LizardTech heads back to school for GIS Day

Shouldering demo gear and giveaways, LizardTech employees John Ruffing, Genie Hays, and David Calabro headed north out of Seattle on Wednesday, November 14th to celebrate National GIS Day in Lynnwood, Washington. The hour and a half they spent with fifth graders in a classroom at Brighton School definitely made an impression on the LizardTech representatives. Quite possibly, it will also have constructively affected the lives of more than a few schoolchildren.

"It was amazing to see how interested and enthusiastic the students were about learning what GIS is and how it's used," says Ruffing. "They were just excited to have us there. They want to learn. They want to soak everything in. One of them said, 'This is the coolest thing I've ever seen!'"

Although they function behind the scenes, geographic information systems (GIS) play an increasing role in the everyday lives of Americans and therefore constitute an expanding future opportunity for school children already exploring possibilities for their careers.

Experience to share

LizardTech, a Seattle company that makes software for storing, manipulating, and distributing massive geospatial images, has first-hand knowledge of the challenges and rewards of working with GIS in the geospatial community.

Since 1992, the company has been creating products that enable GIS users to adapt their work flows to the realities of their workday. LizardTech's MrSID format is the industry standard for using large-image data in GIS and geospatial applications. It's flagship product, GeoExpress, comprises a number of image manipulation tools such as color balancing, re-projecting and area-of-interest encoding, along with compression to much more manageable file sizes without the loss of image quality. Where once satellite and aerial image data were so large that they could only be viewed on mainframe workstations, LizardTech's software has enabled the development of applications that can display that same imagery—and much large—on handheld devices anywhere.

Hands-on GIS

In their geography curriculum, the students at Brighton have been studying the American Revolutionary War. That gave the "Lizards" on hand the perfect springboard for moderating an exploration of the differences in mapmaking between the 18th century and today. After a discussion of what GIS is, how scale works, and what kind of information might go on a map, the Lizards gave demos of how people in geospatial occupations actually use GIS. The students then got busy creating a map of the original 13 American colonies using

Genie Hays with Brighton's GIS Day enthusiasts

GIS software, complete with a site location marker for Philadelphia's historic Independence Hall.

"What I found most interesting was presenting the students with Revolutionary War era maps of Philadelphia alongside current aerial maps of the city," says Calabro, LizardTech's marketing coordinator. "We engaged the students in understanding some of the obstacles inherent in map creation in 1776, as compared to GIS mapping in 2007. We were able to show just how much of an impact current technology has had in the progress of geographic information systems. I think that this is what observing GIS Day is all about."

Students responded enthusiastically to the day's activities, and the Lizards declared the day a success. "I liked that they showed us how to make our own maps," said Allison Downs, a fifth grader at Brighton, "and also how they showed us maps about the Revolutionary War, which we were studying. It was really fun and I would like them to come back next year."

A certified good time

Upon completion of the map project, each student was presented with a personalized certificate saying they had completed an exercise in GIS awareness.

"My students came away with a greater understanding of geographical information systems in general, and an excellent mapping connection to what they have been learning in Social Studies about the Revolutionary War in particular," said teacher Heather Knouse. "They were motivated to learn more and continued to explore some of the software we had learned about in class after the presentation."

In addition to the thrill of discovery, the Lizard's also brought plenty of plastic lizards to give away to the students, as well as pencils, water bottles, patches and other items provided by ESRI, the co-creators (with the National Geographic Society) of GIS Day.

LizardTech donated GeoExpress software with unlimited encoding and floating licenses to outfit the GIS lab at DeRenne Middle School in Savannah, Georgia, as part of that city's inaugural eighth-grade GIS Day program.