

Exploring the Evolution of Geo Intelligence - Esri User Conference 2013



Content is king! That was the main message from the Esri UK annual conference in London – a buzzy event with four breakout streams and 17 partners exhibiting. Robin Waters reports.

The Esri UK conference was held at the Novotel in Hammersmith on 21 May. Around a thousand Esri customers attended as well as nearly all of the 250 or so Esri UK staff. That is a big conference for GIS in the UK. And the customers came for free – perhaps that is the secret to a successful conference in austere times?

It is the first time I have attended the conference and I was impressed. Esri folk could not have been more helpful; the facilities, with a couple of admitted glitches, were spot on; the

food and drink (free bar at five) were first class; the partners seemed to be doing great business on their stands and the plenary and breakout sessions were very interesting. Partners ranged from RGS (but not AGI) to Nokia here (sic) – previously NAVTEQ. OS, The GeoInformation Group, Atkins, Leica, Canon and Bluesky are natural partners but 1Spatial would normally be seen as a competitor and I admit to never having heard of the others!

Hints and Frustration

Breakout sessions were organised so that some technology and/or content from Esri was followed by a couple of end-user case studies. I heard all about UK content from Christophe Charpentier and then two very good case studies from the Canal and River Trust (formerly British Waterways) and Scottish Power. The former are now relegated to charity status and have lost their membership of the Public Sector Mapping Agreement with Ordnance Survey, which seems daft. The latter presented a low carbon stakeholder collaboration and are incredibly frustrated by not even being able to use their own company's anonymised meter readings due to privacy concerns, which also strikes me as daft.

I will be writing up my interview with Charles Kenelly for the next issue but suffice it to say that his tongue in cheek review of the next 25 years of GIS in the UK had sufficient humour and a few hints that ought to keep us on our toes. When do you think Ordnance Survey will just serve its own data to anyone and cut out all the middlemen? When will we all be geotagged – if we want cheap life insurance?

Apps and Blurred Distinctions

There was also an interesting plenary discussion session with Peter Wilkinson from Esri UK, and Christophe Charpentier and Ismael Chivite from Esri Inc. They enthused at the potential for ArcGIS Online and thought that smaller users would take it up rather than have to maintain their own servers but they did think that ArcGIS servers would continue for larger and more sophisticated users. The distinction between online and desktop applications will become blurred in any case. Not good news for 'conventional' GI experts – the panel thought that they will be gradually be overtaken by application specialists able to use the easier technology but that there will be a great need for those who can blend cartographic skills with graphic design to produce the end user outputs.

Education and Competition

Presenters don't get much more passionate than Jason Sawle who runs the Esri not-for-profit schools programme. This programme has been going for several years but not been as successful as they had hoped until ArcGIS Online made it so much easier and provided lots of base mapping. He is looking for further sponsors – £250 per school – and in particular for those that can help with their own local data. GIS is on the curricula but it still needs a big push.

And now for something completely different! We heard from Kate Philp and Ibrar Ali, MC about their determination to help the Brits beat the Americans and the Commonwealth teams to the South Pole in aid of Walking with the Wounded, which we will be able to follow live through an Esri application later this year. All in all an excellent day out that was enjoyed by a lot of people.

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