Invisible geography on the Internet

You do not need to have time to go surfing to use the Internet. With the right tools for the job and some useful addresses, even the busiest geographer can explore. Rob Kitchin and Lisa Sykes get on-line

Rumour has it that half the searches made on the Internet are for porn sites. While this is disturbing it should not disguise the fact that there is a lot of valuable information out there for the taking. And geographic organisations have not been slow to get on-line — every week there are new sites from museums, libraries, environmental groups, research organisations and government bodies. It is merely a matter of knowing how to get connected and where to look.

For the uninitiated, the Internet is a vast computer network of connected smaller networks that spans the globe to form a virtual cooperative community that shares ideas and information. It is of increasingly interest to geographers and environmentalists because of the enormous amounts of geographic information and resources that can be accessed, all from the comfort of your home, office, school or college.

As with anything relating to computers, jargon and endless abbreviations conspire to make the Internet seem confusing. However, the basics are easy to learn — some 30 million people have already done so and use the Internet regularly.

The Internet evolved from a military computer operation in the late 1960s into a global information network linking every continent. This means that wherever you are in the world, as long as you have a phone line, a modem (a box that allows your computer to send and receive information over a phone line), a

Below: the Virtual Tourist home page (http://wings.buffalo.edu:80/world/) is a good starting point. To explore a part of the world just click on the relevant section and a map will appear from which you can access information from local networks.

Above: in the Virtual Town (http://www.cs.ucdavis.edu/virt-town/), this map of a fictional town appears and you can choose which section to explore. If you click on the shopping mall, a list of shops will appear — all real shops where you can buy goods using your credit card.
Sites of special scientific interest

There are literally hundreds of sources of information and resources relevant to those with a geographical or environmental interest but there are a few particularly useful places to start if you want information on topics such as crop classification and other land-use issues. These are updated on a regular basis.

General information

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) at http://www.unep.org contains a wealth of information on environment-related topics. It is a United Nations agency that works to achieve sustainable environmental solutions for global problems. It provides information and links to relevant organizations. UNEP's project for World Wide Web (WWW) site contains links to a wide range of related sites and information about NCGIA (National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis). The project provides links to a range of geographical organizations.

Specific topics

Geography
Earth Sciences
Environmental issues
Demography and population
GIS (Geographical Information Systems)
Remote sensing
Regional Science
Cartography
Geology
World facts and figures
World Health Organization
http://www.who.int
World Data
http://www.worlddata.com
United Nations Development Programme
http://www.undp.org
World Hunger Program
http://www.wfp.org
Weather (including weather movies)
http://www.worldweather.com
Expeditions
Government
UK government
http://www.gsi.gov.uk
European Union
http://europa.eu.int
Commonwealth
http://www.commonwealth.org

FTP sites

CIA World Factbook
GEO/MAPS
http://epscs.gsfc.nasa.gov/pub/geo/Map/GEO/MAPS.html
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
http://www.noaa.gov/pathmaps.html
Weather maps and satellite images
http://noaa.com/weather/Weather.html
Map data sets
http://mapdata.com/MapData.html
Geological maps
http://www.npd.no/geo/GeoBasis/GeoBasisHome.html

commercial service provider, which as well as providing Internet access also has its own databases, bulletin boards and newsgroups on environmental issues. You can also send and receive e-mail through GreenNet. There is a one-off set-up fee of £15.00, which includes a tutorial and a manual, then you pay a monthly subscription of between £5 and £20 depending on how much time you spend online. You will also pay a small on-line charge for peak (office) hours. Because you are using a phone line (via your modem) to connect to GreenNet, you also have to pay your phone company for call charges. But the whole point of using the Internet is that you only pay local call charges to access anywhere in the world. You don't necessarily need a separate phone line; it is easy to switch from using a modem to a telephone.

The Web

The World Wide Web was developed by CERN (European Particle Physics Laboratory). It is not another name for the 'Net' but is a part of it, albeit the newest and best-looking part. Each document provides links to other documents (hypertext), which may include images, sound and video as well as text, allowing you to move between sources of information without typing in separate addresses. To access the Web you need a software package that allows you to move around or 'browse', such as Netscape Navigator. Many service providers now offer a complete kit of all the software you will need to use the Web, already configured for use on their system. If The Geographical Magazine's long-winded experiences of finding, downloading and configuring software are typical (and I am led to believe they are), grab this offer with both hands. If your provider
cannot provide the software, it should at least be able to tell you how and where to get hold of it. Netscape and other Internet 'tools' are also being thrown in with many new computers too - it is worth checking out these offers when you buy.

Starting Netscape takes you to a 'home page' from where you can access information across the globe. Documents can be accessed and viewed, either by typing in a URL (Uniform Resource Locator) address (a computer's home address also prefixed by http://), or by clicking on 'hot-spots' within the current document. These hot-spots typically take the form of highlighted blue text or small graphical icons. Once the information is displayed, it can be saved for later use, downloaded on to your computer's hard disk or printed out. The downside is it can take a long time for the information to work its way back to you, particularly if it contains images - remember some of the sites you will be connecting to are on the other side of the world.

Another way to find information on the Web is to use a 'search engine', the computer equivalent of the Yellow Pages. There are many available, try this site in Buffalo (http://www.geog.buffalo.edu/geog/searchers.html) for access to more than 20 search engine software packages.

Telnet and FTP

Telnet allows you to 'login' (attach) to a remote host computer. In effect, your computer becomes a terminal of this remote host allowing you to explore the files that are stored there. In general, you will need a login or 'username' and a password to gain entry, but there are some open access sites. FTP, on the other hand, allows you to download or copy files from a remote computer to your own. Unlike Telnet, which makes you a terminal of the host, FTP only allows you to look at the files and download them. The username for FTP sites is generally 'Anonymous' and your password would usually be your e-mail address.

To use Telnet or FTP you need to know the address to login to. There are software packages, such as Archie or Gopher, that you can use to search the Internet for addresses of relevant information sites. The easiest way to get hold of this software is on the free disk that comes with many

Internet guidebooks, but you can also download them from the Internet itself.

E-mail

The most common use of the Internet is via electronic mail (e-mail). It is quicker and cheaper than sending a fax and goes directly to the recipient's computer. Here at The Geographical Magazine more and more of our readers' letters, queries and articles are being sent by e-mail. Even if you never go off into the wilds of the Internet looking for information, it is worth having a modem so you can send and receive e-mail. You need an address, which either your university or service provider will give you, and you need to know other people's addresses. In addition, there are free mailing lists that you can subscribe to. Every message that is posted to a list gets passed onto all the subscribers. There are mailing lists concerned with just about every subject under the sun, allowing ideas, comments and questions to be circulated among their subscribers. Details of all lists can be obtained from: listserv@bitnet.bitnet. If you want to cancel your mailing list subscription just send an e-mail message to the list's administrator asking to be removed. Mailing lists tend to provide more 'junk mail' than useful mail, and because of the sheer volume of messages you will need to clean out your e-mail directory on a daily basis. Using these four methods and the addresses on these pages will allow you to reach geographic sites of interest - and quickly, so even the most time-pressed of us can keep up-to-date. If you are really in a hurry, make sure you access the Internet in the morning, before America 'wakes up', as there are less users on-line.

Rob Kitchin is a lecturer in human spatial behaviour and computing in geography in the department of geography at the University of Wales Swansea. His e-mail address is R.M.Kitchin@swansea.ac.uk. In the Map Room next month we will be continuing our reviews of geographical software and will also be taking a regular look at new sites of interest on the Internet. Any queries or information on addresses should be e-mailed to geograph@gn.apc.org.

How The Geographical Magazine gets on-line

This weather image at http://is506.cl.msn.edu:80/weather/ is just one example of images that can be downloaded to your own computer from World Wide Web sites.