IAN DOWMAN, PROFESSOR OF PHOTOGRAMMETRY AND REMOTE SENSING, UCL AND PRESIDENT OF ISPRS

Promoting Capacity Building

ISPRS wants to expand its international role and to develop a presence in developing countries, says this monthâ€™s interviewee. Ian Dowman, president of ISPRS, the organisation that since April 2006 has begun contributing a monthly column to this journal, recognises the fact that geospatial information is becoming more widely used and appreciated by professionals and public alike. The public sees the media using satellite data to help it report on war and disaster, and is increasingly familiar with in-car navigation systems. Disasters, and the possibilities of such things as road charges, raise both professional and government awareness of the importance of geo-information.

What are the main scope and objectives of ISPRS?

The Society's scientific interests include photogrammetry, remote sensing, spatial information systems and related disciplines, as well as applications in cartography, geodesy, surveying, natural, earth and engineering sciences, and environmental monitoring and protection. Further applications include industrial design and manufacturing, architecture and monument preservation, and medicine. The primary mission of ISPRS is to promote photogrammetry, remote sensing and the spatial information sciences. We do this through the organisation of meetings and through working with international bodies such as the United Nations, The International Council for Science (ICSU) and the Group on Earth Observation (GEO).

When was ISPRS established and how is it organised in terms of structure?

ISPRS was formed in 1910 by Professor Dolezal in Vienna, and originally called ISP: The International Society for Photogrammetry. Remote Sensing was added in 1980. ISPRS is run by a Council of six members, elected by the General Assembly at the four-yearly Congress. The scientific work is organised by the eight Technical Commission presidents. Each Commission has a number of Working Groups. Full information is available at the ISPRS website www.isprs.org.

Please elaborate upon your own role and involvement in ISPRS.

My role as president is to ensure that the Society is running properly and has clear goals that are being fulfilled by Council and the Commissions. The secretary-general, currently Orhan Altan, is responsible for the administration of the Society, whilst I am more concerned with policies and strategies and I take the main responsibility for visiting members. Furthermore, I have a personal interest is promoting photogrammetry and remote sensing in developing countries and want to work with other societies to achieve thisâ€¦

â€¦What could be done to contribute to the further development of these countries?

In the field of photogrammetry and remote sensing, one of the most important developments in recent years has been the formation of the Group on Earth Observation (GEO). This is a government-level organisation which brings together data producers and data users and has produced a plan for a Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) which is designed to meet the needs of society in nine areas of societal benefit. These are Disasters, Health, Energy, Climate, Water, Weather, Ecosystems, Agriculture and Biodiversity. ISPRS is a Participating Organisation of GEO and is actively engaged in a number of tasks defined by the GEO Plenary to implement GEOSS. The main focus of these is capacity building and we have already co-organised workshops to promote this ideal. ISPRS also works with other societies through the Joint Board of Spatial Information Societies, through the United Nations and through the International Council for Science to provide the needs of developing countries.

What will provide the focus of attention for ISPRS over coming years?

We are focusing on developing the scientific programme based on international excellence in research, and in collaboration with

other international scientific unions. We also want to expand the international role of ISPRS by building on our existing links and developing a presence in developing countries. This involves education and technology transfer in collaboration with international partners. In this context I would like to add that 2006 is a busy year for ISPRS as each Commission will be organising a symposium. The full list was published in the April edition of GIM International and can be found on our website. These cover a very wide range of activities and demonstrate the breadth and depth of ISPRS activities.

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

The most important change is that geospatial information is becoming more widely used and appreciated by professionals and the public. This is at least partly because technology is providing the means to collect data, extract information and distribute it to a very wide range of users; but is also because people see a need for geospatial information. The general public sees this through the media, which reports on wars and disasters with the help of satellite data, and through the use of in-car navigation systems. Professionals and government see it through the response to disasters on the ground and through such possibilities as road charging. There is therefore strong pressure on the geospatial industry to produce the information which is required and the tools to use it effectively. There is a clear trend towards making use of all available data and integrating it to generate the required information. The role of ISPRS in this is to facilitate scientific exchange of information within the ISPRS community and to ensure that potential users of data know what can be done and how to obtain the information they need.

How do you see the role of ISPRS in educating young people and training professionals?

I have already mentioned the capacity-building activities carried out through GEO. We also have a Commission on Education and Outreach that has a programme of work that includes:

- promotion of education and training at fundamental, advanced and professional levels
- promotion of technology transfer, considering regional needs and resources
- computer-assisted teaching and training, and distance learning
- innovative techniques for information dissemination over the internet
- promotion of student consortium and innovative outreach activities.

Within this framework we run summer schools for students and training workshops for professions in less well developed countries. Since 2004 we have organised workshops in Istanbul, Mexico, Laos and Sri Lanka; more are planned.

In April 2006 ISPRS began contributing a monthly page to this journal. Please elaborate on your reasons for taking this step.

To be honest with you, the main reason was financial. We were finding it increasingly expensive to produce our quarterly bulletin, Highlights. The solution is to produce a four-monthly eBulletin and the monthly page for publication in GIM International. But in doing this we also expect to reach a wider audience, inform GIM International readers about ISPRS activities and, hopefully, get more people involved in ISPRSâ€¦

â€¦ I am sure in this way you will reach a broad international audience, including many people in developing countriesâ€¦

â€¦ Another important issue is the ISPRS Foundation. We are constantly concerned about providing funding for new scientific initiatives, and particularly provide training, travel grants and engage in other philanthropic activities. The ISPRS Foundation has been set up to enable us to provide such funding. We have made a good start in attracting donations and have made awards for people to attend the symposia this year. But we do need more donations and will be very happy to discuss this with potential donors.