GeoDesign: An Evolving Field

The first GeoDesign Summit took place from January 6th to 8th 2010 at ESRI headquarters in Redlands, California, USA. The gathering brought together about two hundred pioneering professionals and academics involved in creating and applying geospatial concepts, technology and tools to advance approaches to design in society.

Presentations covered both theory and practice and participants were offered several on design concepts and how these might be applied in the evolving field of GeoDesign. They also learned how some people are already using geospatial technologies to support design.

A number of attendees commented that that they "had been doing GeoDesign for years". Most agreed that some elements of GeoDesign had indeed been practiced for many years, but many more opportunities existed to engage geospatial technologies in more steps of the design process. Also clearly identified was the need for more training of geospatial professionals in basic design principles.

Progress was made in defining GeoDesign. Michael Flaxman of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology came up with "a design and planning method which tightly couples the creation of a design proposal with impact simulations informed by geographic context". Diana Sinton of the University of Redlands extrapolated: "a planning approach that grounds design methods and practices in temporal and spatial knowledge of human and natural geographic contexts".

GeoDesign as a discipline, a field of study and a practice is still evolving, and a number of action points were identified by the end of the summit to help further this. They included:
- obtaining a broader consensus; all are invited to participate in this discussion at http://participatorygeodesign.ning.com/ and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geodesign
- identifying new geospatial functionality, tools and technologies needed to support broader adoption of GeoDesign
- holding a ‘GeoDesign Challenge' with a cash prize to encourage development of real-world GeoDesign projects
- publishing a book of GeoDesign case-studies
- determining optimal methods of teaching design principles to geospatial professionals and developing a GeoDesign curriculum
- a second GeoDesign Summit in early 2011 to review progress.

In the end no one definition of GeoDesign was adopted by the group, but people left with a clearer mental picture of what constitutes GeoDesign. The greatest ‘takeaway' of the meeting may have been a much more lucid understanding among attendees of the role GeoDesign can play in leveraging geographical knowledge to effect positive change in our world.

Summit presentations will be soon be available online.