

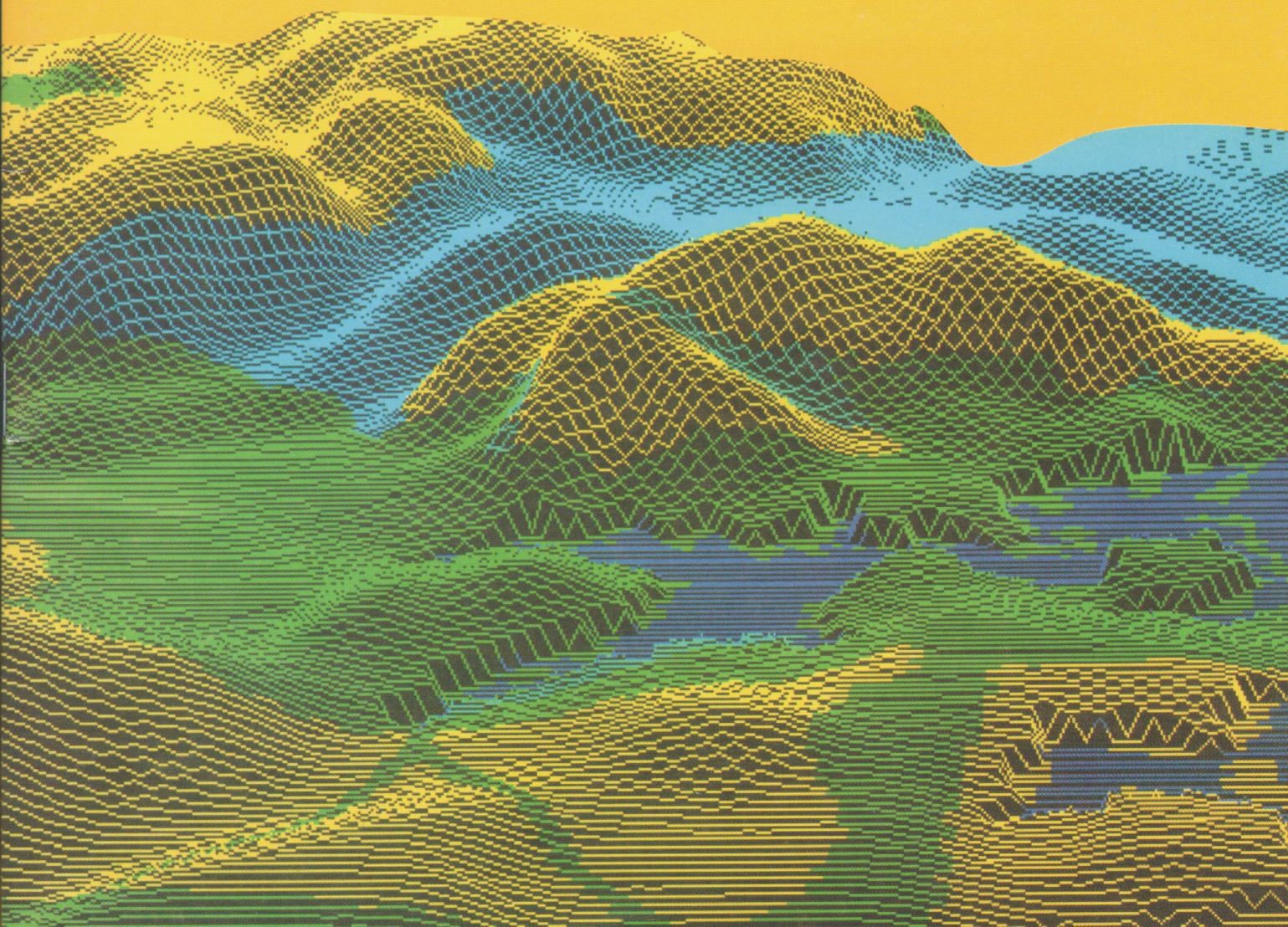
MORAVIAN GEOGRAPHICAL REPORTS



VOLUME 4

NUMBER 2 1996

ISSN 1210 - 8812



MORAVIAN GEOGRAPHICAL REPORTS

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PRICE

75 CZK
mailing costs are invoiced separately
 subscription (two numbers per year)
 145 CZK
including mailing costs

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PRINT

PC - DIR, Ltd., Brno, Technická 2

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 ISSN 1210-8812

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The 28th International Geographical Congress THE HAGUE 1996

Antonín VAISHAR

The 28th International Geographical Congress was organized by Royal Dutch Geographical Society. The Congress was held in the Dutch Congress Palace in Hague, 4-10 August, 1996.

The main organizer was the Faculty of Geography, University of Utrecht jointly with other high schools and government institutions. Motto of the Congress was „Land, Sea and Human Effort”.

According to the list of participants, which was prepared before the Congress, there were 1354 persons present. However, the final figure might have been considerably different, and the organizers spoke of some 1600 participants. Over 50% of the registered (773) were from Europe. Of these, 615 and 158 from economically advanced and post-Communist countries, respectively. The continents of Asia, North America, Australia with Oceania, Africa and Latin America were represented by 223, 146, 74, 71 and 47 geographers, respectively. The most numerous delegation was from the Netherlands (129 persons), U.S.A. (114) and Great Britain (112). Strongly manned delegations were also those of France and Germany (each counting 71 participants), Australia (56), Japan (55), Sweden (44), Russia (42), South Africa (40), Italy, Spain, India, China, Canada and South Korea. The long list should demonstrate the strength of global geographical powers from the European point of view. The Czech Republic had 10 geographers at the Congress. As to our closest neighbours, there were 19 representatives from Poland, 10 Hungarians, 4 Slovaks, 11 Slovenian geographers and 7 Austrians.

In terms of its extent, the main contents of the Congress consisted in technical sessions which were organized by individual committees and IGU study groups. In addition, there were workshops organized in thirteen technical sections that reflected topical problems of contemporary geography. In total, there were 48 symposia of which the majority were held for more than a day. In the top of it, there were 10 plenary meetings to follow the conference motto, 33 papers characterizing the situation in individual geographical disciplines. The programme included 1260 technical papers in total length of 415 hours, presented were 219 posters, and there were also a whole range of technical discussions. Abstracts of the individual presentations were published. Publication of full papers is a business of each symposium organizer. The technical workshops were supplemented with numerous excursions, exhibitions and films. The mentioned structure formed a very colourful and complicated mosaic within the scope of which more than 20 events were held at the same time in many a case. The Dutch Congress Center offers good facilities for organizing such a number of events in one building with a sufficient social background. An exception was the Committee on Geographical Education whose workshops were held elsewhere. Concentration of the majority of events in one place made it possible for all participants to focus precisely the issues they were concerned with. However, another side of the coin was the fact that the Congress participants were scattered in different workshops with their attention being invaded by too many interesting activities.

There was a great number of inspirative new technical ideas and much experience exchanged. However, this is not the major reason for organizing events like these. What is most important are contacts between experts. The human contact is irreplaceable even in the era of faxes and internet. Congresses of the Hague type are mainly the congresses of contacts, information, offers of literature, publicity of workplaces, announcement of international conferences and the like. The main assembly of participants come regularly to visit the events, considering them to be socially significant. Other participants have a rare possibility to exceptionally visit these international congresses, or they have a

concrete target there. Important part of the Congress was sales of scientific literature ensured by both renowned publishing houses such as ELSEVIERS or KLUWER and by individual national delegations of which most active were those of Germany and France. The result was an even more colourful mosaic of interests than in the case of current technical activities. Well, this is reality of the scientific life.

A pleasant change at the 28th Congress was International geographical contest of secondary students under the auspices of the Committee on Geographical Education. The contest of 3-member teams consisted of three laps: terrain research, technical essay, and a quiz of geographical knowledge. The teams came from Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia and the winning team was that of Poland. The event is considered very important by the IGU executives who appointed the organizing committee of the 29th Congress to repeat the contest. Another social event was a commemorative celebration of the 125th anniversary of the first geographical congress that was held in Antwerp in 1871.

Another important result of the 28th Congress was the election of a new IGU Chairman. Resigning Herman Th. VERSTAPPEN from Belgium will be replaced by Bruno MESSERLI from Switzerland. The new Chairman presented his inauguration speech in which he pointed out the main objectives of IGU in the coming period such as integration with global programmes such as Global Change, Habitat or Agenda 21. It is considered important for the future that the role of scientists from developing countries is strengthened since it is there where the majority of contemporary global problems concentrate and where less than 10% total number of world experts work on their solution. Great attention is going to be paid to geographical education. In addition to the IGU meetings, there were also workshops of nine committees and IGU study groups.

The resigning Chairman awarded IGU prizes to outstanding world geographers: Yole VERHASSELT (Belgium), Harold C. BROOKFIELD (Australia), and Huang Bin WEJ (China). New medals for political contribution to the problems of environment protection were awarded to Ms. Gro Haarlem BRUNTLAND and Mr. Al GORE. The medals were taken over by chairmen of IGU committees from Norway and U.S.A. At the end of the event, the flag of International Geographical Congress (which was granted by organizers of the 27th Congress in Washington) was handed over to organizers of the 29th Congress.

There are many geographers who lately ask a question whether there is any sense in organizing these international geographical congresses which are rather demanding both in terms of their organization and finance. It apparently depends on what the individual participants expect from these events. However, it is for sure that any inflation of them should be prevented. A 4-year interval with some regional conferences in between appears to be optimal as well as a discriminating choice of organizers. The next 29th Congress will be held under the motto „Living in Diversity” in Seoul, 13-18 August 2000. Prior to this date, there will be a regional conference on the theme „The Atlantic: Past, Present and Future” in Lisbon from 30 August-2 September, 1998. Candidate for organization of the 30th Congress in 2004 is the Royal Scottish Geographical Society which is going to hold it with the central theme „Geography and Communication” in the congress center in Glasgow.

