

Geospatial information and geographical names: Finding our way through a forest of information

Today in the world there is so much information available to us! At every turn we are confronted by data. We look at the weather for the day or the week, we look for the metro/subway layout, we look up timetables to buy our airline tickets ... and whether we seek them or not, the news headlines from around the world enter our lives and the street signs and the advertising boards we see every day divert our minds. For some, information is a subject of fascination and has its own allure – what species of plants grow here? What football teams hold the records? What are the best holiday locations near Seoul?

Nearly all these bodies of information have dimensions of time and space. So much – some say 80% – of knowledge is spatially based, and the importance of ‘place’ is today being realized as significant to sorting, categorizing and inter-relating our sets of data, whether we think locally, nationally, or globally.

If data is referenced to location (*geo-* or spatially referenced), we can, for instance, relate the locations of city infrastructures, such as roads, water supply pipes, sewers, and power lines, and so more efficiently and safely install new gas lines or new traffic lights. We can relate the climate of an area to the soils, the type of terrain, the distance from markets, and other criteria which could help determine the best sorts of farming for the region. With the various layers of information gathered, we can use their inter-relationships to predict natural hazards such as river flooding, tsunamis or droughts that may cause immense human suffering. The possibilities that currently exist (or could be conceived in the future) with respect to carefully gathered, stored and distributed geo-referenced data, meeting national and international standards, is certainly thought provoking!

If we think of how we access information when browsing the web, in the social media, in newspapers, or just by talking to each other, very often it is through a place name (also referred to as a geographical name). Where did you take those photos? In what places can we visit mountain parks that are open in the winter? Which countries in Africa have water power resources? Geographical names are often the key to finding the information we are seeking.

These names of buildings, streets, cities and villages, rivers, mountains, seafloor features, oceans, and so on, reflect the language and identity of the people of the region and are handed down from generation to generation. Yes, of course, we know that names can and do change over time, but an orderly process is always an advantage.

Through the United Nations, a group was established in 1960 to provide a forum for discussing and taking a world view on geographical names issues and encouraging countries around the world to set up their own authorities to look after the administration of all their place names. In keeping with this vision, the Republic of Korea has established the Korean National

Committee on Geographical Names (KNCGN), supported by the National Geographic Information Institute (NGII) and the Korea Hydrographic and Oceanographic Agency (KHOA).

As we all realize, not all languages are written using the same writing systems or scripts. Although these are well understood by the speakers of these languages, they can provide road blocks to communication for those using other scripts. At present, the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names is working on romanization systems for scripts, so that consistent and scientifically-based conversions can take place into the Roman/Latin alphabet. Hopefully before too many years, systems of conversion into other scripts can also be pursued. Such work helps to avoid confusion in communication between, for instance, the use of Kiev, Kyiv, Kyyiv, or Kyev for the Roman alphabet form for the capital of Ukraine - Київ.

“Over the last decade, new technologies have deeply transformed the availability and accessibility of geospatial information and its potential uses,” said Mr. Sha Zukang, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs at the opening of the First High Level Forum on Global Geospatial Information Management in Seoul on 24th October 2011.

Geographical names may be only a small part of location based (geospatial) information, but when one considers their contribution to effective delivery services, provision of humanitarian aid, timely search and rescue activities and our collective heritage, they are indeed a significant and essential part of our daily lives.