

Does GIS really matter?

— by Jeff Thurston

You may have heard people say over and over again: “everything is some place” and “you can organize your world.” You wonder why some of your friend’s eyes glass over when they start talking about spatial information and GIS in connection with “place,” and you think to yourself: “What’s this all about?” Does GIS really matter?

Geographic information systems (GIS) are about three things—people, place, and quality of life. Each of these can be described using different factors, but, at the end of the day, GIS connects them together.

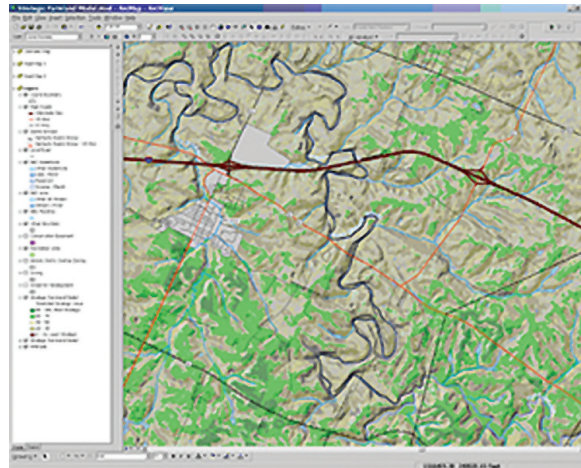
To learn about GIS as a tool is to begin to understand the power of visualization it places at our fingertips. I bet I could explain more about the world with a GIS than I could by talking to you. In fact, using a GIS I could literally bring the world to you, and do it better than any other medium—even television.

You would see yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And if you have a question about something, somewhere I would likely be able to provide you with a good answer, and likely some guidelines about where you could look for more information.

We often talk about the “place” part of GIS, associating it with a map or some other graphic. As important and useful as that may be, building your career (and possibly securing life-long employment) upon the knowledge of how to use GIS to solve problems important to other people, adds more value to your life than learning about things that leave you disconnected from the real world.

Don’t you want to know why water is clean? Where the good food is? Where different kinds of music evolved from? How to make trains more efficient? How to help people avoid disease, hunger and death? There are so many questions that one could ask and GIS can help you to find the answers.

When your friends get excited and go all “GIS-geek-like” when they talk about GIS, you see—though you may not be aware of this—people who grasp the idea of GIS tools opening doors to connecting with others and letting the world echo back the replies to one’s questions.



Some people say that one does not need to learn GIS. I suppose that is true. We don’t have to learn to swim, drive, or ride a bike either. But we do, because exercise keeps us fit and makes our vacations more enjoyable.

And you know what? The same applies to learning GIS. One of the most powerful things you can learn today is about connecting that phone

you carry around in your pocket to a GIS and find your way in a place you have never been to. “Finding places” or “navigating” is important to people, and so are other aspects of the people-places-quality-of-life nexus. The question the geospatial professional should ask is, “How can GIS make their work and life experiences better? and “How and where do I learn to use GIS for the benefit of the public and my own career?”

So, does GIS really matter? I think it does. Picture this. Many people will be using data in the future for all kinds of problem solving. Most of that information will often be presented to them in simplified ways so that they can understand where to store the data, attach it to a project, and use it to create—something. But far fewer people will actually be developing GIS solutions to problems, which will then be made available to thousands of people.

People who use and understand GIS play an integral role in understanding how the world works and conveying that information to others who enact change. Technology, in the case of GIS, becomes a conduit for positive impacts on people’s life and work.

How do you know if you are learning GIS right? Remember, GIS is much more than just pushing a button, or producing a map, or accessing data. It’s about connecting with the world. GIS is about how you think about the world, how you participate in it. If you nail these aspects of GIS down and understand them, then you will know the power you wield when you power your computer and open the first file. — Jeff Thurston is editor and co-founder of *V1 Magazine*. He is based in Berlin.