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In 2002 I collaborated with Linda Hill and Greg Janée on the design of the ADL Gazetteer Protocol, but my professional interest in gazetteer and placenames probably started in 1997 when working on the South African National Spatial Infrastructure Framework. As part of setting up the first African FGDC clearinghouse the seemingly simple concept of geographic metadata and place and theme keywords turned out to be an intriguing matter that still fascinates me.

I work as a project manager at ESRI's ArcWeb Services group where, among other things, I'm in charge of the "ESRI World Gazetteer" which is used in different ESRI products. The ESRI World Gazetteer is one of several gazetteer and gazetteer-style databases that are provided through ArcWeb Services. It is used both by desktop GIS software like ArcMap and ArcGIS Explorer, as well as web browser applications, for example MapMachine by National Geographic and Where's Yours by Nature Valley. The ESRI World Gazetteer is available for free for certain non-commercial usage.

Currently we use our gazetteers primarily as a means to find a location (preferably with a footprint) and to quickly zoom in to the location in question. This could be either in web applications or desktop software. In this context, a "location" is primarily used to be able to zoom in a map to a certain area (using the location footprint), or to find certain data about a specific placename. This location finding functionality can be divided into two main categories:

1. Traditional gazetteers – type in a placename
  - returns Placename, with Type, and Spatial Footprint
    - ESRI World Gazetteer
    - Special Gazetteers for U.S. landmarks, World Postal Codes etc. Note that the main reason to keep these as separate gazetteers is for royalty purposes.
2. Addresses – supports not just a "street address" but also an IP address, a domain name or a "phone number" – all of which can be thought of as placenames/locations.
  - Returns "placename" with point location and other attributes where available (but no bounding box)
    - ArcWeb currently support street address geocoding for Australia, New Zealand, many European countries, United States and Canada.
    - Phone Numbers for the United States
    - IP addresses

What we're interested in pursuing is in general more focused on practice than theory/research. For example, here are a few very interesting topics (in no special order):

1. Implementing a "standard", or at least "interoperable", thesaurus instead of local thesauri.
2. Better implement alternative names, making it clear when it is the identical feature with different names.
3. Better implement and support multiple languages (and scripts). Both for queries in a specific language, but also for searching and presenting names in other languages.
4. Further integration between gazetteer feature and GIS feature (with exact boundary). This would also help in updating/maintaining the gazetteer.
5. Further and smarter integration between gazetteer feature and different hierarchies (for example Goleta, Santa Barbara County, State of California, United States).
6. Further integration between gazetteer feature and attributes from both non-GIS and GIS data (for example, 2006 median income for Alaska).
7. Adding historical / time dimension to data.
8. Investigating and potentially using "standard" protocols in our applications, for example the new OGC Gazetteer Protocol or the ISO9112 Standard.
9. Improved ranking of search results, taking into account additional information from the user situation.
10. Reverse gazetteers – based on point or polygon tell me the name of a place, taking into account context to return the appropriate level of detail and type.
11. Improved solution for creating, and using, your own gazetteer. A user could create their own gazetteers either from spatial or non-spatial databases, and then being able to host and serve them on a managed service platform and served out as a standard gazetteer.

I hope that this workshop with its presentation, discussions, and interactions will further our efforts in these directions.