

# Questions

There must be billions of them lying on bookshelves and languishing on coffee tables, in boxes in garrets and antiquarian bookshops; some will be brand new, almost never touched, others torn through heavy use. A lot will have been the source of inspiration for dreams of emigration to better places and journeys to unknown shores, others just an aid to matter-of-fact planning of business trips or visualisation of logistical processes. Some are beautifully illustrated, others dull. Some belong to almost priceless collections and others are not worth a second look. But always they have been a representation of reality. I am, of course, talking about atlases.

Remember those old-fashioned, printed books with maps, legends and registers? Publishers have made billions out of them and the product has gone on selling itself in an endless cycle as borders changed, polders were created, islands disappeared through storms at sea and the consumer, student, businessman or passionate traveller needed a more up-to-date map. And for all these different consumers innumerable different sorts of atlases have been published by just as many specialised publishing houses.

It seems nowadays there's only one 'publisher' left: Google. Google Earth is the name of the programme on everybody's lips and desktops. And the beautiful thing about it: this portrayal of our Earth is more realistic than ever before, although of course it's still a representation. Google Earth's Plus, Pro and Enterprise versions are sold to companies. The same companies are willing to pay Google Earth for a link on its digital maps, and government organisations are also allowing their data to be included in these digital maps, according to Chikai Ohazama, product manager for Google Earth, interviewed by contributing editor Arie Duindam in this edition of GIM International.

So it's not only consumers who are dreaming again, inspired by satellite pictures of earlier visited beach resorts in, let's say, Italy, California or New Zealand, or are gazing in awe at their own back garden and perhaps, or perhaps not (!) at their car in the driveway. Penetration of the business-to-business market moves fast too. Those professionals who thought Google Earth would remain a play-toy for computer freaks have already been proved wrong.

This development implies some questions for the near future of the business. Is it a good thing that there is, seemingly, no competition, at least in the consumer field? Is Google Earth a danger to the business? Or will it cause an upswing in developments that are already hardly standing still? I do hope the latter proves the case; it will make the geomatics business even more exciting than it already is. And it will drive the price of old atlases up even further!