wrote "Afghanistan" on his card. His guess was right.

For the second year in a row, the National Geographic Bee champion is a student who has not missed a single question. "Akshay, way to go!"



Narrowing the field

Rajagopal, whose geography talents became apparent after he got his first atlas at the age of five, found his way to the top of this elite group by studying geography DVDs and reference books.

"He just realized he could remember all these names of countries and

Photos © 2008 National Geographic. Reproduced with permission.



Nebraska's Akshay Rajagopal (first on the right) took top honors at the 2008 National Geographic Bee held in Washington, D.C., in May. Alabama's Hunter Bledsoe, 13, placed second (center), and Massachusetts' William Lee (left) placed third.

capitals," said homemaker Suchitra Rajagopal, Akshay's mother.

"It was just a hobby until this year," when he began studying for the competition, she added. "I just feel great for him," said Akshay's father, Vijay Rajagopal, an engineer who said he told his son not to worry too much about winning because he could always come back next year.

Now, though, Akshay can't come back.

As the Bee champion—and winner of a \$25,000 college scholarship and a lifetime membership in the National Geographic Society—he's ineligible to participate in the national competition again.

The Lux Middle School student is, however, eligible to compete for a spot on the geography team that will represent the United States in the biennial National Geographic World Championship in 2009.

Runners-up

Maps, on some level, seem to speak to second-place winner Hunter Bledsoe, 13 "When he's looking at a map—it's giving him information that I know I don't get," said Ken Bledsoe, Hunter's father and a physical education teacher.

That may be one reason Hunter was also able to get so many tough questions right. He correctly answered "Afghanistan" when asked the question about Balkh—half of the ten finalists missed that one.

Bledsoe also correctly named Barcelona as the Catalan city that was a center of worker and student resistance during Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain. The Alabama eighth grader won a \$15,000 scholarship.

William Lee, 13, an eighth grader at Joyce Middle School in Woburn, Massachusetts, won a \$10,000 scholarship for coming in third.

Slipping in this year's sly reference to Canada—an informal National Geographic Bee tradition in honor of Trebek, a Canada native—Lee mentioned that many of the coins in his coin collection are Canadian.

Boys, Big Kids, and Kookaburras

There was only one girl among the 55 competitors in Washington this year.

Eighth grader Autumn Hughes, 14, a Wheat Ridge, Colorado, homeschooler, was eliminated in a tiebreaker Tuesday, narrowly missing a slot among the top ten finalists.

Last year, Washington State's Caitlin Snaring became the second girl to win the National Geographic Bee since it began in 1989.

This year, with the exception of 11-year-old winner Rajagopal, the ten finalists were all aged 13 or 14.

Trebek asked Rajagopal to stand before the audience next to his 13-year-old neighbor, Lee, emphasizing the size difference a few years can make at that age.

The 2008 questions included slides, graphs, and even a live laughing kookaburra bird. The species is native to the Australian mainland but migrated south to the island of Tasmania—a location everyone participating correctly identified.

Holding his giant check and posing for photographers after the contest, Rajagopal considered his surroundings for a moment before looking up and saying: "It does feel like I'm really special today." ■

