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Satellite imaging's picture still fuzzy

on 27 December 2000, 22:00



by [Niall McKay](#)

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In 1998, the U.S. government wanted to verify claims that Serbians were slaughtering ethnic Albanians.

Of course, the U.S. had dozens of spy satellites in space, but most were busy collecting military data -- troop movements, missile locations, and so on. Besides, it's difficult to get satellite images of an exact location on short notice. So the government contracted with a private company, Applied Analysis, to dissect commercial satellite images and figure out exactly what was happening on the ground.

"All that was available at the time were pretty crude Landsat images, each pixel representing an area roughly the size of a football field," says Carey Erdman, CEO of Applied Analysis.

To coax more detail from the images, Mr. Erdman and his team isolated the spectral signature of fire and then did spectral analysis of each pixel. "We couldn't see much, but we could see that there were hundreds of fires burning and were therefore able to verify reports that many people were being burned out of their homes," Mr. Erdman says. That information helped shape the U.S. response to the Kosovo conflict, and doubtless saved many lives.

Now can the remote-sensing business save the ailing satellite industry? Analysts say probably not.

LOST IN SPACE

"Every year for the last ten years, the satellite remote-sensing business has been estimated as a \$5 billion industry that is just five years away," says Scott Sacknoff, president of the International Space Business Council in Arlington, Virginia. But so far demand for satellite data remains tepid: according to a recent report by the ISBC, sales were just \$612 million last year.

The buzz around remote sensing started in 1992, when Congress passed the Land Remote Sensing Policy Act. It relaxed restrictions and allowed U.S. companies to compete with foreign firms like France's Spot Image and India's Indian Remote Sensing.

Since then the business has expanded to serve a wide range of customers. Japanese fishing companies use satellite data to decide where to route their trawlers. U.S. farmers rely on spectral analysis to find crops in need of fertilizer -- healthy plants give off a slightly different spectral signature from unhealthy ones.

But obstacles continue to slow the business. Perhaps the most glaring problem is recent launch failures. Two out of the three satellites launched by commercial satellite provider EarthWatch crashed and burned, for instance.

"We're all hoping that our competitors succeed in getting better-resolution satellites into orbit," says Chuck Herring, spokesman for EarthWatch, which lost its QuickBird 1 satellite in November. "We need more satellites. The future of the industry depends on it."

SMALL STEP FOR MANKIND

At the moment, there are only a handful of commercial satellite image providers in the world, including Spot Image, Indian Remote Sensing, Space Imaging, and the U.S. Geological Survey's Landsat. Their images don't come cheap -- companies have charged as much as \$6,000 per image in the past, though prices have dropped recently to as little as \$600 per image.

Image quality is improving as well. Typical resolution in the past was one pixel per 30 square meters. Spot Image now provides 10-meter-per-pixel images, Indian Remote Sensing has 5-meter-per-pixel images, and Space Imaging can do 1-meter-per-pixel images. Rumor has it that Congress is about to approve the deployment of a .5-meter image satellite.

But will more high-resolution satellites clear up the uncertainty in the industry?

"Unfortunately not," says Jeff Burnett, vice president of operations for the Open GIS Consortium in Wayland, Massachusetts. "We can't even make sense of a great deal of the data that is out there."

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The living room is a jungle of plastic and wires – I say enough already.

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Satoru Iitawa's keynote touched on both systems, but it seems like the Wii got the short end of the stick.

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