

Atlas: a Window on the World

This is an exciting time for cartography. The volume of available geographic information continues to increase, from diverse sources and providers each with their own characteristics and quirks. One of the best ways to consolidate such data is in an atlas. Atlases are visual windows on our surroundings. Whether they offer views of the entire world or focus on small areas of interest, atlases offer a unique geographic perspective.

Atlas Information System

Turning the page of a printed atlas allows the reader to discover and explore distant places. Atlas information systems operate as a focal point for use and dissemination of this geographic data in a variety of cartographic forms. They allow the data to “come alive”™ through an intangible collaboration between atlas developer and atlas user. Interacting with an atlas information system, digital trekkers can begin their journey by zooming from a satellite image sourced from space into large-scale information, and then travel through layers of unfolding geographic detail until they reach their final destination. Members of the ICA Commission on National and Regional Atlases share common interests in fostering the design, production and use of atlases and atlas information systems. For example, the Commission sponsored a special session at the August 2004 conference of the International Geographical Union held in Glasgow, Scotland. The Atlas Commission is also collaborating with four other ICA Commissions in sponsoring a joint seminar, “Internet-Based Cartographic Teaching and Learning: Atlases, Map Use and Visual Analytics”™ to be held in Madrid prior to the International Cartographic Conference (ICC) in July 2005 (http://redgeomatrica.rediris.es/ICA_Madrid2005).

Successes and Challenges

Commission members explore new tools for atlas design, creation, and dissemination. Data integration is a common challenge; atlases are collections of diverse information usually assembled from disparate sources, whilst electronic atlases and atlas information systems often work with spatial files that require some level of data amalgamation. Technical problems like this are the focus of Commission members. Participation in the ICC provides an opportunity for members to share such experiences. This year there are eight presentation sessions planned on atlases and atlas information systems, in which approximately 33 papers will be presented on a variety of concepts and approaches. Members will use this occasion to discuss and collaborate over their successes and technical challenges and learn from colleagues about new approaches to their work. The Commission website (<http://kartoweb.itc.nl/cnra/index.html>) also provides an opportunity to communicate about forthcoming events and recent achievements and serves as a reference for proceedings of past atlas seminars and workshops.

While atlases and atlas information systems serve diverse purposes, the ICA Commission on National and Regional Atlases attempts to find issues of common interest in advancing the work of producing atlases and maintaining atlas information systems. We encourage those interested in this work to participate in Commission activities.