

GIM INTERVIEWS DR MILAN KONECNY, PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL CARTOGRAPHIC ASSOCIATION (ICA)

President of a Proud Organisation

Map users expect understandable, true and user-friendly output and visualisations of data fitted to application, and this is the job of the cartographer. The XXIII Congress of the International Cartographic Association (ICA) will be held in Moscow from 4th to 9th August 2007. Established in 1959 from origins in the International Geographical Union, ICA is soon to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. Reason enough to interview ICA president Milan Konecny.

Map users expect understandable, true and user-friendly output and visualisations of data fitted to application, and this is the job of the cartographer. The XXIII Congress of the International Cartographic Association (ICA) will be held in Moscow from 4th to 9th August 2007. Established in 1959 from origins in the International Geographical Union, ICA is soon to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. Reason enough to interview ICA president Milan Konecny.

When was ICA established?

ICA was formed in 1959 to help overcome internal, national and international barriers in the cartographic profession; it aimed at free exchange of theoretical and technical information previously kept secret, to a large degree for defence or commercial reasons. To celebrate our fiftieth anniversary we are planning next year a meeting at the place where we were founded, Bern in Switzerland. I am president of a proud organisation. ICA separated from the International Geographical Union (IGU) in order to be able to react faster to changes in technologies. Paradoxically, finding solutions to many problems now requires closer contacts with IGU again, especially on sustainable development. But for many reasons the links are currently weak compared to those with other sister organisations. But the ball is in the IGU court; we hope they pass it back again soon.

How is ICA organised in terms of structure and membership?

The main structural elements are on one hand the national cartographic societies or associations, and on the other commissions and working groups. Affiliate members support our work financially and their contributions are mainly used for the ICA solidarity fund. This enables young cartographers and GI specialists from developing countries to join our meetings. We are trying to find a way to open ICA also to individuals.

How do you see the role of ICA in the light of other international geomatics organisations, such as FIG and ISPRS?

Former ICA presidents Michael Wood and Bengt Rystedt initiated in Durban in 2003 the establishment of the Joint Board of Geospatial Information Societies (JBGIS) and I try to continue this initiative. Bengt Rystedt and I had problems in convincing others of the necessity for JBGIS. But with the help of John Trinder and Ian Dowman from ISPRS, and strong support from former FIG president Holger Magel, who has also served as JBGIS president, eight organisations now support the JBGIS concept: FIG, IAG, ICA, IHO, IMTA, ISCGM, ISPRS and, recently, GSDI. Complementing one another's efforts, we are trying to find ways of helping developing countries, especially those in Africa.

Please elaborate upon your own role and involvement, including your ambitions as ICA president.

I formulated some of my ideas in your journal when interviewed by your former colleague Jacques Sipkes, who passed away two years ago; I would like to dedicate this interview to his memory. My main target was to make ICA sufficiently visible and a factor to reckon with again. Some of our activities were very successful, but participants did not know that these were ICA initiatives. I started a slightly new approach to integrating activities, and we further developed the research agenda. A new working group on cartography and GI in crisis management was established in 2005. In order to meet real people and face real problems, I travel a lot. Together with Ramon Lorenzo, Ferjan Ormeling, Haggai Nyapola and Bengt Rystedt, I have worked on the idea of re-establishing closer ties with NMOs and NMAs. I asked some new countries to become ICA members and enhanced the role of ICA in the UN, UNESCO and the Balkan countries. In Australia, with the help of Graciela Metternicht, we created links with the WALIS forum. We have opened two new forums on the role of art in cartography (William Cartwright) and on GIS, cartography and society (Robert McMaster). Very good relations have been created with PAIGH, led by secretary-general Santiago Borrero. Leading firms such as Intergraph and ESRI support many of our activities, and Jack Dangermond in particular is propagating cartography and geography in many places and situations.

The XXIII ICA Congress will be held in Moscow from 4th to 9th August 2007. Could you tell GIM International readers why they should attend?

The first reason is to get informed about the frontiers of global cartography and Geographical Information Science. Kirsi Virrantaus and David Fairbairn, with the assistance of the whole executive committee, together created the ICA research agenda. The second reason for attending is to exchange research ideas and results with colleagues from all over the world during technical sessions. The Russian organisers, led by general manager of Rosskartografia and ICA vice-president Vladimir Tikunov, reviewed all papers submitted for presentation at the congress. Russia is a cartographic superpower and the congress will enable people to learn more about Russian cartographic research, its National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) and its cartographic products, such as the new national atlas series. There will certainly be some pleasant surprises in store for many participants concerning the developments. Further, every ICA congress provides a demonstration of the ever-popular Barbara Petchenik contest, meetings of commissions, and formatting of new commissions and working groups. Attending the programme in Moscow will also offer you your only chance to visit the astronaut-training base in Star City! And those who attended the previous ICA conference held in Moscow thirty years ago will be surprised by all the changes.

Many consider cartography to be just the output phase of a GIS system and believe that mapmaking software makes cartographic experts redundant. How do you cope with this attitude?

Yes, I recognise this. People also once thought that the gramophone would do away with the need for musicians. Even people I trust claim that we are now beyond cartography, and to support their argument they show me Blaeu maps from the seventeenth century. But that is definitely not contemporary cartography! Nature in January 2004 called for a technology consisting of a mix of remote sensing, cartography, geography, photogrammetry and so on, and that is the better approach. GIS gave new and very strong directions for cartography. But today GIS is just a tool like a car, and it seems just a matter of whether we are travelling by Trabant or Mercedes. But it is the fuel that causes problems which need to be solved, especially within the framework of NSDI creation: in Europe GMES, and mainly INSPIRE. These initiatives require cartographers to produce real and true digital and analogue maps; the efforts of enthusiastic laymen are often null and void because they believe that data coming from a computer represents the absolute truth and are not aware of basic cartographic approaches.

Both technology and society are in the process of rapid change. How do you see the future of cartography and the future role of ICA within the geomatics business over, say, the next five years?

I prefer the term 'geoinformatics' because the term 'geomatic' was coined in Canada by political request. But anyway... cartography will continue to play an important role as long as people use their eyes to collect information. The millions need maps, and if cartographers do not create them, somebody else will. In the research field we are the leaders in visualisation and web mapping. Contemporary mapping is influenced by information/knowledge-based societies. I see new fields in cartography, which are not covered by present mapmaking software. My Moscow paper will explain my understanding of mobile, sensor and adaptable areas of cartography based on map context and real user approaches. Very important is Google Earth, and it is nowadays our target to define our role in connection to this tool. New areas of cartography will be used in early warning and crisis management all over the world.

What should be the role of cartography education in any geomatics, excuse me, geoinformatics programme?

ICA has begun drawing up a global overview of existing programmes. At many universities the teaching of cartography is an integral part of other curricula such as geography, photogrammetry, remote sensing and GIS. But there is space for cartography as a science in its own right. There are many requests from institutions, government and private-sector to prepare students for integrative approaches to the above fields. Our students should be knowledgeable in e-government and e-business.

Many countries in the world are undergoing development or are in a process of transition. Geo-information plays an essential role in all associated activities. What are the activities of ICA in these fields?

We have been first formulating at UN level the idea of a strong, visible GI community; everybody should understand that cartographers, geographers, geodesists, remote-sensing specialists and photogrammetrists are experts that deal with spatial data, information and knowledge, and who have to contribute to the solution of global challenges. Many countries are making efforts to create NSDIs, and a few of the many weaknesses here concern necessary but insufficient technological approaches,

and non-technological aspects relating to cultural, traditional, social and educational differences. Which of the fields in geoinformatics is closest to the user? Who is asking, searching for and managing the real requests of our users? Do we have real evidence that users need NSDI data? NSDI consists “only” of sets of data, but users expect output that is understandable, true and user-friendly; they expect data that can be visualised differently according to differing applications, such as for crisis management. Herein has and will continue to be our role.

ICA Scope and Aim

ICA is the world authoritative body for cartography, the discipline dealing with the conception, production, dissemination and study of maps. The ICA mission is to internationally promote the discipline and profession of cartography. The main objectives are defined in the Strategic Plan (www.icaci.org):

- to contribute to the understanding and solving of worldwide problems (sustainable development, early warning, disaster reduction, problems of poverty or the digital divide and many others)
- to foster international and national efforts to harmonise and make interoperable all sources of environmental, economic and social information in a geospatial context; ICA offers a forum for discussion
- to facilitate the transfer of new cartographic and GI technologies and knowledge between nations, especially in developing countries such as Africa and Latin America
- to carry out and promote multinational cartographic and GI research to solve scientific and applied problems
- to support education in cartography/GI
- to promote professional and technical standards in cartography and GIS/GI science.

The five environments within which ICA operates are science and technology, education, professional practice, society (social and organisational) and art. All are important for the successful development of the fields of cartography and GI, but the most important is society. We aim to apply scientific knowledge to the everyday life of society in terms of sustainable development, risk situations, economic development, and many other aspects.

<https://www.gim-international.com/content/article/president-of-a-proud-organisation>
