

GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD

EXPLORING THE AMERICAS IN A HUMBOLDT DIGITAL LIBRARY

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I have omitted to state above the extreme satisfaction I have received from Baron Humboldt's communications. The treasures of information which he possesses are inestimable and fill us with impatience for their appearance in print.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1804

I formerly admired Humboldt, I now almost adore him.

—Charles Darwin, 1832

Nothing ever stimulated my zeal so much as reading Humboldt's Personal Narrative.

—Charles Darwin, 1865

New computer technology, with the ability to access bodies of texts from on-line libraries and to conduct comprehensive searches, is transforming the way in which research is conducted. The question is whether this new technology can create a clear understanding of the precise geographical and historical context at any one point in a given text, especially in a text that deals with travel or exploration. Can a digital library become a resource to access a text's total environment, including its background and its influence? If so, are these links genuinely enlightening? Can the navigation tools efficiently elaborate on the text and then return to it? If the Humboldt Digital Library, a joint project between the Max Kade Center for German-American Studies at the University of Kansas and the Computer Center at the University of Applied Sciences in Offenburg, Germany, is to become a viable research tool and a model for treating texts with geographical dimensions, we must consider ways of dealing with a number of challenging background issues and technological problems (Doherr 2005).¹

With extensive observations and written analyses during and after travels in what are today Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Cuba, and the United States between 1799 and 1804, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) generated remarkable advances in diverse disciplines, including geography, anthropology, history, archaeology, sociology, botany, zoology, geology, astronomy, and ecology. He published and illustrated twenty-nine volumes relating to his travels in the Ameri-

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