



GRID-Geneva Quarterly Bulletin No. 2

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Global Resource Information Database-Geneva

Message from the Regional Coordinator on the Balkans Task Force

In early May, UNEP's Executive Director Dr. Klaus Töpfer established the "UNEP-UNCHS (Habitat) Task Force on the Environment and Human Settlements in the Balkans", or BTF as it has become more commonly known. The BTF, in cooperation with other UN and relevant technical bodies, has been mandated to review the impacts of the Balkans conflict on the human and physical environment, identify those areas in need of assistance, help formulate response measures and make recommendations on specific actions to be taken.

Since the BTF's debut, GRID-Geneva has been in charge of data and information collection, compilation and analysis of the potential or proven environmental and human settlement impacts of the conflict in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and surrounding countries. An Information Unit was rapidly set up within GRID-Geneva to serve the BTF and provide regular status reports, including graphical outputs such as maps and other products.

During the period of May-June, the BTF Information Unit at GRID-Geneva produced a total of 10 "Situation

Reports". Initially these reports were for internal use by the BTF and UNEP management, but as of the fourth issue dissemination was widened to include a broader audience of UN agencies, NGOs and other public institutions. From the sixth issue onwards, the situation reports have been distributed electronically in PDF format, with linked maps and other graphics/info products, which are thus re-printable in full color by users (several completely new Balkans maps products have been created at GRID-Geneva).

As of 1 June, the BTF has been chaired by Mr. Pekka Haavisto, the former Environment and Development Cooperation Minister of Finland. Under Mr. Haavisto's direction, activities of the BTF have focused on strengthening networking with an ever-expanding group of UN agencies, NGOs and governmental partners. This has included organisations such as UNDP, UNECE, UNHCR, WHO et al., the Danube Commission and Programme Coordination Unit (Vienna), the European Commission, European Environment Agency (EEA-Copenhagen), the Green Cross, IUCN, Red Cross, WWF-International, Friends-of-the-Earth, Greenpeace, Oxfam-UK, Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) Disaster Relief Unit and their "FOCUS" Project, Swiss Federal Agency for Environment, Forests and Landscape

(BUWAL), the University of Geneva, numerous national authorities in the Balkans region and many others.

Complete dossiers of the situation reports and color map products have been provided by the BTF to high-level decision-makers such as Finnish President Mr. Marti Ahtisaahri prior to his mission to Belgrade, FRY to negotiate the peace agreement with Yugoslav authorities, to Germany's Minister of Environment Mr. Jurgen Tritten, the office of Mr. Carl Bildt (UN special envoy for Kosovo), and to various other bodies and decision-makers during the European

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GRID-Geneva Advisory Board Meeting

An "ad-hoc" meeting of the GRID-Geneva Partnership Advisory Board (AB) was held at the Geneva Executive Center (GEC) on 22 June 1999. The meeting was in fact a continuation of the AB's 18 March discussion on GRID-Geneva's proposed mid-term (five-year) strategy, and the process to implement the same within the context of UNEP/DEIA&EW's "Environmental Observing and Assessment Strategy". Representatives of BUWAL, UNEP and the University of Geneva approved the new version of the mid-term strategy and asked the Regional

Coordinator to prepare specific indicators which could be used to measure its implementation, for discussion at the next AB meeting.

Other topics covered during the "ad-hoc" meeting were the Charter of the AB's operating rules and procedures, a proposed "pricing policy" for GRID-Geneva's products and services, and the role of GRID-Geneva in the Balkans Task Force. In regard to the latter subject,

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Global Fire Occurrences as observed by GRID-Geneva in 1998/99

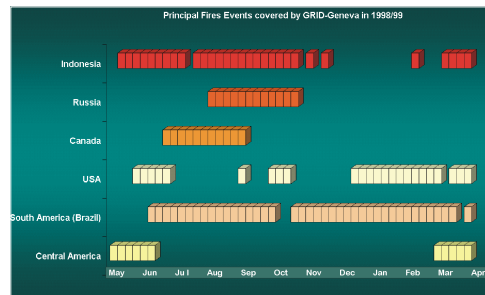
Although fire plays an important role in sustaining the biodiversity of certain ecosystems, this does not apply to the tropical rainforests of Borneo, Sumatra, Yucatan, Amazonia or in the Russian taiga. In these areas large fire events in 1997-98, were responsible for health problems, biodiversity and economic losses, soil erosion, as well as air and water pollution. The fires are often caused by a combination of unfavorable climatic conditions and poor agricultural practices. This is particularly worrying in the

case of Brazil where the fires are active all year-round.

The need for a better understanding as well as global concern over this phenomena lead several organisations to monitor fire outbreaks in different parts of the world. GRID-Geneva was asked to compile the data in order to provide decision-makers with accurate and updated information on a regular basis.

This table shows the occurrence of fires events as observed by GRID-Geneva over

a one-year time period. The results clearly show a wide variability in the number of fire events worldwide and underscore the need for such a survey. The largest fire events were recorded in Indonesia (May-July 1998), Central America (May-June 1998), Russia (Sakhalin Island, September 1998), Canada (July 1998) and Brazil (June-September 1998). Weekly status reports including maps

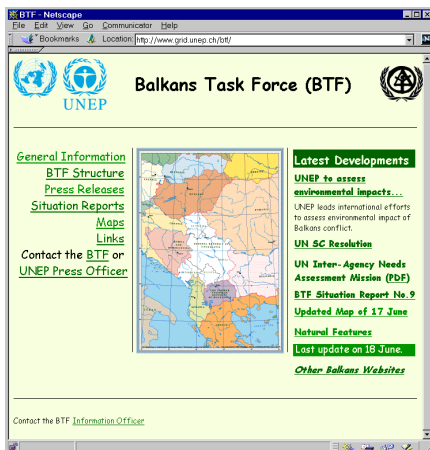


and satellite images can be obtained from the GRID-Geneva website: <http://www.grid.unep.ch/fires. ?>

Balkan's Conflict

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Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health held in London on 16-18 June. During the latter event, the official BTF website newly prepared by GRID-Geneva was launched by Dr. Töpfer and Mr. Haavisto in a press conference held on 16 June (see "<http://www.grid.unep.ch/btf/>"). The BTF website includes a broad range of information about the BTF, its composition and mandate; copies of all situation reports and related products; official UNEP and other UN agency press



releases; links to partner websites; and contact information. GRID-Geneva will continue to host and maintain the BTF website for the

duration of the project and its follow-up activities.

In summary, the quick set-up of the BTF Information Unit attests to GRID-Geneva's capacity for rapid response in the event of complex environmental crises such as the Balkans conflict. It also confirms the maturation of GRID-Geneva's early warning capabilities - and flexibility - to collect, analyse and disseminate environmental information and related products to all

audiences including high-level decision-makers, on short notice and in a most politically sensitive situation. ?

Ron Witt, Regional Coordinator

New Website on Swiss Clearing-House Mechanism (CHM) for Biodiversity

In early 1998, the Swiss Agency for the Environment, Forests and Landscape (BUWAL) commissioned GRID-Geneva to create a Swiss Clearing-House Mechanism (CHM) Internet site. The purpose of the CHM website is to promote technical and scientific cooperation at all levels among the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity. It is also meant to facilitate access to and the exchange of information on biodiversity issues within Switzerland.

With nearly 300 webpages, the site provides a background description of Switzerland, and describes the various components of Swiss policy on biodiversity conservation and sustainable use. The website is available in four languages: English, French, German and Italian. The site also has a search option allowing the location of biodiversity-related links from around the world. In the future, it is expected that new inputs will continue to be made to update the site by groups such as the Swiss Forum on Biodiversity. The



public at the following Internet site address: <http://www.admin.ch/buwal. ?>

CHM Site is hosted on BUWAL's server and will soon be opened to the

Mediterranean/West Asian Activities

Preparations for the project on 'Capacity Building in GIS and remote sensing for the Eastern Mediterranean Region' are moving steadily forward. The proposal has been well-received by both the Centre for Environment and Development in the Arab Region and Europe (CEDARE) based in Cairo, Egypt, as well as the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) of Lebanon. The latter considers this project as being complementary to an earlier project conducted in the coastal zone of Lebanon, which focussed mainly on land use. CEDARE and CDR have proposed two more partners

for the project: the Marine Research Center and the Ministry of Environment of Lebanon. The pilot area selected is the coastal zone approximately 50 km north and south of the capital Beirut.

The next step consists of developing a more detailed programme of work. A visit to the collaborating partners is planned in the near future to discuss each agency's contribution to the proposed project. Discussions will focus on issues such as selection of pilot area, data availability, in-house experience, human resources available, methodology, etc.

With respect to the selection of satellite imagery, the imagery most suitable for the project is that from the SeaWiFS sensor on board the Sea Star satellite, launched in August 1997. The non-commercial use of SeaWiFS data is managed by the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center's (GSFC) Distributed Active Archive Center (DAAC), and GRID-Geneva is now in the process of becoming an authorized SeaWiFS data user. A summary document of the various satellite products available in the market has been prepared. ?



Imagery from the Sea Star satellite is especially suitable for oceanic research. Source: SeaWiFS project, NASA/GSFC.

Alpine Catalogue of Data Sources

Development of an Alpine Catalogue of Data Sources (Alpine-CDS) was initiated early this year. The objective of this project is to facilitate access to information on the Alps by providing meta-information on existing data sets. Designed as a database, the CDS will be an important reference tool for planning and co-ordinating environmental projects in the Alpine region.

The Alpine CDS is being jointly developed by the System for Observation of and

Information on the Alps (JRC/SOIA) of the Alpine Convention, GRID-Geneva and the Swiss Agency for the Environment, Forests and Landscape (BUWAL) with support from the University of Geneva. As a first step, the Alpine CDS is currently being populated with information held by international organisations, national research and academic institutions located in non-signatory states of the Alpine Convention, and Swiss data centres.

An inventory of institutes potentially active in the Alpine region has been prepared. All of these institutes will be requested to provide information on the data they hold that are pertinent to the Alpine region. They will also be provided with the option of directly adding and modifying their meta-data in the Alpine-CDS. At the end of the first phase, the Alpine CDS will allow users to easily and quickly locate a considerable amount of Alpine data

(databases, maps, reports, projects, models, institutions, experts) held by international organisations, European Union institutions and Switzerland. In the second phase, nationally-held information from other member countries of the Alpine Convention will be included in the Alpine-CDS. The CDS will be launched on the Internet by the end of 1999. ?

Update on EIS for Africa

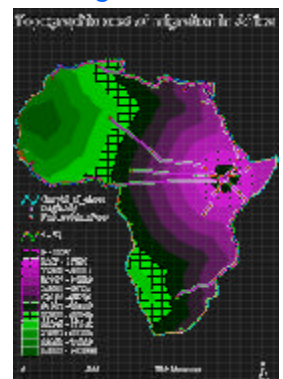
The first phase of the Environment Information System (EIS) on the Internet for Africa project has been completed. This consisted of developing a prototype version of a software application, the GISWeb-Africa, providing access to cartographic information products on Africa's physical environment.

In the second phase currently underway, the focus is on improving the GISWeb-Africa software application. This includes expanding the scope of the cartographic database

to include other non-environmental themes such as population, infrastructure, etc. The spatial analytical capacity of the software programme is also being improved, allowing the integration of more information layers and robust calculations. GISWeb Africa will be finalised by the end of July and will be available as a CD-Rom accompanied with a user guide and manual. ?

Research into Past Human Migrations

The preliminary phase of this University of Geneva/GRID project to gather adequate baseline data (topography, vegetation, hydrology, etc.) has been completed. Continental Africa has been chosen as a prototype for the next step of modeling possible migration paths of Paleolithic human populations. Friction maps are being calculated and models have already shown interesting results that need to be analyzed in greater detail. Preliminary findings are to be presented at the International Union for Quaternary Research



Congress in Durban, South Africa, in early August 1999. ?

Global Resource Information Database-Geneva

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Advisory Board Meeting

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The AB members congratulated GRID-Geneva on the establishment of the BTF Information Unit, and its rapid preparation of quality data/information products as well as development of the official BTF website.

The next full GRID-Geneva Partnership AB meeting is scheduled to be held at and

hosted by the University of Geneva in early November 1999. ?

Calendar of Major Events & Missions Planned (July – September '99)

5-9 July

Participation in the IDNDR Forum: Partnerships for a safer world in the 21st Century, Geneva, Switzerland.

5-9 July

Mission for project "Capacity building mission on GIS and Remote Sensing in the Eastern Mediterranean", Beirut, Lebanon.

19-28 July

Participation in UNISPACE-III Conference and UNEP Exhibition, Vienna, Austria.

21-23 July

Participation in Regional Workshop on the Use of Remote Sensing in EIS Applications (with CEDARE), Rome, Italy.

3-11 August

XV Congress of the International Union for Quaternary Research (INQUA) in Durban, South Africa.

7-8 September

European GRID Centres' Meeting "Euro-GRID'99" in Budapest, Hungary.

14 September

Inauguration of the International Environment House, (formerly GEC), Geneva, Switzerland.

New Staff

Ms. C. ten Oever; Junior Professional Officer (JPO) for land cover mapping, entry-on-duty 21 June.

Ms. D. Rizzolio; Information Officer for the Balkan Task Force; entry-on-duty 10 May.

Gulf Mission

At the request of regional and national environmental institutions, an exploratory mission to the Gulf Region was undertaken by GRID-Geneva on 1-5 May 1999. Discussions focused on the extension of the DEIA&EW activities, and more specifically of those of ENRIN and GRID, in the region. Consultations were held with the Regional Director and Deputy of UNEP/ROWA, along with several visits to regional and national institutions in Kuwait and Bahrain which

could serve as potential partners for environmental data and information networking. The next step planned is an extensive review and needs assessment of capabilities in other Gulf countries. ?

Recent Publications and Other Products

New Publications

- ◆ "Baythymetric and bottom effects on CZCS chlorophyll-like pigment estimation: data from the Kerkennah Shelf (Tunisia), Jean-Michel Jaquet, M. Sarbaji, S. Tassan and V. Barale, International Journal of Remote Sensing 1999, vol. 20, no. 7
- ◆ Article about GRID-Geneva and its activities in the Swiss technical journal "Mensuration Photogrammetrie Genie Rurale" in French/German.
- ◆ Ten situation reports describing the environmental impacts of the Balkans conflict have been prepared.

New Maps

- ◆ Location and Type of Targeted Industrial Facilities in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
- ◆ Selected Sites Vulnerable to Environmental Damage due to Conflict in the Balkans Region. (updated regularly)
- ◆ Major Natural Features, Biodiversity and Protected Areas of the Balkans Region.

Project Proposals Prepared/in Progress

- ◆ GRID-Geneva is participating in UNEP/IETCs's "maESTro" meta-database project and in the on-line "Web-maESTro" tool by contributing relevant information from the GRID data set archive.
- ◆ Development of a prototype database on mineral resources for environmental conflict resolution in the cases of ex-Yugoslavia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

GRID-Geneva Website

The GRID-Geneva website received over 12,500 visitors for the period April to June 1999. New services on the website include the launching of the official website of the Balkans Task Force (BTF). ?

Visit the BTF website at:
<http://www.grid.unep.ch/btf/>

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