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## AGENDA 21 GOES ELECTRONIC

*by Deborah Carter*

A unique Canadian technology is making it easier for planners and policymakers to design environmental policies and monitor their impact. The Canada Centre for Remote Sensing (CCRS), in collaboration with IDRC, is developing an electronic atlas of Agenda 21, the Earth Summit's action plan.

The initiative promises to ease access for researchers and practitioners in the South to the information required to implement the Agenda 21 action plan. In its pilot phase, the atlas will focus on Agenda 21's chapter 15 on biological diversity.

The CCRS, IDRC, and several international partners have developed a prototype CD-ROM software that contains the data and information featured in chapter 15 as well as additional information on genetics, species, ecosystems, and ecosystem services. Known as the Biodiversity Volume of the ELectronic Atlas of Agenda 21 (ELADA 21), it is accessible to both the technical and non-technical user equipped with a personal computer and the software. Plans are under way to make the atlas available over the Internet. The software would be updated periodically with new information and country studies.

The software uses two powerful tools -- geographic information systems (GIS) and hypermedia -- to present a rich array of text, maps, tables, graphs, surveys, animations and photographic images. It includes several country studies, documentation from the International Plant and Genetic Institute, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, and the Interim Secretariat for the Convention on Biological Diversity, as well as interactive scenarios linking biodiversity to socioeconomic issues.

According to John Whiting, the project's coordinator, "ELADA 21 will empower countries and agencies to report on and better manage biodiversity and related information." The atlas can be used to develop and test various scenarios and to exchange information within the South and with industrialized countries.

Among the major components of ELADA 21 are country studies from the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Canada, Kenya, Poland and Thailand. Using standardized guidelines developed by UNEP to assist countries to create national frameworks on environmental management, the countries drafted studies that provide an overview of biodiversity issues at community, regional, and national levels. Whiting says that each country was encouraged to present its own perspective and to include any traditional environmental knowledge that its citizens possess.

Marc Beaudoin, the project's leader and a staff member at CCRS, instructed country representatives on how to formulate the profiles and provided technical training for inputting text and images. For Beaudoin, the project has offered opportunities to promote technology transfer and infrastructure development. Another advantage is that participating countries that signed the Convention on Biological Diversity can present their studies as progress reports on how well they are meeting their Convention obligations.

Already, ELADA 21 has generated interest. After Costa Rica's president saw a demonstration, he used similar GIS and hypermedia tools to create a scenario for a high-level meeting on the environment. Nigerian environmental authorities asked to buy the software after seeing a demonstration of its capacities.

The ELADA 21 software becomes available early this year. At present, the main challenge confronting the project team is to find the atlas a permanent "home"; a country or an agency willing to assume responsibility for maintaining, upgrading, and updating the software.

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