



Too many cooks?

By Howard Veregin

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Two or three times over the past couple of months, I have heard the phrase “too many cooks” used in reference to Wisconsin’s geospatial community. “[WLIA](#), [LION](#), [SAGIC](#), [SIAC](#), [GIO](#), [SCO](#), [WIGICC](#) – why do we have so many organizations in this state focusing on GIS? It’s just causing friction and confusion.” The implication is that somebody needs to get out of the kitchen so that the real chefs can get on with their cooking. What’s not articulated of course is who is going to be asked to get out, and by whom.

I do not share this point of view. From my perspective as State Cartographer and with many years of experience with GIS and cartography, both as an academic and in private industry, I think there is still plenty of room left in the kitchen. Wisconsin’s geospatial landscape is rich and diverse. Each of our geospatial organizations fulfills a unique role and mission, and each organization focuses on a different segment of the geospatial community. This diversity positions Wisconsin to adapt effectively to changes in geospatial technology and use, provides a foundation to support growth and evolution in the field as a whole, and allows us to capitalize on our geospatial assets and demonstrate return on investment.



The Changing Geospatial Landscape

Over the last decade the geospatial domain has grown from a specialized area of professional



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expertise to a global phenomenon. In addition to ubiquitous web-based and mobile mapping applications used by literally millions of people worldwide, the geospatial user community is diffusing into many non-traditional sectors as diverse as public health, economic development, conservation, community planning, business intelligence, and the humanities. Professionals in these areas are beginning to see the benefits of these technologies and the integrating power of geography for solving problems. This trend has not gone unnoticed. GIS pioneer Michael Goodchild, writing with geographer Donald Janelle, argues that geography, spurred on by technological advances in GIS and cartography, has in recent years found new theoretical significance in many disciplines.⁽¹⁾ Among the examples they cite is [Paul Krugman's 2008 Nobel Prize in Economics](#) that was based in part on an understanding of the importance of location in economic activity. The importance of place has also been recognized by the Obama administration in a 2009 [White House "Place-Based Initiative" memo](#)  (recently [amplified in a June, 2010, memo](#) ) seeking to target the prosperity, equity, sustainability, and livability of places by leveraging spatially-targeted investments in rural and urban areas.

I believe that these changes — in geospatial technology, non-traditional applications, and the growing importance of the place-based paradigm — have important implications for many geospatial organizations, in Wisconsin and beyond. To ignore them means missing an opportunity to connect with a whole new set of users who, if their experiments with geospatial technology are successful, will help us immeasurably in our efforts to prove to policy makers how extraordinarily valuable geospatial technology really is. Likewise finding new uses for Wisconsin's rich local collections of geospatial data will benefit us when it comes time to justify expenditures for data development and maintenance. At the very least, getting GIS tools and techniques into the hands of new users helps foster the growth of spatial thinking, and we all know we need more of that.

In any case, many of these new users will succeed whether we help them or not. Individuals standing in the way by trying to narrow the scope of "legitimate" geospatial activity or claiming to be the only authoritative geospatial voice will be bypassed by groups eager to find other ways to advance. Some have argued that this kind of thing has already happened in the field of academic cartography. According to cartographer Denis Wood,⁽²⁾ academic cartography has rendered itself irrelevant through its insistence that it be recognized as the sole authority on map-making while simultaneously focusing on the narrowest possible definition of the field. Most of the truly unique and valuable maps, Wood claims, are now made by non-cartographers. His claim is that what is important is the substance of the map, not how well it conforms to academic cartographers' demands about style and design. While provocative, Wood's comments have been described as "not far from the truth" by other observers.⁽³⁾

The Geospatial Community in Wisconsin

WLIA, LION, SAGIC, SIAC, GIO, SCO, WIGICC and other organizations have different perspectives, audiences, missions, agendas, and abilities. Each organization has a unique role to play in the state. WLIA's focus has historically been the land information community. LION brings together county Land Information Officers to foster success in land information programs at the local level. SAGIC is the primary advisory group for state agency users and developers of geospatial data and technologies. SIAC is a forum for faculty, staff and students at UW-Madison involved in GIS and related disciplines. The GIO is concerned with coordination of geospatial resources, policies, and programs to support the needs of state government. The SCO's mission is education, outreach, coordination, and dissemination of data and information. Each of these roles is unique, valuable, and important, and each contributes to the richness and diversity of Wisconsin's geospatial landscape. The Wisconsin Geographic Information Coordination Council (WIGICC), I believe, is well-positioned to go beyond the boundaries of traditional geospatial domains and applications, and reach out to non-traditional sectors to help identify needs and coordinate efforts. WIGICC could explore some of these new approaches in ways that other organizations probably would not, given their roles and missions.

My reaction to recent discussion about the WIGICC Report of Accomplishments and Recommendations is that there continues to be some disinterest in WIGICC on the part of the established GIS community in the state. The Council seems to have failed to completely convince this community of the value of a statewide council, at least at this time. Perhaps this is natural given the relative maturity of geospatial activities at the local level here in Wisconsin. However, the lack of interest continues to be a problem for WIGICC. As a grassroots volunteer organization, WIGICC cannot survive without network support. The network may not be interested in WIGICC until it accomplishes something significant, but on the other hand how does WIGICC accomplish anything without engagement?

Some have asked, "Coordination councils are supposed to support the community. And if WIGICC isn't supporting the community, then isn't that a problem?" I think the answer to that depends on how broadly you define the community. I support and endorse the Outreach Recommendation in lines 257-266 of the June 10, 2010, WIGICC report draft:

Outreach efforts continue to be a high priority activity for WIGICC. In particular, WIGICC is positioned to reach out and engage the emerging non-traditional geospatial user community. This includes individuals in the health professions, economic development, the non-profit sector, and others who are eager to use and apply geospatial tools and concepts but lack the background and skills to do so. By developing stronger ties to this community, WIGICC can serve as a coordination body

making connections between people, communities, data, and other necessary resources to help these non-traditional sectors succeed in their efforts. This is important and significant because this is one of the largest growth areas of the geospatial community, having received much impetus from the wide availability of Google and other web-based mapping sites. WIGICC is uniquely positioned to assist this emerging group because it defines "geospatial" in the broadest possible terms.⁽⁴⁾

WIGICC may not have succeeded — yet — in convincing established geospatial users of its potential value. That does not mean, however, that in the meantime WIGICC cannot focus attention on other sectors that do need attention, would benefit from support, and would appreciate some help. Perhaps through its efforts with these sectors WIGICC can demonstrate success and foster interest on the part of established users as well. Ultimately, of course, WIGICC must support and be supported by the geospatial community as a whole, not just non-traditional sectors. My point is only that the pathway to that goal may in part be through concerted effort in emerging areas where the need is more obvious and successes can be more readily achieved.

Conclusions

Ultimately, WLIA, LION, SAGIC, SIAC, GIO, SCO, WIGICC and other organizations can and will work together collaboratively on issues of mutual interest. Multiple groups with different audiences and agendas can be more effective than one group when it comes to advancing the field as a whole. Two heads are better than one -- a proverb that, not coincidentally, stands in stark contrast to the maxim of "too many cooks." My hope is that -- because of and not in spite of the diversity of these organizations -- we can find constructive ways to work together, fusing different interests and talents to find new solutions that advance the role, value, and utility of geospatial technology and methods to help solve the critical problems we're facing in all areas of society. The rich, diverse mixture of organizations and viewpoints we have in this state is a good starting point for this growth and evolution.

Notes:

1. Michael F. Goodchild and Donald G. Janelle. Toward Critical Spatial Thinking in the Social Sciences and Humanities. *GeoJournal*, Vol. 75, 2010, 3-13.
2. Denis Wood. Cartography is Dead (Thank God!). *Cartographic Perspectives*, No. 45, 2003, 4-7.
3. Brandon Plewe. Web Cartography in the United States. *Cartography and Geographic Information Science*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2007, 133-136.

4. Wisconsin Geographic Information Coordination Council. *Report of Accomplishments and Recommendations*. Draft 9, June 10, 2010.

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