

Difference versus Change

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**Presented at SIRC 2004 – The 16th Annual Colloquium of the Spatial Information Research Centre
University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand
November 29th-30th 2004**

ABSTRACT

GIS and related systems have been operational for about twenty-five years now. Increasingly, national and international agencies are attempting to use the technology to track changes over that period and, increasingly, they are finding this problematic.

Why should this be so? The rush to adopt geographic technologies, in many places, blinded early adopters to some fundamental problems inherent in data collection and analysis. Problems of perception, of disciplinary existentialism, homomorphism, and our natural propensity to classify observation provide part of the answer. The ease of adopting nominal fields as a data type rather than something more definite provides another part of the answer. But the dissonance between difference and change, a poorly understood mismatch in concepts, remains a major component in the barrier to tracking change through time.

This paper reviews the impacts of each of these issues and suggests that the solutions are not technical, but theoretical. Indeed, many of these are issues in the disciplines which underpin geographical technology and have been for many years. Now that many of the technical issues have been addressed and the technology is in common use it is time to revisit the underpinning theory.