

Intense and happy GIS days in St Helena!

By iLaria Marengo , First published 3rd March 2014

It took quite a long journey to reach St Helena (8 hours on the plane from Brize Norton, 11 days in Ascension, and 2 days on the RMS St Helena) but it was an extremely fruitful and worthwhile trip.

The purpose of travelling to the island was to meet the community of data “collectors and users” and introduce to them the concepts of open source GIS, metadata recording and data management. In brief, the goal was to officially start the Information Management Centre (IMS)/GIS data centre and provide the islanders training/knowledge and understanding of the open source software QGIS. In addition, time was dedicated to support Dr Judith Brown and her marine team in preparing the data for a series of analyses that will contribute to the mapping of St Helena’s marine biodiversity. The use and application of GIS as an analytical and mapping tool will be very beneficial for the Darwin project that Judith is leading and will help in delivering a marine management plan for the island.

As in the Falklands and Ascension Island, in St Helena there is also a major need to standardise the procedures of data collection, storage and management. The absence of an integrated and harmonised data system translates in duplication and dispersion of data across the government departments; difficulties in sharing and accessing the data within the departments and between departments and the local National Trust; and, in the worst cases, loss of data.

On the contrary, the benefit from having the IMS/GIS data centre is that people will share a data system with the same structure across the islands, will be able to find relevant information easily and quickly thanks to an online metadata, will be familiar with the way data are stored and gathered, and will be in the position of carrying out studies and research across the islands of the south Atlantic region as the data, thanks to the standards and similar procedures, will be highly comparable.

The IMS/GIS data centre consider training and advising people on GIS concepts, data standards and procedures first priority. In St Helena 20 people from the government and the National Trust attended the QGIS course.

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Everybody worked on their own data: the complete beginners experimented with GIS applications and unveiled its functionalities as an analytical and mapping tool, while the intermediates challenged the open source software to test that it is as effective as a proprietary one. The result was greater than the expectations: in two weeks not only people started using QGIS and felt the tool less difficult than thought but, above all, understood that successful data collection starts from as soon as the project outcomes are defined and it is based on a careful design and thinking of the structure of the attribute table, the variables that will be measured and the tools to be used to quantify the variables.

In addition, more than 30 metadata were provided for correspondent datasets. This is the first big step that will cast light on the accessibility, availability, distribution and quality of the data across the island. All in all, the weeks in St Helena were fruitful in terms of work carried out, collaboration, knowledge and skills acquired by everybody.

After two intense and happy weeks of GIS, everybody could see some results either in forms of maps, or in terms of understanding basic data management principles, or by looking at the number of records of metadata compiled.

The challenge now is to carry on, don't lose the enthusiasm and keep in touch remotely and through the GIS Officer who is due to arrive in Jamestown in May. The passion, the effort and collaboration that people showed in St Helena are the right "fuel" for running and making the project a success!

