

Video of Ian McHarg at the Esri User Conference in 1997

At the 1997 Esri User Conference, Jack Dangermond honored landscape architect Ian McHarg, author of *Design with Nature*, with the president's award. In this video of McHarg's acceptance speech, he reminisces with typical humor about his seminal discoveries of overlays and chronology, the challenges of environmental planning, and the role that GIS can play.

<http://video.esri.com/watch/127/video-of-ian-mcharg-at-the-esri-user-conference-in-1997>

Video Transcription

00:01 A second, perhaps more personal legend when I was even younger was a gentleman who, for most of us...

00:09 ...invented many of the concepts of environmental conservation and the notions of using a methodology...

00:17 ...to do rational planning considering environmental factors.

00:24 This person in the '50s and in the '60s was advocating concepts of bringing it all together, thinking holistically...

00:33 ...considering all of nature and all of its processes.

00:36 He brought together at the University of Pennsylvania experts from social science and physical science and soils and geology...

00:45 ...and he mixed these people together in a new concept of multidisciplinary education focused not simply on academic understanding...

00:54 ...but on doing something about environmental planning as a method.

00:59 Most of you will recognize the notion of map overlay or polygon processing, having its roots with what I believe, its founder, Ian McHarg.

01:12 Ian McHarg has been a professor.

01:15 He's been a professional practitioner.

01:17 He's been a theoretician.

01:19 He's been an author.

01:20 He's been a visionary and he's given us guidance, especially me, in where we take this technology.

01:29 Most of today, we've been overwhelmed by the technology stuff.

01:35 I'm overwhelmed.

01:36 I'm just guessing what you're feeling.

01:39 And while the technology stuff is moving along, much of the underpinnings for it...

01:45 ...the concepts for integrating natural processes are not being shown today.

01:52 They're being implied.

01:54 And in many ways, the methods that Dr. McHarg has invented and theorized have yet to come to fruition in your practices and your thinking.

02:05 Please join me in welcoming Ian McHarg, a landscape architect.

02:20 And, and Jim could I have the lights turned up, please?

02:23 Thank you.

02:24 So that the entire room is lit.

02:28 [indistinct speech]

02:29 Thank you very much, Ian, for all of your contributions.

02:32 Oh, my good man.

02:34 What a wonderful fellow you are.

02:36 Not exactly.

02:37 Yes, the fact of the matter is who deserves the praise more?

02:40 Nobody.

02:42 There's a wonderful inventor and he...who started off as a modest young student I think at Harvard University when I was giving a lecture...

02:52 ...has parlayed this thing into a magnificent accomplishment and, of course, he's obscenely rich...

03:01 ...during which time...during which time I'm the same rotten, impoverished, miserable, misbegotten professor that I've been for 40 years.

03:14 How much better of this give to be a large sum of money.

03:19 Alright. I'm glad we've got the lights on.

03:22 I hate these bloody sepulchral rooms where every self-respecting man as the lights dim...

03:31 ...closes his eyes and seizes that last best erotic fragment and lives it again.

03:40 So have your five minutes.

03:41 Let's have a little look at the watch.

03:43 I could see it...five minutes.

03:45 Well, a couple years ago I was up in Vancouver to get something called the Lifetime Achievement Award...

03:53 ...and somebody got up, oh the man who got it last year.

03:56 He got up and said, you know, the fact of the matter is that Ian McHarg is the titular father of GIS.

04:05 Of course, I have no role in paternity of this sort at all.

04:10 But the fact of the matter is I didn't...I don't think I bred GIS.

04:13 But what I did do was I discovered overlays.

04:17 Why?

04:19 Because I required the teaching environment and found to my astonishment nobody knew where their environment was.

04:25 And so I, given the responsibility I had to teach young people about this from all the ends of the earth...

04:32 ...I then decided the way to teach would be to make a composite...composite teacher.

04:38 And so I got a million dollars from Ford and I bought myself a meteorologist and a geologist and geomorphologist.

04:44 Hydrologist, soil scientists, plant ecologists, animal ecologists...

04:47 ...and then I get another million from the National Institute of Mental Health...

04:51 ...and I hired an ethologist, ethnographer, cultural anthropologist, epidemiologist.

04:56 There it was.

04:57 At last, ha, ha, ha, we are capable of actually dealing with the environment because no single person could do it...

05:02 ...but these [unintelligible] of people if they could learn to work together, could.

05:05 But then the question is, how could they work together?

05:08 And I discov-...I'd gone to Harvard, of course, where I had three degrees which are no substitute for an education.

05:14 And I was probably the only ha, ha, I was the only innocent [unintelligible] among all these scientists.

05:20 But I realized there was one device by which the disparate insights of all these incredible people could be made causal and consequential.

05:30 I discovered chronology.

05:32 What an extraordinary discovery, because every study we don't do anywhere really has to involve a recapitulation...

05:39 ...and discovered that this utilization of chronology, using time as a unified rubric was very, very efficacious and so I started off...

05:49 ...by asking... the people with the oldest habit is geologists...to tell us about the geological history of the area under study.

05:56 And then the geologists reasonably said, "You know, I can't do this alone.

05:59 I need help from meteorology."

06:01 So geology and meteorology, ha, ha, were able to develop the evolution to a point where you could reinterpret the data to reveal groundwater hydrology.

06:10 Reveal the same data to reveal geomorphology.

06:13 Reveal the same data to explain surficial hydrology, which point, of course, you're well on the way to understanding soils...

06:20 ...which leads you to the possibility of identifying environments and seeing them populated by the appropriate plants...

06:27 ...and also by appropriate environ...by appropriate organisms.

06:32 The lights are not on, Jack.

06:33 You know, I can't see the whites of anybody's eye.

06:36 You could be dead for all I know.

06:39 Is there nobody who could put the lights on in this sepulchral building?

06:45 Nobody, Jack?

06:46 Nobody can do it.

06:47 I'll tell you a little poem.

06:48 John Milton discovered this place a long while ago.

06:51 He wrote a line and said, "Hence, loathed melancholy of Cerberus and darkest midnight born...

06:59 ...of stygian gloom forlorn midst horrid shapes and shrieks and sights unholy.

07:07 Find out some uncouth cell where brooding darkness spreads her weary wings and the night raven sings."

07:16 What an epitaph for this building.

07:24 So it goes.

07:27 So then, I discovered this wonderful conception of layers.

07:34 But the environment, of course, is not divided, say by language and science...

07:38 ...but the divisions have fragmented the environment and so it has to be reconstituted using chronology as a device.

07:51 Let's suppose about 30 or 40 years ago, I invented ecological planning and...

08:01 ...one thing we could say about it, having all these disparate scientists and so on, bringing them all together...

08:06 ...we were able to do really quite elegant ecological plans.

08:10 And I think that which distinguishes them from many of the remarkable things I've seen upstairs and heard today...

08:16 ...is that they tended to be seriously systematic; that is, by going through the exercise of understanding geology and climate...

08:23 ...the interaction to reveal groundwater hydrology physiography, it's the original hydrology and so on...

08:29 ...you're engaged then in constructing causality, the end of which, if you do it well...

08:34 ...you'll understand how the place came to be, what it is, and where it's going.

08:38 And that, I think, is a justification for talking about a system.

08:42 And I'd say that the departure which Dr. Marble mentioned is an enormous com...commitment to technology...

08:51 ...and not quite as great a commitment to integration holism.

08:58 I would say, of all the great people who are here today, perhaps the challenge you should accept is...

09:07 ...the dreams for a fully computerized ecological planning, which was able to undertake everything that had been done manually...

09:15 ...faster, cheaper, and better than ever before has not been fulfilled.

09:20 I would say, I've seen an awful lot of plans in an awful lot of places, and I would say that by and large...

09:25 ...the ecological planning studies I did in '60s and '70s have not been equaled, far less surpassed.

09:31 And I think there has got to be a challenge; that is, we've got to be able to learn to do at least as well for regions and for the nation...

09:40 ...and indeed for the global environment than we are doing at the moment.

09:50 The fact of the matter is, of course, global environmental problems have exacerbated.

09:56 As a population increases, as the demands of the population upon the environment increase, the problems are much exacerbated.

10:00 ...devotes itself to doing which, and resolves that in its succeeding century, ha, ha...

10:04 However, I think there is reason for optimism.

10:07 I think the fact of the matter is that the capability of environmental science, the capability of sensors...

10:14 ...of satellites, of computers, and not least of GIS, means that we have developed new and wonderful prostheses.

10:23 For me, the great dream would be, if by the remaining years of this century...

10:28 ...the nation and the world concluded there should be a global and national ecological inventory...

10:39 ...all of us address ourself to greening, healing, and restoring the earth.

10:46 So, that...

10:47 Green, heal, and restore the earth.

10:49 And I would love, 'cause I'd love to be there.

10:51 I'm 76 years of age and my dream is that I get some [unintelligible speech], so that if the world concludes on...

11:02 ...undertaking an ecological inventory of the United States as an exemplar for the world, and if there is a global ecological inventory undertaken...

11:11 ...and indeed if the country's determined to green, heal, and restore the earth, then about 30 or 40 years hence...

11:18 ...I will be invited as a very old man into space where, with a group of scientists, I will see, of course, the, ha, ha...

11:27 ...return of the primeval environment, the ret...the resurgent forest, clean atmosphere, oceans, coral reefs, and so on...

11:36 ...and all the lesions and welts and suppurations upon the earth, worldlike body diminishing.

11:47 Alright. Now I'll finish it reading a poem.

11:51 All of you are going to buy a book which I wrote.

11:56 It's called Quest for Life.

12:01 And it's my autobiography.

12:03 It's published by John Wiley and I'm going to sign the things when? On Thursday.

12:10 The reason for signing was very simple.

12:12 By defacing them, they cannot be returned to the publisher.

12:21 Here we are.

12:24 So it takes Jack, just a couple of minutes.

12:27 Do you mind?

12:28 I was asked by the publisher to write a poem to the world's children, which I did.

12:33 I sat down and wrote it.

12:35 Dearest children, do you know that we have inherited a miracle?

12:41 All matter, the heavens, the sun, the earth itself, is made from the ashes of stars, cycled by volcanoes and sea and air...

12:50 ...clouds, rain, rivers, rocks, and soils matter permeates us all...

12:56 ...including you playing, smiling children now.

13:01 Exult in this prodigious unexpected world.

13:06 Birdsong and butterflies, puppies and pandas, foals and flowers, dappled trout, time, the seasons, music, joy, laughter.

13:16 You and me joined in this improbable universe.

13:20 Recoil from the loathsome scabbed, mutilated and scabbed land, foul seas, rivers, air, squalid slums, wastes...

13:30 ...diseased tissues on the living earth. Repudiate them.

13:35 Resolve to protect the earth.

13:36 It's our home.

13:38 All creatures are kin, brethren, gifted with life, aching for fulfillment, doomed to die.

13:46 But our breath will fuel flowers.

13:50 Our tears will join the magic cycle.

13:53 Our cabin will find other homes.

13:55 Our wastes will replenish.

13:58 In this sense, we are mortal...we are immortal as is the earth.

14:03 We are transients.

14:05 But we can be guardians.

14:06 We can protect and restore; it needs resolve, commitment, energy, and art.

14:12 So you must aim to protect all that's wild and wondrous, to heal mutilation, salve wounds, restore the earth.

14:22 Then bequeath a better legacy, a finer future for the earth and its creatures...

14:29 ...for all children now and forevermore.

14:33 Make it a quest of life in God's name.

14:36 Amen.
