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University researchers visit Chernobyl

By Edward Klopfenstein
Oregon Daily Emerald

This story begins in June of 1986 when Chernobyl's number four reactor overheated and blew. After eight days and floating for hundreds of miles, particles of radioactive iodine reached their half-life and began to weaken.

But, the heavier strontium and cesium particles will radiate the ground for nearly 200 years more, blanketing what is by some estimates a 50,000 square mile area east of the reactor.

Plutonium, the heaviest element, fell closest to the Chernobyl plant and poses the strongest long-term threat.

Unlike the iodine, cesium and strontium particles, continents will move, rivers will change course and millions of people could die before the plutonium particles weaken.

That's where three researchers from the University came in.

From a chance meeting in 1987 between University ecologist John Baldwin and Dmitri Kavtaradze, an ecologist in the Soviet Ministry of Education, Baldwin, Kit Larsen, systems analyst for the Computing Center, and David Hulse, an associate professor in landscape architecture, helped create the only existing computer resource to date for the victims of the Chernobyl disaster.

Baldwin applied Larsen's and Hulse's computer mapping program - called macGIS for Macintosh Information Systems - with data collected on Chernobyl's fallout.

The pair created a similar map for the Columbia Gorge so officials could manage land use between recreation and commercial interests.

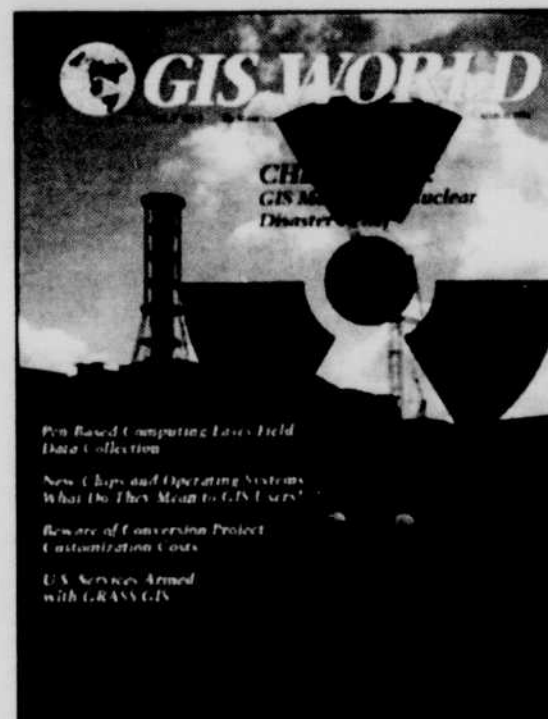
The pair developed the program in 1987 because, Hulse said, his students spent more time learning the IBM operating system than they did the GIS programs.

With the program in place in Russia, radiation victims can either estimate the level of radiation they've received or what their chances for contamination in the future might be.

But, to make the maps, the researchers had to enter the radiation contaminated zone four times and walk the Chernobyl grounds twice.

The last time they entered the Chernobyl area was June of 1993.

Larsen, Hulse and Baldwin protected them-



COURTESY PHOTO
University researchers David Hulse and Kit Larsen stand in front of Chernobyl's entombed reactor number four during a 1993 visit to Russia. From the cover of GIS World published in March of 1994.

selves with cloth outfits, surgical masks and Geiger counters which they donned at the first checkpoint just outside the 20-mile contamination zone that represents the highest levels of radiation.

The zone doesn't look like a wasteland, they said, resembling instead a rural countryside with farms, rolling hills and plenty of animal life.

"When you're going toward the reactor, it's unsettling," Hulse said. "The radiation sensing devices are picking up the invisible radiation.... Out in front of (the Chernobyl site), the Geiger counters are just going nuts."

"It's not a place you find very comforting."

The radiation in the area would resemble being

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