

May 29, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis Governor of Florida The Capitol 400 S. Monroe St. Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis:

On behalf of the constituent members and supporters of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), and of fellow geographers and GIScientists worldwide, we the undersigned write to remind you of the scientific foundation of geography as a discipline and the life-saving implications geographic sciences have in public health and epidemiology. Purporting that a geographer is automatically "not a data scientist" is both blatantly untrue and an insult to the thousands of geographers and GIScientists working tirelessly to inform urgent policy decisions during this time of national crisis.

Simply put: it is impossible to address and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic without using geospatial data and analysis. Geographers from around the globe have responded to this crisis with an array of in-depth studies. For example, Dr. Song Gao's team at the University of Wisconsin is using big data on human mobility patterns to predict potential new hotspots for infection. Geographers have also been instrumental in tracking the impact of social distancing on disease transmission, as well as changes to air quality due to altered social interactions (Descartes Labs). Dr. Marshall Shepherd outlines numerous other examples in his recent Forbes article, "Why Geography Is A Key Part Of Fighting The Coronavirus COVID-19 Outbreak" where he uses the pandemic as a "teachable moment" to broaden understanding of geography as a discipline.

How states and localities reopen in the coming months will define how we, as a nation, are remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic. The notion that geography is not a science demonstrates a narrow understanding of the discipline. Worse, it reflects a profoundly worrying perspective from a public official, since geography — specifically, how places and people are connected and interact with each other — is inherent in crafting strategies that will restore everyday life. Location-based public health data is the most critical factor in implementing reopening plans. Citizens are placing full trust in our elected officials to guide and protect us, and making these policy decisions with inattention to geography could have fatal consequences.

As governor, you bear the heavy responsibility of working in Florida's best interest and safety. We would welcome the opportunity to connect you more fully to our vast and capable community of scholars, professionals, and scientists. Geographers and GIScientists stand ready to provide their expertise and contribute to the collective effort to contain and quell the COVID-19 pandemic. Science-based decision making is crucial in your navigation of these unprecedented times, and geography is science.

Sincerely,

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