



REMEMBER THE BEST

PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE WORKING TO IMPROVE LOCATION TECHNOLOGY. WE SHOULD CELEBRATE THEIR ACHIEVEMENTS

In my local gym – they do the best coffee and croissants in my local area – there is a 8cm-thick green horizontal line drawn on the wall 6.15m above the ground. You can only see it when you climb the stairs to the first floor. That's where they serve the pastries and by taking the stairs, I feel I've earned mine.

The line is there to recognise and celebrate Ukrainian Sergey Bubka's world record pole vault – a record that stood for nearly 21 years. It was finally beaten in 2014 by France's Renaud Lavillenie, who cleared a bar set 1cm higher, and it is his name now on the wall. Given the margin of victory, they have quite understandably left the line where it was.

As I return down those stairs, skinny (well you have to try) latte in hand, the letters of Bubka's name, the outlines of which are still clearly visible behind those of Renaud's, are a literal example of the human race's desire to go higher.

We need these people. A tiny minority of the population they may be, but when they go faster, higher and become stronger, they drag the rest of us along with them. In every aspect of our lives, scientists and artists are working to know and achieve more, and very often they advance faster than 1cm every two decades – although I suspect certain climate scientists would be delighted with that rate of change!

The geospatial discipline, both academic and commercial, has its champions, too. But it seems to me that all too often, their achievements are given a brief a nod of approval before we all move on with our lives. Whilst this column is not a wall in a public place, it is all I have and so this month, will be my tribute.

And I do it because recognition is crucially important, even if the subjects will never see it. Neither Bubka nor Renaud are ever likely to see the wall in the gym – but young, aspiring pole vaulters might. They may see that line on the wall and train just a little harder. Work a little longer. Knowing that the gym may one day have to scrub out another set of letters and replace them with theirs.

This year, the Association of American Geographers named Harvard University's Peter Bol as its Honorary Geographer. The award is for non-geographers who have displayed excellence in using geography, which is apt since Professor Bol's specialism is the study of East Asian languages and their cultures. Sometime ago however, he recognised the power of GISs and their unique ability to support his and others' research.

He led a university-wide effort to explain the benefits of using GIS across every department at Harvard, a project that culminated in the creation of the Centre of Geographic Analysis and his appointment as its first director in 2005.

Beyond Massachusetts, he worked with China's Fudan University in Shanghai to create the China Historical GIS. It is a remarkable repository of data. Sadly the design of the website (www.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis/) is terrible but by clicking on 'Dynamic Maps' (it's there believe me, it just takes some finding), you can access an interactive map of China that shows the location of everything, now and in the past.

I have spent countless hours looking at the position of Ming garrisons between 1363 and 1644, the remarkable proliferation of Buddhist sites across China in the past 100 years and the modern day population densities of the world's most populated country. I found myself asking questions about how the country works now and what it was like in the past. I now have an interest in a country I knew nothing about.

I've never met Professor Bol but through this award, I now know his work. It is clear that he has dedicated his life to furthering his understanding of a part of the world and in doing so has inspired countless people to try to know more – in a very small way, I am his latest success story.

But he is just one example. There is a host of others working all over the world to advance the use of location technology. All of them will improve the lives of others but just as importantly, they might just motivate someone else to become involved, to learn more.

Recognising the achievements of people with awards isn't just in-crowd backslapping. It is a way of drawing attention to those people who will drag all of us over the next high bar.

THERE IS A HOST OF OTHERS WORKING ALL OVER THE WORLD TO ADVANCE THE USE OF LOCATION TECHNOLOGY

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