

Introduction

Ossi Kotavaara & Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola
Department of Geography, University of Oulu, Finland

Nordica Yearbook has given emphasis to northern geography during its 18 previous annual volumes and the northern theme has been highlighted even more in the recent years. The first theme issue with a distinct northern emphasis was *Northern nature and human activities*, edited by Heikkinen *et al.* (2006). In the issue *Geographical reflections from the North*, Luukkonen and Äikäs (2008) reviewed the agenda of young geographers working at University of Oulu and, furthermore, suggested that such reviews should be continued regularly. The next issue, titled *Northern change*, discussed human and physical geographies from the northern perspective as well (Rusanen *et al.* 2009). The last two issues had a multidisciplinary scope. The issue in 2011 focused on *Sustainable development in the arctic region through peace and stability* and was based on the Northern annual travelling symposium and The Calotte Academy (Heininen & Rouge-Oikarinen 2011). The most recent issue was based on the work of the FiDiPro research group *Human-environment relations in the North: Resource development, climate change and resilience* (Nuttall *et al.* 2012).

This issue continues the discussion about the role and matter of northern geographies and the significance of geographical knowledge in current societies, in particular. Due to the multidimensional nature of geographical knowledge, the

position and challenges of geography as a discipline need to be discussed in dialogue with human and physical geographies as well as scholars and actors from other fields. In addition to asking what geography is, it is interesting to critically consider why geography and geographical knowledge is needed. Following Johnston and Sidaway (2004), who trace the roots of geography as a discipline via actors, traditions, responses and turning points, this issue approaches the question of north and northernness in geography by reviewing the history and looking the work of northern geographers. The aim is to give a voice to scholars to consider and reflect the current state of northern geographical research and the development in the field.

The theme issue, “Openings, relevance and potential - Why northern geographies matter” seeks to answer the following questions: What northern geography is? Why and where do we need northern geographies and geographical perspectives? Rather than aiming to provide a single, accurate answer to these questions, this issue intends to point out the multiplicity of northern geographies. It provides an interdisciplinary window to geographical research, and demonstrates how human and physical geography scholars create and approach the question of the North with different methods, techniques and theoretical frameworks.

The question of northern geographies is perhaps more topical than ever. Northern environmental change and the melting of the Arctic sea ice are regarded as focal questions in northern and global geographical research. Northern societies are characterised by cultural and physical structures that differ evidently from the rest of the Europe. Northernness can also be understood as a ‘discourse’ that is used in policy making and that is under constant struggle. The North and the Arctic region, in particular, have become sites of geopolitical power play, strongly related to the resources of the North (Dittmer *at al.* 2011).

The question of northern geographies, and the relevance and potential of geographical research, can be approached from different perspectives: as a question of the nature of geographical knowledge, geography as an institution and regional and social equality. Geographical research provides key understanding of the complex human-environmental processes and changes in the North. It provides understanding and knowledge of the horizontal and vertical linkages of the phenomena, and on actions in space, thus offering an increasingly important perspective through which to approach global societies (Holt-Jensen 1999: 146).

The environmental conditions, infrastructure and societal factors of Northern Finland differ from the Central European, US and UK contexts in which many current scientific discussions and theorizations as well as methods have been developed and tested. This means that the methods and concepts should be critically adopted and applied in different

geographical contexts. Thus, what we consider as “northern differences” actually opens up a theoretical and analytical field of study and need to be systematically examined by geographers and others. Secondly, we need education and research that focuses on and is located in the North. As Hall (this issue) notes, knowledge is always situational, knowledge is not coming from nowhere but it is contextual. In practice the location of geography institutions, at least to some extent, steers the choice of perspectives and the objects of study. The question of the contextual nature of knowledge is important for scholars working with northern issues; sometimes the northern perspective is restricting, at other times enabling and empowering.

Thirdly, the question of northern geographies can be understood as a question of regional and social equality. As Ridanpää (this issue) points out, it is important to ask who is the one speaking and from which political and cultural point of view. Northern issues should be discussed and made visible – only by this means it is possible to make just and sustainable politics. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that scientific knowledge and geography has also an important role in the production of the North. In scientific debates and in popular media the North and northernness become constructed as a zone or a region which holds particular environmental, cultural and imaginative characteristics.

The articles of this theme issue analyse and report on current developments in the field of geographical research and on research projects, their findings and

applicability. They also point out how geographers who work in different fields construct the North as a research object in rather different ways. The two first articles review northern research, its context and relevance in the field of human and physical geography. The last two articles approach northern questions with qualitative and quantitative study settings.

The theme issue begins with a conceptual paper of northernness, authored by C. Michael Hall. He discusses the representations and relevance of northern geographies, how the questions of global environmental change and the Arctic geopolitics have brought northern geographies to the forefront of scientific debate. He raises an important question concerning the responsibility of geographers and researchers in the creation of more environmentally sustainable practices and policy. By helping to conserve biodiversity and by promoting those practices and policy that limit the environmental changes, northern geography and geographers become the agents of global change and future.

The article written by Janne Alahuhta, Terhi Järvinen, Henna Sormunen, Helena Tukiainen, Sanna Varanka and Jan Hjort, the Physical Geography Group at the University of Oulu, discusses the significance and relevance of the geographical approach in the study of ecosystems and global change. They state that the role of the physical geography has strengthened within the natural sciences as it offers a more holistic understanding of human-environment relationship. The methods of physical geography are advantageous since they provide understanding of both temporal

and spatial patterns of environments and ecosystems. It can be said that northern physical geography is in the foreground of the global environmental research. The high-latitudes and the northern environment provide a “natural laboratory” through which to study topical scientific research questions, global warming and the health impacts of ecosystem change, for example. This paper, introducing the study of the physical geography research group, offers an interesting view to modern physical geography and current global environmental research.

Juha Ridanpää’s article discusses the concept of the North and northernness from the critical, postcolonial perspective in which the regional entity of the North can be understood as something that has become historically defined through colonial culture politics. He uses the Lappish literature as an example and argues that northernness and the stereotypes that are attached to the Finnish North, in particular, are constructed as an imaginative regional counterpart to the southern Culture. Literature and art can create, maintain and disrupt the regional imagination of northernness. Ridanpää stresses that the self-reflexivity of a researcher is an important guideline for the critical and postcolonial reading of the literature.

The article from Mikko Tervo, Ossi Kotavaara, Harri Antikainen and Jarmo Rusanen studies the accessibility of public services for different age groups in the municipality of Siikalatva. The accessibility and spatial formation of public services is a topical question in the Finnish municipalities because of the potential and completed municipal mergers and demographical

changes. Secondly, the paper discusses the potential of GIS methods in the production and applicability of knowledge in planning and public decision-making. It provides further understanding of how geography matters; how the acknowledgement of difference in regional features and structures is crucial in the design of the methods and methodological approaches.

All the authors in this theme number have a connection with the research conducted at the Department of Geography at the University of Oulu by their appointments. Writers' positions vary from PhD students and post-doctoral researcher to docents and professors. Hence, we feel that the "baton" in reviewing the northern geographical research agendas, given by Luukkonen and Äikäs (2008), has now been passed to future editors. Finally, we hope that this issue's reflection to northern geography is applicable also for geography students at the University of Oulu.

References

- Dittmer, J., S. Moisiso, A. Ingran & K Dodds (2011). Have you heard the one about the disappearing ice? Recasting Arctic Geopolitics. *Political geography* 30: 4, 202–214.
- Heikkinen, O., K. Suorsa, M. Anttonen & M. Mönkkönen (2006; Eds.). NGP Yearbook 2006, Theme issue on northern nature and human activities. *Nordia geographical publications* 35: 2.
- Heininen L. & R. Rouge-Oikarinen (2011; Eds.). NGP Yearbook 2011, Sustainable development in the Arctic region through peace and stability, *Nordia geographical publications* 40: 4.
- Holt-Jensen A. (1999). Geography – History and concepts. A students guide. Sage, London.
- Johnston, J. & D. Sidaway (2004). *Geography & geographers: Anglo-American human geography since 1945*. 6. ed. Hodder Arnold, London.
- Luukkonen J. & T. Äikäs (2008; Eds.). NGP Yearbook 2008, Geographical reflections from the North. *Nordia geographical publications* 37: 6
- Nuttall, M., K. Tervo-Kankare, & T. P. Karjalainen (2012; Eds.). NGP Yearbook 2012, Negotiating resources, engaging people: Human-environment relations in the North. *Nordia geographical publications* 41: 5.
- Rusanen, J., T. Klemettilä & J. Luukkonen (2009; Eds.). NGP Yearbook 2009, Northern Change. *Nordia geographical publications* 38: 5.