



*'Maps have 'north' at the top, but it could've been different'* by Caroline Williamson

So the answer to the question of which way up is the Earth is simple: it is not any particular way up and there is no good reason other than a historical superiority complex to think of north as being the top of the world.

Yet is it time to start embracing a different view of the planet from the one we are used to? Perhaps, because evidence from psychology suggests that our north-up culture might be polluting the way we think of what is valuable in the world.

A well-known bias in psychology reveals that most people think of north as being 'up' and south, 'down'. Brian Meier, a psychologist at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, has also found that people unconsciously process positive words as if they were higher in space than negative ones. So, he wondered whether these two things, north = up and good = up affect the value that people put on different areas on a map.

Sure enough, when shown a map of a hypothetical city and asked where they would like to live, people were significantly more likely to choose an area in the north of the city. And when another group of people were asked where fictitious people of different social status would live, they plotted them on the map with the richest in the north and poorest in the south.

It isn't too much of a stretch to think that people are less likely to care what happens in countries or regions that are 'lower' than them on the map or globe.

**The good news is that in Meier's experiments the relationship between 'north' and 'good' was eliminated by one simple thing – turning the map upside down. So perhaps the world might get a little fairer if we just took a look at it another way up now and again.**

South-up maps are easily available online. It is also something that Mortlock is very much in favour of: "As an Australian, I think it should be done more often", he says.

If nothing else, it's a sure-fire way to make the world seem fresh, and unexplored, once more. With so few earthbound discoveries left for our generation to make, all we can do is – to paraphrase Marcel Proust – look again at the world we've got, but this time, through different eyes.

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<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160614-maps-have-north-at-the-top-but-it-couldve-been-different>