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The Perceptual Northwest

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ABSTRACT

Our goal is to survey cultural perceptions defining the U.S. Northwest region. As geographers, we should concern ourselves with mental constructs of regions, as they can easily impede or facilitate communication. Assumptions of others' regional boundaries and images may be erroneous. Over the past several decades, a handful of geographers have begun to examine these perceptual (or vernacular) maps and regions. Students at 21 colleges and universities were asked to identify: (1) boundaries of the U.S. Northwest region; (2) Northwest regional characteristics and symbols; and (3) what cities or other places best represent the Northwest.

Nationally, student respondents largely followed the "official" area of the region regarding state boundaries, with Washington, Oregon, and Idaho as the core area. Student perception of characteristic cities and places followed this pattern, with referenced population centers spread across the three-state landscape. Regarding descriptive words and symbols, more emphasis is placed on Garreau's coastal perception of the Northwest through terms such as rainy, trees, and mountainous. Regional differences showed up in perception of area, descriptive words, and symbols of the Northwest. Proximity led to different perceptions. Northwest students showed the smallest perception of the Northwest in geographic area, while those farthest away (Southeast students) mapped the largest Northwest. Difference from the home region also led to different perceptions. Students from less-forested regions emphasized trees more than students from more forested regions, who emphasized open and vast characteristics of the Northwest.

ALL OF US CARRY AROUND with us in our minds mental maps and images of the world (Downs and Stea 1977; Gould and White 1974; Saarinen 1976; Tolman 1948). Psychologists focus on how these images form, while geogra-

phers tend to focus more on how these maps and images influence behavior. As geographers, we should concern ourselves with these mental constructs, as they can easily impede or facilitate communication. Over the past several decades, a handful of geographers (Good 1981; Hale 1971; Jordan 1978; Lamme and Oldakowski 1982; Lowry 1999; Lowry and Zonn 1989; Raitz and Ulack 1981; Shortridge 1980; Shortridge 1985; Zelinsky 1980) have begun to examine these perceptual (or vernacular) maps and regions.

The most common means of examination has been via surveys of college students (Good 1981; Jordan 1978; Lowry 1999; Lowry and Zonn 1989; Shortridge 1980; Shortridge 1985), although Lamme and Oldakowski (1982) surveyed a more general population at a folk festival. Lowenthal and Prince have called the college-educated the articulate minority most influential in creating such images (in Saarinen 1976). In addition they are a "captive" audience and make it easy to achieve large numbers of respondents. There are other means of discovering perceptual regionalizations (or maps). Hale (1971) surveyed postmasters, county extension agents, and newspaper editors in every county and parish in the United States. Zelinsky (1980) examined the use of regional terms in business names via a survey of the business white pages of the Metropolitan Statistical Areas of the United States, as did Lowry (1994) for the Southwest. The most common method, however, is the survey of college students.

Perhaps the best statement concerning different ways of defining regions comes from Jordan's work on perceptual regions. He states, "perceptual or vernacular regions are those perceived to exist by their inhabitants and other members of the population at large. They exist as part of popular or folk culture. Rather than being the intellectual creation of the professional geographer, the vernacular region is the product of spatial perception of average people. Rather than being based on carefully chosen, quantifiable criteria, such regions are composites of the mental maps of the population" (1978, p. 293). Thus the difference in definitions, but of what importance is this? Should vernacular regions be of importance to geographers?

The importance of the examination of vernacular regions by geographers has been stated by Zelinsky (1980). In his examination of vernacular regions of North America, he poses the question, "How seriously should the serious geographer take the vernacular, or popular, regions of his country?" (p. 1). His answer is that "identifying and understanding our vernacular regions is a justifiable, even necessary, pursuit if we wish to apprehend the

major social and geographical realities of late Twentieth-Century America” (Zelinsky 1980, p. 2).

Jordan (1978) has also commented on the importance of perceptual regions. He states: “As geographers, we ought to know more about perceptual regions than we do, at various scales and in different parts of the world. Spatial patterns, behavior, organization, and flows are among our traditional concerns, and we should be able to understand these better if we know how populations perceive regions” (p. 307).

The term “Pacific Northwest” originates from a need to identify the Oregon Territory differently after the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho were created from it. The term has always been used in an official capacity to include only those states (Hardwick 2006). The best historical treatments of the region are Meinig’s four-volume (1988, 1995, 1999, 2006) work and Johanson and Gates’ (1957) *Empire of Columbia*, although a textbook by Hardwick *et al.* (2007) also offers insight.

Occasional modifications in popular literature include Garreau (1981), who termed the coastal part of the Northwest “Ecotopia,” stretching from Alaska in the north to just south of San Francisco. Eastern portions of California, Oregon, and Washington, along with Idaho, were lumped by Garreau with Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, and most of Alaska, Alberta, British Columbia, and Northern Canada in an “Empty Quarter.”

To meet the objectives of this research, a survey was compiled and administered to 1,818 students at 21 universities across the United States. The universities were spread out across the country, ranging from Massachusetts to Florida and Arizona to Washington, and all students were enrolled in a freshman geography class. The survey consists of two parts: for part one, students were provided with a map of the coterminous United States with the states outlined, and were asked to draw/shade the area they believed to be the Northwest; for part two, students were asked three general questions about their perceptions of the Northwest.

Once the maps from the first part of the survey were returned, they were analyzed by overlaying each map with a grid composed of cells of 50 square miles per cell. This cell size was selected after testing various sizes: while smaller cells (e.g., 25 miles square) provide slightly smoother maps, the extra time needed for analysis made this size prohibitive. Larger cells (e.g., 75 miles square) could dramatically cut time requirements, but at the expense of maps with higher resolution and visual quality. Each cell was

given a unique label and was included in the region if any part of the cell was included in a map returned by the respondent.

The results were then entered into a database. They were first entered separately, such that a map could be constructed that represents the respondents from that university (thus we can compare where people from Oregon, for example, place the Northwest vis-à-vis those from Wyoming). The universities were grouped by states to allow for a regional comparison as follows: Pacific Coast (WA, OR); Southeast (NC, GA, FL); Midwest (OH, IL, WI), South Central (TX, OK); Great Plains (NE, MT); and Northeast (MA). Secondly, all of the respondents' maps were then combined together so that one composite map of the region could be constructed. This simple mapping exercise enabled us to determine where the Northwest exists in the minds of U.S. students.

For part two of the survey, students were asked three questions:

1. List up to five words which you feel are most descriptive of the Northwest.
2. Are there particular cities, or other places, which you feel best represent the Northwest? If so, what are they?
3. Is there anything which stands as a symbol of the Northwest? If so, what?

The survey and instructions were sent to a collaborator at each selected institution, administered, and returned. The results from the part two questionnaire were entered into a database so that results from different sites can be compared and a composite view can then be developed.

For part one, 1,687 respondents' maps are included in the results (not all students returned a map). Student responses to the three questions (n=1,818) are presented for part two. Figure 1 is a composite map based on all student responses:

More than 75 percent of the student responses included the entire states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho as part of the perceptual Northwest, while more than 50 percent included all of Montana and Wyoming. Parts of northern California, Utah, and Nevada were drawn as part of the Northwest by at least 25 percent of the students.

The top four descriptive words in listed in Table 1 are interesting. They describe the area from the Pacific Coast to the Cascade Mountains, which comprises a very small part of the region identified by students. While the majority of students include Washington, Oregon, and Idaho on their maps,

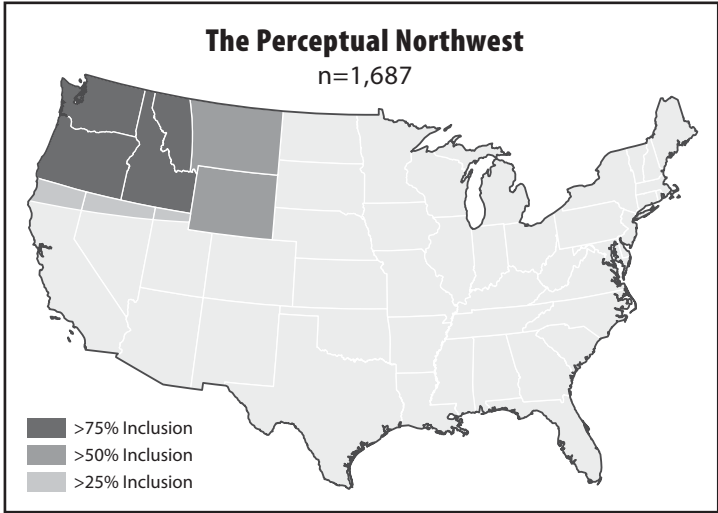


Figure 1.

there is a geographical disconnect as they described the Northwest with adjectives that apply mainly to the coastal areas of the region. Indeed, east of the Cascade Mountain range stretch great plateaus of open landscapes, home to farming and ranching. Summer temperatures and lack of rainfall often approach desert-like conditions in the lower elevations of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. For example, approximately one-third of the state of Washington is comprised of the Columbia Plateau ecoregion, which is predominantly arid steppe grassland, and extends into north-central Oregon. Another 14 percent of Washington is comprised of the Okanogan ecoregion, a mixture of high-elevation forest and arid, lower-elevation shrub and grass-

Table 1.

Top Responses From All Students

n=1,818

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
rainy (1,049)	Seattle (1,060)	trees/forest (327)
mountainous (720)	Portland (618)	rain (154)
cold/cool (694)	Boise (141)	Space Needle (121)
trees/forest (510)	Eugene (91)	mountains (120)
open/vast (276)	Spokane (62)	potatoes (92)

land (Washington Department of Natural Resources 2003). The southeastern quarter of Oregon is predominantly within the Northern Basin and Range ecoregion, which also contains a natural vegetation of arid steppe grassland. This ecoregion, along with the Snake River Basin (arid steppe grassland) ecoregion, covers the southern one-third of Idaho (Omernik 1987).

The top five cities/places (Seattle, Portland, Boise, Eugene, Spokane) come as little surprise because these are the larger metropolitan areas in the Northwest. Tacoma, WA, and Vancouver, WA, (located near Seattle and Portland, respectively) are not listed in the top five, yet Tacoma and Boise (approximately 190,000 residents) and Vancouver, WA, and Eugene (approximately 140,000 residents) have similar population sizes (United States Census Bureau 2002). Another interesting note: Washington, D.C., was listed by 10 students. The top five symbols of the Northwest as reported by the surveys are a blend of nature and culture. The Space Needle is synonymous with Seattle, as is the potato with Idaho.

Interesting differences emerge when comparing results from individual universities. Previous research (Lowry 1996) showed location to be the single most important factor in such perceptions. Race, gender, and geography of respondents were examined, and only the respondents' geography had a statistically significant role in perception of the Southwest. Thus, in the present study, survey sites were divided into geographic regions that most closely follow the perceptual and vernacular regionalizations of Hale (1971), Zelinsky (1973), Garreau (1981), and others.

Pacific Coast Region

In general, universities in the Northwest (i.e., Washington and Oregon) had the smallest area outlined as being part of the Northwest (Figure 2). This was not unexpected, as past research has shown respondents from what is ultimately defined as the "heart" of a region generally are more protective of their home. These respondents know the region better than do others, and they are more "stingy" in what they include—indeed, Portland State University had the smallest area overall.

Of these four schools, only Eastern Washington University (Cheney, WA) did not include northern parts of California and Nevada. Students from Southern Oregon University (Ashland, OR) and the University of Oregon

(Eugene, OR) include most, if not all, of Montana.

The 408 student responses from this grouping are summarized in Table 2. The results are not surprising, as three of the four universities are located on the coastal side of the Cascades (Eastern Washington being the exception) and the top three characteristics describe the landscape found there. The top five places/cities, as identified by students from this Northwest group, follow the top five of the larger U.S. group, with the exception of Spokane, which is replaced by Missoula. Eugene and Boise also switch places in the ranking. Missoula's inclusion here, and exclusion elsewhere, is a reflection of the knowledge these respondents have of the area that others, especially those great distances away, do not (i.e., respondents in Oregon know Missoula while those in Texas and Georgia are far less likely to know any city in Montana).

Lastly, three of the top symbols of the region, as listed by the Northwest students, were also found on the overall top symbols list. "Salmon" and "green" were found in the top symbols list for this region only. Interestingly, students from the Pacific Coast region did not perceive the Northwest to be cool/cold.

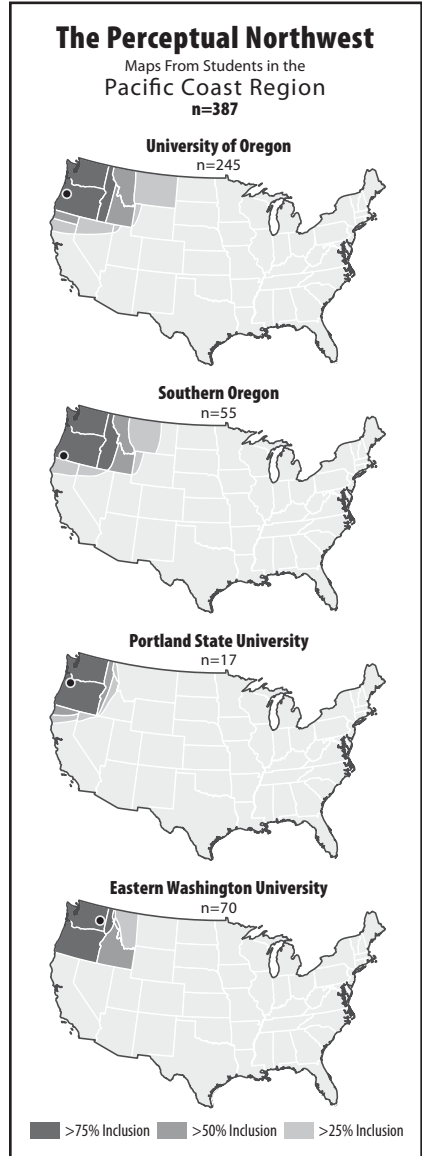


Figure 2.

Table 2.

Top Responses From Students in Pacific Coast Region

n=408

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
rainy (252)	Seattle (247)	trees (137)
green (159)	Portland (233)	rain (47)
mountainous (111)	Eugene (69)	mountains (30)
sparsely populated (95)	Boise (17)	salmon (28)
beautiful/scenic (60)	Missoula (11)	green (16)

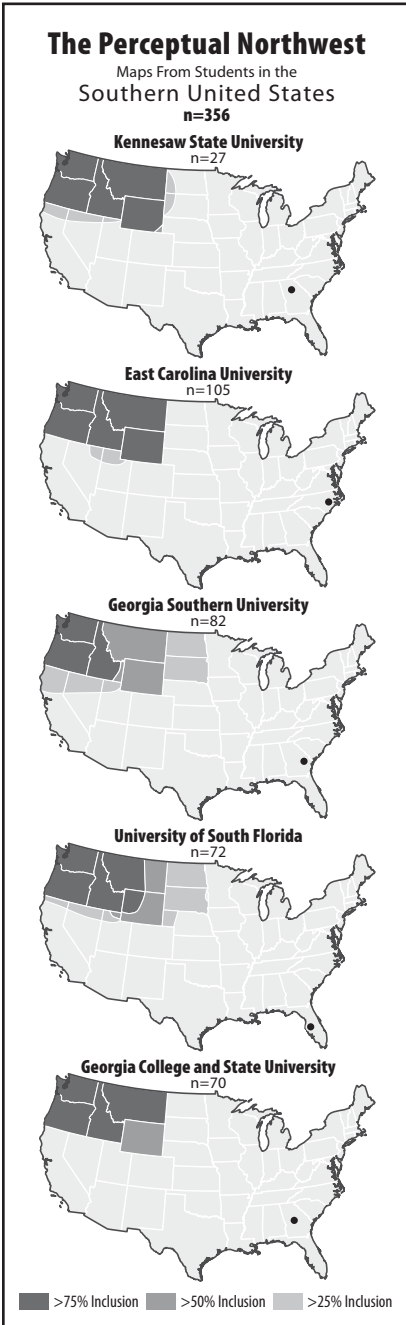
Southeast Region

Students from universities in the southeastern U.S. drew maps that encompassed the largest area (Figure 3). These students are the greatest distance from the Northwest, so this is not surprising. They have, in general, less knowledge of the region, they hear less about it, and they are less likely to travel in the region. They are thus more likely to see some generic north-western quadrant of the country.

More than 25 percent of the students from Kennesaw State University (Kennesaw, GA), Georgia Southern (Statesboro, GA), Georgia College and State University (Milledgeville, GA), and the University of South Florida (Tampa, FL) included some or all of North and South Dakota as part of the Northwest. Northern Nevada and Utah were also labeled by at least 25 percent of the students from the southern U.S. as belonging to the Northwest.

Four of the top five characteristics listed by students from the southern U.S. were also included on the overall descriptive list (Table 3). “Sparsely populated,” however, was listed on only one other list: the South Central U.S. region (see below). Again, these characteristics look at the coastal areas (cool, mountains, rainy) and the interior (cold winters, sparsely populated and open). This largely forested region of the southeastern U.S. used the terms “open” and “vast” to describe the Northwest, while ranking symbols such as trees lower on the list than students from less-forested regions.

Four of the top five symbols of the Northwest, as documented by students from the southern U.S., were found on the overall list. Yellowstone National Park was number five on the list, which may explain why over 50 percent



of the student maps from this region included Wyoming. Several students often provided the adjective “Idaho” when listing potatoes as a symbol of the region. It is perhaps surprising to find potatoes on the list, let alone at the top of the list, when only nine percent of the respondents listed Boise as a city in the region.

South Central Region

Maps from more than 75 percent of students at the two South Central universities showed all of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana as part of the Northwest. In addition, at least 25 percent of the students from Texas included parts of northern California, Nevada, and Utah in the Northwest.

More than 70 percent of the students responding said that the Northwest was cold/cool, while 50 percent also described the region as mountainous and rainy. As was the case for all regions, Seattle and Portland were the top two places listed by respondents from this region (Table 4).

Great Plains Region

Maps from students in this region were consistent. At least 25 percent included all of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, and parts of northern California, Nevada, and Utah.

Figure 3.

Table 3.

Top Responses From Students in Southeastern Region

n=372

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
cold/cool (200)	Seattle (190)	potatoes (27)
mountain (158)	Portland (106)	mountains (23)
rainy (120)	Boise (33)	Space Needle (18)
sparsely populated (95)	Washington (16)	trees (18)
open/vast (65)	Yellowstone NP (16)	Yellowstone NP (10)

Table 4.

Top Responses From Students in South Central Region

n=272

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
cold/cool (190)	Seattle (157)	trees (32)
mountainous (147)	Portland (62)	Space Needle (31)
rainy (147)	Montana (15)	potatoes (21)
trees/forest (68)	Washington (14)	mountains (17)
sparsely populated (53)	Boise (9)	rain (11)

The descriptive words used by these students were similar to those of the students from the South Central region (Table 5). Seattle was identified as the top place by 52 percent of the students in this region. However, Mt. Rainier was specifically identified as the fifth-most-recorded symbol of the Northwest—the only time a particular mountain was included in the symbols list, even though this is the least-mountainous region in the study area.

Midwest Region

There was a considerable degree of variability in the maps submitted by students from this region (universities from Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin). At the core, more than 75 percent identified Washington, Oregon, and Idaho

Table 5.

Top Responses From Students in Great Plains Region

n=374

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
rainy (197)	Seattle (234)	trees (45)
mountainous (136)	Portland (120)	rain (40)
cold/cool (93)	Boise (34)	mountains (33)
sparsely populated (52)	Eugene (13)	Space Needle (32)
trees/forest (42)	Spokane (12)	Mt. Rainier (7)

as part of the Northwest. From here, the maps start to appear different, as 25 percent of the students from Chicago State, for example, included parts of California, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado, South Dakota, and North Dakota.

More than 50 percent of the students described the Northwest as rainy, but as a whole, trees/forest was not included on the description list (Table 6). Open and vast were descriptive word used by students from this largely forested region. Interestingly, the most commonly listed symbol was a tree. Seattle and Portland were first and second, respectively, on the place list.

Southwest Region

Maps produced by students from the Southwest portion of the country were more consistent. More than 50 percent of students from the University of Arizona (Tucson), and 25 percent from Northern Arizona University (Flagstaff) had all of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming as part of the Northwest.

In some respects, the top five descriptive words appear be an antithesis of the southern region, though Flagstaff is at a high elevation and gets cold in the winter (Table 7). Surprisingly, Idaho and Boise were not included in the most recorded places despite the fact that more than 75 percent of the students included Idaho in their map. Four of the most common symbols listed were identical to the overall list. The region is the only one to have included Starbucks/coffee on the symbols list – the only proprietary symbols to make any list in the survey.

Table 6.

Top Responses From Students in Midwest Region

n=156

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
rainy (82)	Seattle (81)	trees (22)
mountainous (53)	Portland (37)	mountains (20)
cold/cool (41)	Boise (18)	potatoes (11)
open/big/vast (31)	Washington (6)	Space Needle (10)
sparsely populated (26)	Montana (7)	rain (8)

Table 7.

Top Responses From Students in Southwestern Region

n=132

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
rainy (92)	Seattle (89)	rain (20)
cold/cool (58)	Portland (53)	trees/forest (18)
green (44)	Montana (18)	mountains (15)
mountainous (36)	Oregon (11)	Space Needle (12)
sparsely populated (36)	Washington (6)	Starbucks/coffee (8)

Northeast Region

Students from the lone northeastern U.S. university were the most consistent in their maps. Greater than 75 percent of students from Bridgewater State College (Bridgewater, MA) included all of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming as being in the Northwest. In addition, this northeastern group was the only one to include the Oregon Trail as a symbol of the Northwest, though parts of the Trail are found in Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri (Table 8).

Interestingly, the student group from the northeastern U.S. was the only group to describe the Northwest as agricultural. Students from the Northeast, the region with the highest percentage of tree cover in the United States, used the terms “vast” and “open” to describe the U.S. Northwest, while rating trees and forest lowest in Northwest symbols. This is similar to respondents from the largely forested Midwest and Southeast and counter

Table 8.

Top Responses From Students in Northeastern Region

n=71

Descriptive Words	Places	Symbols
mountainous (28)	Seattle (28)	potatoes (8)
rainy (23)	Portland (14)	Oregon trail (6)
cold/cool (19)	Idaho (8)	Space Needle (4)
agricultural/farming (13)	Washington (5)	mountains (4)
vast/open (11)	Boise (5)	trees/forest (3)

to respondents from the more-open Great Plains and Southwest. Ironically, students from the largely forested Northwest did emphasize trees and not the terms “vast” and “open.”

Conclusions

Nationally, student respondents largely followed the “official” area of the region regarding state boundaries, with Washington, Oregon, and Idaho as the core area. Student perception of characteristic cities and places followed this pattern, with referenced population centers spread across the three-state landscape. Regarding descriptive words and symbols, more emphasis is placed on Garreau’s coastal perception of the Northwest through terms such as “rainy,” “trees,” and “mountainous.”

Regional differences showed up in perception of area, descriptive words, and symbols of the Northwest. Proximity led to different perceptions. Northwest students showed the smallest perception of the Northwest in geographic area, while those farthest away (Southeast students) mapped the largest Northwest. Difference from the home region also led to different perceptions. Students from less-forested regions emphasized trees more than students from more-forested regions, who tended to emphasize the open and vast characteristics of the Northwest.

In summary, we can be fairly certain when using the term “Northwest” or “Pacific Northwest” that our students are thinking of the same region others have in mind when using similar terminology. We can also be fairly certain we can use the terminology in class and know we are communicating effectively vis-à-vis the location of the region.

However, further geographic education on the natural and human landscapes of the region, including less-publicized steppe grassland and second-tier population centers within metropolitan areas would improve knowledge of the region. Simplification of regions can limit understanding of not only natural diversity and population density but cultural diversity. Many would guess Asians are the primary immigrant to the region. Although most Mexican-Americans are urban, the Pacific Northwest has a high percentage of rural Hispanics, largely due to employment in agricultural industries such as apple and cherry harvesting. Similarly, the World War II defense industry, including Boeing aircraft, attracted numerous African-Americans to the region. With an increased understanding of the additional knowledge pertaining to the Northwest, students and citizens can make better-informed decisions on issues such as population base and environmental conditions.

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