reading and using maps of all descriptions are a powerful geographic analytical tool. These maps show movements of goods or people or the distribution of an individual crop. Others may show multiple patterns, such as urbanization, industrialization, agriculture, settlement, and weather and climate. Human processes include migration, agriculture, settlement, urbanization, industrialization, militarization, commercialization, and others.

Maps are one of the very best ways to find and analyze geographic patterns. Some maps show single patterns, such as the distribution of an individual crop. Others may show multiple patterns, as urban land uses. Maps may also show movements of goods or people or physical elements, such as food, human migration, winds or ocean currents. Maps are a powerful geographic analytical tool.

We are all geographers to some extent. Reading and using maps of all descriptions is a skill that most of us nurture throughout our lives. We perhaps begin by using world maps and globes, followed by road maps and atlases. Our map reading skills tend to increase with use and with age, until we are able to understand more and more complicated maps involving multiple variables.

Our mental maps are the maps that we build in our minds over time, ranging from a map of the world down to the map of our neighborhoods. The qualities of our mental maps vary from person to person, but greater use of maps tends to increase our mental map functionality.

“Geography in the News” began as an idea for a newspaper column in 1963-64 when I was teaching high school geography in Henry County, Va. I realized that my students were having trouble relating their geography lessons to world events, particularly the Vietnam War. My mostly rural students had not been exposed to many maps, had few map reading skills and only very rudimentary mental maps—even those students heading to college.

I continuously searched for classroom materials to help students build and use their mental maps. Later, I envisioned a newspaper column that would analyze the geographic background of breaking news events using maps.

After an 18-year career as a professor at the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa, I took a position in 1987 as chair of the Department of Geography and Planning at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. That spring, widely respected geographer and NBC news analyst Dr. Harm deBlij visited campus and encouraged me to begin writing my column for a local newspaper.

“Geography in the News” (GITN) evolved from being published in a single small-town newspaper to distribution to teachers by subscription, with subscribers’ numbers growing annually.

In 1999, Maps.com (previously Magellan Geographix) in Santa Barbara, Calif, offered to publish GITN digitally and market to teachers as part of a classroom teaching package called Maps101. In October 1999, GITN No. 499 went live on the Internet.

In 2007, I brought my daughter, Mandy Gritzner, aboard as a researcher and co-author, gradually merging her into the GITN system. She was a geographer with a graduate degree, international experience in the Peace Corps (Bolivia) and a book and professional articles to her credit.

By 2008, GITN was available online to more than 3,500 schools and colleges and used in 87,500 classes/classrooms. Its estimated weekly potential readership was 2.1 million students, teachers, parents and administrators, plus newspaper readers.

Appalachian State University supported GITN with matching financial assistance for training undergraduate cartographers, while Maps.com provided financial and internship support. ASU’s News Director Jane Nicholson has served as technical editor of GITN articles for nearly 20 years.

Over the years, GITN has won international, national and regional awards from such groups as Travelocity, the Association of American Geographers, the National Council for Geographic Education, Southeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers and the North Carolina Geographical Society.

It is our hope that “Geography in the News” continues to provide enjoyment and geographic enlightenment to its many readers.

And that is Geography in the News™. July 31, 2009. #1000!

Co-authors are Neal Lineback, Appalachian State University Professor Emeritus of Geography, and Geographer Mandy Lineback Gritzner. University News Director Jane Nicholson serves as technical editor.