GIM INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEWS ORHAN ALTAN

ISPRS on Track for Melbourne

Orhan Altan is president of ISPRS. He gives us a sneak preview of the four-yearly ISPRS Congress which will be held in Melbourne, Australia, this summer. Seeing the potential for tremendous developments in the sector in the years ahead, Altan calls on governments to resist cutting back on sciences such as photogrammetry and remote sensing which, while still developing, are already very important.

Back in 2009, you said that ISPRS should prioritise environmental monitoring and sustainable development. Is that still your standpoint?
Yes – it is still my standpoint and also that of the ISPRS. In 2008, we established several working groups on environmental issues to operate from 2008 to 2012, and I think we have achieved some good results in this field.

What about increased cooperation between the larger bodies and learned societies in geomatics?

In the Joint Board of Spatial Information Societies (JBGIS), we conduct meetings with more than nine societies every year in order to foster common projects and mobilise ourselves to reach common goals. Within the ICSU GeoUnions Consortium, we work closely with related organisations on common projects. We have already completed two high-class ICSU-sponsored projects; within GEO, we worked with different bodies and contributed to the Strategic Plan. In UNOOSA and COPUOS, we are one of the very active Societies; we have finished a common project together with UNOOSA and JBGIS, with whom we published a booklet on best practices in disaster and risk management. Another common project is underway to produce a publication on the 'Value of Geo-Information for Disaster and Risk Management' (VALID). Together with UNOOSA, ISPRS organises a conference series on applications for socio-economic benefits. ISPRS is also cooperating with the UN initiative on Global Geospatial Information Management (GGIM) to survey the current status of mapping and map updating in the world. We have organised several capacity-building workshops in Africa in collaboration with IEEE, UNECA and the US Department of State, and we are planning more workshops with ICA, for example. In South America, meanwhile, we worked with SAF, the photogrammetric service in Chile, to organise LARS – the Latin American Remote Sensing Conference.

Can you name a few other goals you have reached, looking back now?
As I've just shown, we have achieved many of our goals by working together with different international bodies, and we are more active in the regions where we are underrepresented. In terms of disaster management, we are very active in publishing the case studies in VALID, and also in organising the GI4DM series of workshops which we have done with other geospatial Societies. We have also worked with other organisations, such as geospatial media and ESRI, in organising international forums and workshops to promote the use of imagery for the benefit of society. Our science programme is strong, and our technical commissions and working groups have organised many workshops and symposia which have allowed information exchange on state-of-the-art research in many parts of the world.

What makes you most proud, when you reflect on the period behind you?
Speaking in Beijing, I stated that I felt very privileged to be following in the footsteps of my predecessors, commencing with Dolezal and followed by many others including Doyle, Konecny, Torlegard, Murai, Fritz, Trinder and Dowman. I see myself as very much following in the footsteps of these people. In 2010, we marked the Society's 100-year anniversary with a centenary celebration including a comprehensive programme in Vienna, the Society's birthplace, and speaking at the gala dinner in the City Hall on 4th July to an audience of over 800 people made me proud. At the General Assembly in Vienna, we agreed on a new Strategic Plan which could serve as an example for various Societies. I must mention the leading role of Prof Ian Dowman as the Committee chair, together with several members of the Committee. I was able to convince several geospatial societies to work with UNOOSA for a common project on disaster management.
For me personally, my election to the Executive Board of the International Council for Science (ICSU) at its 30th General Assembly in Rome on 30th September 2011 was a big thing. I was nominated by the Geo-Union cluster of ICSU. It is the first time that an ISPRS officer has been elected as a member of the ICSU Executive Board. ICSU is a non-governmental organisation with a global membership of national scientific bodies and International Scientific Unions. ICSU's mission is to strengthen international science for the benefit of society, as well as planning and coordinating research.

Do you expect any major or exciting developments in the years ahead in photogrammetry, remote sensing and the spatial sciences?
I can't speak for photogrammetry and remote sensing in detail, but we will see new developments in digital camera evolution, point cloud processing and augmented reality. Hyperspectral laser scanning will certainly compete with imaging photogrammetry in the future, and we will see tremendous developments in microwave sensing. I expect us to see new developments in different sensors too, and new software will enable more effective use of geospatial data.

What will be the main focus of the ISPRS Congress in Melbourne?
The four-yearly Congress is always a culmination of the ongoing work of many researchers, scientists, practitioners and administrators in the fields covered by ISPRS. The Congress will therefore be an important opportunity to view the latest developments in all the areas that ISPRS is concerned with.

Why should delegates travel to Melbourne?
The ISPRS Congress is the most important event in the conference calendar. It will bring together more than 2,500 people, including ISPRS Ordinary, Associate, Regional and Sustaining Members, representing more than 90 countries. The Congress will comprise meetings of the General Assembly, the Society's decision-making body, and technical plenary and parallel sessions with oral and interactive presentations of papers on new developments in a broad range of fields within the photogrammetry, remote sensing and spatial information sciences. There will also be a large commercial exhibition displaying the latest equipment and services related to the topics covered by ISPRS, and a scientific exhibition displaying the many achievements of ISPRS members. Melbourne will be an exciting location for the Congress. I am sure that all who attend the Congress will enjoy a very rewarding visit to Australia.

The economic crisis – and the resulting budget cutbacks – has endangered the progress of the GMES programme in Europe and the Enhanced View programme in the US. What is your view on this?
There have been cutbacks in the budgets, but I am certain that governments will make real investments to emphasise the importance of developing sciences like photogrammetry and remote sensing. Within Europe, INSPIRE, Galileo and GMES have created considerable awareness of geospatial data's value and, having created these programmes, governments should realise that reducing funds now will undo the good work done so far.

What is your outlook on the fact that the sector's economy is often so dependent on government spending?
Only certain parts of the sector are dependent on government spending, and my last comment has dealt with that issue. Other areas of the geospatial data sector such as laser scanning, both airborne and terrestrial, are increasingly buoyant as the economy picks up and will become even more active. In Europe, directives on providing services relating to the environment and health and safety will ensure that the sector has work for a long time to come.

Do you see geographical differences – regions that are lagging behind and regions that are speeding up – in developing or applying remote sensing and photogrammetric techniques?
Yes, there are geographical differences, but there is also increasing awareness of the value of geospatial information throughout the world, and there are encouraging developments in many regions.

Can you give some examples?
The most obvious advances are in China, South Korea and India. In these countries, governments and new companies are collecting and exploiting a lot of geospatial data. Don't forget the South-east Asian countries that have their own satellite programmes. On the African continent, Nigeria and South Africa are very active in collecting and using data from Earth observation. And last but not least, as already mentioned, there is great interest in expanding the knowledge and use of geospatial data in South America.

If you could give the readers of GIM International a message, what would it be?
ISPRS has become one of the leading international institutions in geospatial sciences. We have achieved this through the continued support of many people in different regions. On behalf of the ISPRS, I want to thank them all for their ongoing support. I hope that they continue to participate in all ISPRS activities as before. At the end of my term, I will be able to say that we were a good team at the ISPRS Council together with the Technical Commission presidents, and your readers will also observe this at the Congress.

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