

Celebration of Maps during International Map Year



Over the past decade or so, geomatics has rapidly evolved and spread into almost every industry to the point where most people do not even realise they are using some aspect of geomatics. Due to this increased use of GIS and GPS technology, combined with a generation driven by digital communication, we have started to notice a decline in traditional paper maps and more emphasis on digital mapping applications.

(By Ted MacKinnon, geomatics specialist, Canada)

This year has been designated as International Map Year – a celebration of maps, geographic information, and how they are used in society – so it seems fitting to write a little about maps and why there will always be a place for traditional cartography in

geomatics.

The basic purpose of traditional maps is to help describe spatial relationships of specific features. Different types of maps are used for numerous and diverse purposes, but they all share common characteristics such as orientation, scale and symbology. Throughout history, maps of all types have been providing people with ways to make life easier.

In a society driven by digital communication, the power of location has become an everyday occurrence, especially since most people these days own a mobile device with some sort of digital mapping application installed. Generally speaking we all want to know where things are located and the best and most efficient way to reach them. Digital mapping applications provide us with all that, but without the need to unfold a large and detailed sheet of paper, orientate ourselves and then determine that same outcome on our own. With digital applications making things easier, should we be concerned that traditional paper maps may be in danger of disappearing?

I think it is pretty safe to say that GIS has almost fully replaced hand-drawn cartography and that most people can use geographic software or mapping applications to create a map (even my kids have used ArcGIS to create maps for their elementary-school projects). However, not many people can actually draft an accurate spatial representation by hand as cartographers have been doing for many years.

Convenience is one thing but that often comes at the cost of losing the artistic component which is often involved with good cartography. Unroll an old hand-drawn map and suddenly people are no longer concerned about how much more efficient digital maps are; instead, they are appreciating the details used to create the spatially accurate and visually appealing representation. Hence, there are clearly still many of us who can appreciate the value of the traditional paper map.

When you consider the way and rate that geomatics technology is advancing, with drones, 3D printing and terabyte-sized data storage all becoming increasingly common, I think it is fair to say that traditional paper maps will probably never actually disappear altogether but instead they will just become one of many different ways of helping to make life easier.

Therefore, if we focus more on teaching youngsters about geomatics theory, geography and traditional cartography, then we may find that more people will learn to appreciate the value offered by paper maps while at the same time taking advantage of all the other types of maps that continue to evolve from digital mapping applications.

More from Ted MacKinnon on <http://tmackinnon.com>.