

Vanishing points: why do environments change?

Global climate change causes sea levels to rise: these islands will almost certainly no longer be map-able in our lifetimes. The science of climate, and the distinction between climate and weather, are long-established geographical topics – and vital to teach. Climate – the interaction of the atmosphere with the position of the continents, and the shape and aspect of the land – is perhaps quintessentially 'geographical'.

The real importance of this photograph, though, is as a reminder that the impact of a global process is felt locally – and in this case dramatically: the place itself may disappear.

Geography concerns itself with other aspects of local change. Often the reasons for a particular change are complex: it cannot be 'explained' locally. Sometimes the change is rapid, sometimes very slow. Children and young people often have trouble visualising change (especially over deep geological time) – the world they know seems to be a given, always there. Geography not only challenges young people to observe evidence of change in the physical and built environments, but also provides the tools to interpret and evaluate it. This is a precondition for thinking intelligently about the kinds of futures we envisage or desire.

Why do environments change? This is a *vital* 'big question' in an increasingly crowded world. Sometimes the answers are to be found in the physical environment itself. Sometimes, humans are responsible. Frequently, it is a combination of physical and human activity that causes specific changes.