Overview: Harvard Geospatial Library

What is the Harvard Geospatial Library (HGL)?

The Harvard Geospatial Library (HGL) is a catalog and repository of data for Geographic Information Systems (GIS). HGL allows users to search the descriptive information of thousands of GIS layers using text as well as geographic coordinates. In addition, many of the layers are available for download, and are in a consistent, open format so they can easily be used by many different software packages without the need for translation. In order to facilitate the search for meaningful and usable data, HGL can also display GIS layers in a web based mapping environment. For information about GIS in general, visit any of the links listed in the help pages within the HGL web site.

HGL is no longer an independent system. Over the past several years the project team has worked collaboratively to make it an open source repository called OpenGeoPortal. The Open Geoportal is a collaboratively developed, open source, federated web application to rapidly discover, preview, and retrieve geospatial data from multiple repositories. OpenGeoportal.org is also a collaborative effort to share resources and best practices in the areas of application development, metadata, data sharing, data licensing, and data sources in support of geospatial data repositories. Working collaboratively means that users searching any OGP instance now have access to data at other participating institutions.

Connect to HGL: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:hgeodesy

What are the benefits of a HGL?

**HGL makes GIS data collections more accessible.** One challenge that looms large to researchers interested in adding a spatial component to their projects is the availability of data. Harvard University’s libraries have a great deal of information in a GIS friendly format, but not all of it is easily accessible. The vast majority of the CDs are housed in the Harvard Map Collection, which is open only Monday through Friday from 10 to 4:45. These are not prime hours for students to access the collection. In addition, the files are in a variety of formats and often need to be processed in some way before they can be used in the most commonly available desktop GIS.

**HGL search tools improve discovery of relevant GIS data.** The goal of the Harvard Geospatial Library is to make finding useful data easier by allowing users to search for data using keywords as well as geographic coordinates. If a student is interested in river systems in China, they simply need to zoom in to China on the search map, and type “rivers” into the text search box. Not only can users find the data, in many cases they can download it in a useful format, and they no longer need to seek out assistance in the nuances of a variety of data formats in order to get started on their projects. HGL can also display GIS layers within a browser. Users can select multiple layers and overlay them, change the drawing properties to create very simple, but useful maps without necessarily even downloading the data.

Are there any access restrictions when using HGL?

The HGL Catalog is open to the general public. Anyone can use the catalog to discover GIS items held at Harvard. Access to the repository is limited on a layer by layer basis. Some layers are held in the public domain and can be viewed and downloaded by all users. Other layers are restricted by license agreements and can be viewed by Harvard-affiliated users only. Access to restricted layers requires a Harvard ID and PIN.

Who contributes to HGL?

The Harvard Map Collection in the Harvard Library holds the largest collection of GIS-ready data on campus and is the largest contributor of data to the HGL repository. Other contributors of data include the Harvard Yenching Institute and the Graduate School of Design. At this time, Map Collection staff are solely responsible for contributing the metadata or “cataloging” that describes data added to the HGL repository. Metadata describing information held by organizations other than HGL is created by those groups and harvested into the HGL catalog.