

Conceptualizing the Horizon

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What exactly is “the horizon”? Where is it? How much do conceptualizations of “the horizon” vary across individuals, languages, and cultures? Complete answers to these questions require attention to ontology, etymology, astronomy, and semantics, and require multiple perspectives. The horizon is an important aspect of landscape and landscape images. It also is the locus for culturally important astronomic events, especially sunrise and sunset. There appear to be two main clusters of concepts related to “the horizon”. One cluster relates to the idea of the sky meeting the Earth’s surface in a scene; this may be expressed as the end of edge of the sky, the Earth, the land, the water, etc. The other cluster of concepts relates to maximum distance from the observer, either visually or conceptually, and transforms into a scientific concept based on curvature of the Earth. The idea of the horizon as the projection of the “horizontal” plane from the observer out as far as possible, especially to the vanishing point in perspective, may be considered to be a variation of the maximum distance definition, or to represent a third notion of what the horizon is. This paper presents preliminary results based on definitions of related terms in a variety of languages, and on informal discussions. It also reviews a research program to confirm or modify these ideas and their relative frequency across different languages and cultures.