

ESRI International User Conference San Diego 2007

A Geographic Vision with a Green Im

25 years after the release of ARC/INFO GIS-market leader ESRI still knows how to attract thousands of people for an inspired user conference. They invited a Nobel Prize laureate, and of course there were hundreds of educational workshops and lectures for the GIS-specialist.

By: Remco Takken



Jack Dangermond opens ESRI's International User Conference 2007 in San Diego.

On June, 18 Jack Dangermond, President of ESRI opened the International User Conference in San Diego with explaining his GIS vision and the theme of 5 days of workshops, lectures and meetings, 'The Geographic Approach'.

Dangermond reminded his audience of the fact that Arc/INFO was launched exactly 25 years ago. "Computers were a million times more expensive and slow. If we could look into the future: in ten years time, our machines will be a million times faster, or cheaper, take your pick. Or they'll have become as big as one bloodcell."

Addressing today's problems, like a growing population, global warming, social conflicts, resource shortages, loss of biodiversity and security, Dangermond pointed out: "We need a change. We need to build on our understanding of nature and man as a living whole, as a network of integrated systems and its place in the evolution of it. GIS is being applied all around the world, and is becoming an instrument of evolution."

Nobel Peace Prize

Keynote speaker on the first day was Professor Wangari Maathai from Kenya, Nobel Peace Prize Winner, environmentalist and Founder of the Green Belt Movement. "Future wars are going to be fought over resources: diamonds, oil, land and water," she stated. "For us to live in peace with each other it is important for us to share our resources."

But right now, at this moment, the environment is Maathai's biggest concern: "Nobody is attacking us nowadays. If there is a threat out there, it's the deserts. The trees should be our soldiers, because they will take care of our water resources, they look after the cleaning of the air." Starting out as a women's right activist, Maathai developed her vision to encompass the degrading environment into a project where African women would plant 15 million trees, and start from there to work on civic and environmental education.

Today, the Nobel Prize winner for peace is still an activist. "I didn't wait for the heavens to do something, because you might wait for too long

for Jesus to come back." Helping her to present the current use of GIS in the Green Belt Movement organization was GIS-specialist Peter Ndunda, also from Kenya. Originally scheduled for a one-hour signing session of her book 'Unbowed', a huge crowd turned up in the map gallery section of the convention center. It would keep Maathai busy for the best part of the afternoon and the early evening.

Workshops and Sessions

During the second day of the conference, there were no plenary sessions whatsoever. Instead, ESRI users could choose from a staggering 286 technical workshops, user group meetings and paper sessions. There were lots of workshops concerning the geodatabase, working with Server GIS and mobile GIS. Of course, also more traditional subjects like cartography, analysis and geoprocessing were discussed.

One of the morning sessions, 'Using CAD data in ArcGIS' was packed full, with additional crowds just outside the doors peeping in. This session showed how to add (to ArcGIS) a CAD-file with the right georeferences, and alongside the motto 'CAD is just one of the sources for geo', CAD-line styles were converted to a geodatabase feature class. Here we saw potential data loss in geodatabase connections, which was duly acknowledged by ESRI: "To state that our current conversion is a full hundred percent lossless would be false."

For newcomers, this was THE day to finally come to grips and become acquainted with the nitty gritty details behind confusing product names like ArcGIS Explorer (a free client for ArcGIS Server), ArcExplorer (an older, now out-of-use reader for shape files and raster data) and ArcWeb Explorer (a flash viewer commonly used in websites).

As for the evening program: if one couldn't find a suitable informal user group to join for dinner, in Petco Park just around the corner, the San Diego Padres were playing against the Baltimore Orioles. Outcome of the match was 12 against 6 for the Padres...

New Versions

Of course plenty of time was spent explaining the upcoming new versions, among others ArcGIS edition 9.3. Only a few changes are to be expected. Dangermond said: "9.3 improves quality but that doesn't change the structure much. Think about service parts, refinements,

age

little tools and hundreds of little things.”

Just a bit later, ESRI's Nick Frunzi talked about problems with tech support helpdesk capacity concerning the current ArcGIS 9.2. Apart from an increased helpdesk staff there will be 'diagnostic reporting' in 9.3, and also access to an internal ESRI knowledgebase. "Our bug list", said Frunzi.

The amount of improvements in ArcGIS Server will be striking. The list was long, and it raised the question if the current version hadn't been launched too early. The improvements regarding documentation, scalability, performance and interoperability, plus new possibilities for Mashups. Also there will be support for PostgreSQL, Oracle Express and DB2.

Gadgets on the Expo

With a slightly more relaxed workshop session for the third day (259 modules from 7:00 am to 4:30 pm), why not stroll along the GIS related market stands in the Exhibit Pavilion?

Wangari Maathai was assisted by GIS-specialist Peter Ndunda, who took care of the visualisations during the keynote.

Naturally, you would find usual suspects like Leica GeoSystems, Hewlett Packard, Océ and of course the enormous ArcGIS islands and the wonderfully equipped ESRI Press shop that ESRI had reserved for itself.

Most of the people though, especially those who had seen Jack Dangermond's keynote opening speech on Monday, were after some cool new gadgets by three smaller vendors. On the hardware front, the Image Server Appliance by ESRI partner Inline Corporation boasts a mere 12 terabyte of internal storage in an optimized and tuned server appliance, including the ArcGIS Server application.

Arc Science Simulations presented an innovative visualization monitor. Their 1-meter diameter globe projector is able to show all kinds of map data in a realistic view 'as the world turns'.



AdapX, however, got high marks with a digital pen and a piece of 'magic' paper, which had been showed earlier in the year at Bentley's BE Conference in Los Angeles. In a quick demo, one could sketch and write over a simple A4 size print map, which only seconds later would turn up on the computer screen, complete with your own scribbling. A great example of working digitally with an analog 'feel'. The location-aware pen recognises a watermark in the paper,

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and using a docking station, it transfers its information to the original digital map on the PC. Great for simple tasks in the field.

Technical Keynotes

For many people, Mr Jack Dangermond 'is' ESRI, but a lot of folks who have been using GIS software for the last ten years, will also know about Scott Morehouse and Clint Brown. Their technical keynotes during ESRI's annual conference in San Diego gave some deep insights into the history and the technical developments within ESRI and the geospatial community in general.

Morehouse addressed the concept and history of modelling geographic information, while Brown sketched the evolution and future role of GIS in digital mapping. Of course, the huge impact on the visibility of geo-information through the success of Google Earth was discussed. Brown: "It supports getting answers to a focussed and limited set of questions. But, GIS users often need a lot more than roads and imagery in their base maps. For analysts, that's not enough. They might want to know where all the schools are, and how many people are living in a certain area."

User Ideas

The exodus of GIS people started early Friday morning. Some attendees hadn't had a proper night of sleep after the big 'Thursday Night Celebration' at the Marriott hotel, so they made sure they could catch some sleep at the airport or in the plane home.

This reporter had a plane to catch to Europe at noon, and thus missed the closing session. This was an open forum for questions and answers with Jack Dangermond and senior ESRI staff.

Clearly, ESRI takes some effort in user perspectives. During the whole week, selected members of the ESRI staff had been running around with little attachments on their badges, saying 'User

Ideas'. Thousands of people had received an e-mail questionnaire earlier in the week. Just before the conference had started, an e-mail came in which stated that Jack Dangermond had personally answered their questions, to be found at <http://events.esri.com/uc/>.

Looking back on the conference, it's amazing how ESRI once again succeeded in organising a smooth event for more than 14,000 people. Loaded with new ideas after every day of the conference, the first thing one would invariably think of when leaving San Diego's Convention Center was: how come nobody thought of a nice pedestrian tunnel under the busy (and dangerous) freight train and trolley crossing? If, like in the US, pedestrians are clearly not visible in any planning or building concept, some just has to step up with a map visualisation of the situation at the Convention Center and, in close proximity, Petco Park baseball stadium. Let's check if, next year, things have changed for the better...

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