

On The Nature of Maps

Rolf Faste, 1992

1. Maps are useful.

Maps are useful because they allow us to operate at higher levels of abstraction than would be possible if we had to pay attention to all available incoming sensory data.

2. Maps are useful in inverse proportion to their completeness.

What makes a map useful is how well it is designed for its intended use. Well designed maps severely edit available information in order to accentuate what is really needed. Subway maps for example, substitute a neat rectilinear grid of colored lines for the actual twists, turns and distances the trains really take.

3. “The map is not the territory” – Korzybski

The only completely accurate map would be a one-to-one duplicate. But in this case the territory itself would serve as a more accurate map at far less expense.

4. Maps for known territories can be purchased.

Because maps are useful, a lot of time, money and effort making maps for other people to buy and to follow. The interstate highway system is well known. When I want to make a long trip, I go to my local AAA, tell them where I want to go, and have them make me a “Trip-tic”—a convenient custom bound book of just the maps I need.

5. You can't buy maps for unknown territories.

We are all familiar with the appearance of maps before the nineteenth century. The known territory in the center is well drawn, but towards the edges the detail become tenuous. Fantastic sea monsters are often found drawn in the water beyond that.

6. Explorers go into unknown territories.

The lack of maps does not keep adventurous people from going out into these undefined regions. Motivations vary. Some are hired to go, some have no choice, some are running away, some are simply curious or hope for something better. No matter what the motivation, we call such people explorers.

7. In the absence of maps, explorers outfit themselves in other ways.

When a person knows they will be going into the unknown, there are a variety of things they can do to prepare themselves. Obviously, they can outfit themselves by buying equipment: good horses, boats, machetes, blankets. More valuable perhaps are accurate compasses, sextants, and timepieces. However the best thing explorers can do is to prepare their bodies and minds. They can train themselves to be sensitive to clues provided by weather patterns, currents, flora and fauna and the stars. They can practice being flexible and quick-witted which allows them to deal with the unexpected. And they can develop their judgment of the capabilities of themselves and of others. Internal skills are better than hardware because they will survive a capsized or unexpected setback. Finally, no matter how bad existing maps are, explorers will study them in order to glean what they can. They listen to and record all the stories, folklore, and rumors about their objective. By cross checking and making judgments about the veracity of sources they can piece together a tentative map, along with a list of good questions. At the least, a body of knowledge about relevant issues and pitfalls will be developed which, in combination with subtle clues along the way, will provide some sense of direction.

8. The future is an unknown territory.