LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF PALAU

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ABSTRACT: The islands of Micronesia, isolated archipelagos scattered across the western Pacific Ocean, are experiencing a surge of library development activity. In 1991, the first Pacific Islands Association of Libraries and Archives (PIALA) conference was held in Koror, Republic of Palau (Belau), and has been held annually in different locales throughout the region. In the Republic of Palau, library development has been evidenced by numerous initiatives to support the establishment and strengthening of libraries. This paper will give an overview of these initiatives, highlighting the efforts of the Palau Community College to establish an Environmental Resource Center (ERC), as well as the efforts at the Ministry of Resources and Development: two Divisions have important collections - the Division of Conservation/Entomology and the Division of Marine Resources. In addition, the Republic of Palau is working with the governments of the United States and Japan to establish a Coral Reef Research Center in Palau, and a Library is an integral part of the plan for this Center. This paper will emphasize the many challenges of library development in the remote western Pacific, including the successes and failures of our experiences. It is hoped that this sharing will elicit help from our colleagues at more established libraries, as well as to inform IAMLIC members of important developments in a region of the world which literally revolves around the marine environment.

INTRODUCTION

Micronesia...the sea of “little islands,” conjures up images of lush tropical vegetation, azure lagoons, thatch-roofed huts, and colorful reefs. These can all be found in the tropical paradise of over 2100 islands which are strung across 3 million square miles west from Hawaii, ending in the far Western Caroline Islands where the Pacific Ocean borders the Philippine Sea. (Bendure 1995) There, the Republic of Palau, world-renowned as a “Mecca” for divers, has earned its reputation as the “number one underwater wonder of the world.” Arguably, Palau’s reefs are of unsurpassed beauty and diversity, and I would be remiss if my accompanying slides did not indulge all of you who have traveled to this conference perhaps your first glimpse of our island’s extraordinary beauty - both above and below the water. Those of you who have had the opportunity to view “The Living Sea” in Imax Theaters may recall that a large segment of that award-winning film highlighted
Palau’s underwater world, specifically the unique, undercut limestone Rock Islands and marine lakes, including Jellyfish Lake.

As luck would have it, I took some recent slide shots of libraries in Palau, but both establishments able to develop slide film could not fulfill my request: their sole staff capable of this task were off island!! So, please bear with me as I am ONLY going to be showing you slides of Palau’s natural beauty this afternoon!

REGIONAL LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

Many people are more familiar with the South Pacific, comprised of Melanesia and Polynesia. Technically in the North Pacific Ocean, the geographic region known as Micronesia is comprised of several distinct political entities, including the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to the north; the Republic of the Marshall Islands, to the far eastern edge of the region; the Federated States of Micronesia, in the center; and the Republic of Palau in the far westernmost reaches of Micronesia. Apart from the Territory of Guam, the other northern entity comprising Micronesia, these “districts,” as they were referred to then, were administered by the U.S. under a United Nations mandate following World War II (Hezel 1995), and the history of their political and economic “development” of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands can not be adequately summarized in this paper.

During the Trust Territory (or “T.T.”) days, formal library development initiatives were primarily focused on the elementary and secondary schools throughout Micronesia. Saipan served as the T.T. headquarters, and libraries in Saipan and Guam were, and still are, much more developed than anywhere else in Micronesia, adhering to established U.S. standards.

The Pacific Islands Association of Libraries and Archives (PIALA) was established informally during 1990 by a group of librarians throughout the region, including Hawaii. At the time, I held the position of Pacific Islands Subject Specialist at the University of Oregon, and was invited to participate in the inaugural conference, held in late September, 1991, in Koror, Palau, by the U.S. Department of Interior Office of Territorial and International Affairs, who provided some funding for the event.

This proved fortuitous for me, as I was scheduled to be in Palau on a sabbatical leave during 1992, providing technical assistance to the Belau National Museum (BNM) Research Library, the Division of Marine Resources Library Collection, and the Division of Conservation/Entomology Technical Collection.

PIALA tries to address common concerns of library personnel in the region, such as training needs and formal education requirements. One major accomplishment of PIALA has been the production of the Union List of Serials in the Libraries of Guam and Micronesia, updated annually.
PALAU’S LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

The islands of Palau, numbering 340, are approximately 500 miles east of the Philippines, and just as far north of Papua New Guinea; these islands are dispersed across 400 miles of ocean. The total land area is only 188 square miles, supporting a total population of 17,000. (Barbour 1995; SAGRIC International 1996) Palau earned its status as the world’s newest nation in 1994, achieving independence from its dubious position as the last U.N. Trusteeship. Palau’s government divides the country into sixteen states; these are outlined on the overhead, but this map does not show Palau’s remote Southwest Islands, which are 200-300 miles from the main archipelago, and consist of six islands divided into two states. (Etpison 1997)

With independence came a flurry of planning activities. The Economic Development Plan was completed in 1994; the National Master Development Plan was finalized in April, 1996, after several draft versions. In addition, The Palau 2000 Master Plan for Educational Improvement was completed in November, 1994, and includes a mandate to “increase library and technology resources at classroom and school levels.” (Palau 2000 Task Force 1994) Library development in general, however, is not given high priority in any of these plans, and supportive legislation is not discussed at all.

Despite no formal historical initiatives, some remarkably specialized library collections were developed in various government offices, but without benefit of professional organization or management. I learned about these collections during my sabbatical year in Palau.

In 1994, soon after my return to Palau to take the position of Librarian at the Palau Community College, I was part of a group which initiated the formation of the Palau Association of Libraries (PAL). We struggle to keep people’s interest up, and have serious problems with a lack of participation.

Elementary school library development has enjoyed a recent surge of support in Palau. In 1992, the Ministry of Education (MOE) teamed up with the U.S. Peace Corps to establish and develop library/community resource centers in Palau’s elementary schools, stretching from Kayangel Atoll, Palau’s northernmost state, through the ten states of Babeldaoab, Micronesia’s second largest land mass at 129 square miles, at 3 schools in the capital city of Koror, and on to the southern states of Peleliu and Angaur. (SAGRIC International 1996) In the third year of the program, the focus shifted to include specific environmental education efforts in the village communities and on developing collections to support this endeavor. Although English is taught in the schools, there is a definite need to develop and produce materials in the vernacular. The automation of these libraries has been discussed by the Ministry, but some villages still do not have an adequate power supply. Certification of the personnel managing these libraries is a priority of the MOE; this summer PCC offered two

The Belau National Museum (BNM), established in 1955 as the oldest museum in Micronesia, has long had an in-house library collection to support its activities and staff research. During my sabbatical, I assisted the BNM Research Library in implementing a catalog using Pro-Cite. (Barnwell 1995) The Museum has also developed an extensive historic and contemporary collection of photo-documentation of Palau, as can be seen in the slides loaned to me for this presentation. The Museum plans to include these materials in its Pro-Cite database.

The Division of Conservation/Entomology also developed a catalog using Pro-Cite in 1992, but due to staffing turnover it has not been maintained. The collection includes valuable field notes and other unique materials, many of which relate to marine topics, including extensive material about the crocodile and dugong in Palau, marine biology, and conservation issues relating to Palau’s environment.

In 1991, the Division of Marine Resources hired its first Information Officer. Prior to his hiring, in September 1990, Bette Kirchner, Information Officer with the Forum Fisheries Agency, came to Palau and set up the CDS/ISIS computer program and established a subject filing system for the collection. Despite my efforts in 1992, in which I worked with the Information Officer to input bibliographic records, the Division continues to be plagued with computer problems, so much of these data have been lost. This collection suffers further because the Information Officer is often pulled away from the office to support water-based activities of the Division! According to our colleague, Ganeshan Rao, he may be travelling to Palau later this year to assist the Information Officer with the ongoing database problems. The Division produces much information of interest to marine researchers, including technical and annual reports. Some of these research results are based on studies done at the Belau Mariculture Demonstration Center. (Division of Marine Resources 1992)

At the Palau Community College (PCC), the demand for environmental information is high, and has been noticeably increasing. In response, I sought external funding to establish and develop an Environmental Resource Center, a project initially supported by the University of Hawaii’s Sea Grant Program. The goal of this project is to provide information in various formats about environmental issues affecting Palau, but not limited in scope to Palau. For example, material such as coastal resource management plans are highly relevant and useful.

After two years of development, we have implemented Follett’s Unison software for the PCC Library’s online catalog. We do not have Internet access yet, and our interlibrary loan capabilities have, in practice, been very limited due to high telecommunications costs as well as the time required for shipment of borrowed materials.
However, I should note that the University of Hawaii’s Pacific Regional Aquaculture Information Service for Education (PRAISE) has been especially responsive in assisting us with obtaining information required by our users, particularly our teaching faculty and researchers based in the College’s Cooperative Research and Extension Department (CRE). CRE is involved in numerous activities, including aquaculture research, environmental education, and marine/coastal resource management.

A locally-based organization, The Coral Reef Research Foundation (CRRF), under contract with the U.S. National Cancer Institute, collects marine organisms in Palau and elsewhere for screening for potential activity against cancer and the AIDS virus. (Palau National Telecommunications Corporation 1997) A small specialized library collection supports the work of the Foundation, and includes standard monographs, serials, slides and video materials.

The recently established Palau Conservation Society (PCS) is one of Palau’s leading NGO’s, and has made impressive strides since its founding in 1994. Noah Idechong, Executive Director, was awarded a Pew Fellowship this year, and was a Goldman Environmental Prize recipient in 1995. (Pacific Daily News 1995; 1997) The Society supports a Community Project Officer, involved in environmental education efforts, and a Scientific Officer. The Society lacks an Information Officer, and the staff find it particularly difficult to obtain accurate and timely statistical data from Palau’s government agencies, which are needed to inform their work. The PCS office is small and overcrowded and needs organization of its background documents. The Scientific Officer is compiling bibliographic records in a Pro-Cite database. (Palau Conservation Society 1996)

Finally, with a look to the future of library development in Palau, I can report on an exciting development: The Republic of Palau is presently working with the governments of the United States and Japan to establish a Palau Coral Reef Research Center in Palau, and a Library is an integral part of the plan for this Center. One of the center’s objectives is to “provide venue and facilities to support research, professional training, workshops and conferences in coral reef/marine environment research, sustainable management and related activities.” The programmatic workplan states that the “Center will need to maintain a strong information management program,” including the following services: “reference library and archive collections; and coordination of exchange of information via local, regional, and international telecommunications systems.” (Palau Coral Reef Research Center 1997)

Despite the many positive and encouraging developments I have detailed above, Palau faces both common and unique challenges to its library development.

**CHALLENGES TO SUCCESS**

Palau, like many cultures, is deeply rooted in the oral tradition. The person who possesses knowledge of particular aspects of the Palauan way of life has an inherent status, or even
wealth. Thus, in many ways, libraries can be seen to challenge or even compete with this traditional mode of information sharing.

Despite some rapidly advancing developments in Palau, there are still random challenges and delays to completing any given project. Libraries face these challenges, whether trying to acquire materials in a timely fashion or needing a photocopier serviced. Power outages remain a frequent, unscheduled inconvenience. The costs of telecommunication services is extremely high. The Palau National Communications Corporation (PNCC) launched its PalauNet service in March, 1997, but to date they have been unable to work out the bugs in the system to provide the College with network access to the Internet. Some staff and offices on our campus have individual accounts, and access, but the Library is unable to do this because we do not have a separate phone line. No library in Palau presently has Internet access, let alone being able to provide Internet services to users.

Palau is further challenged by the limits of its personnel, both in a lack of professionally-trained library personnel, and a high turnover rate for those people working in libraries, problems common throughout Micronesia. I am the sole “professional” librarian on island. One Palauan national has had some archival training in Australia, and is an Information Officer with the President’s office. Another Palauan with a master’s degree in library science is presently working on Saipan. We need to attract Palauans to pursue careers as information professionals, and we need our libraries to develop and adopt standards.

No structure which houses a library in Palau was designed or built specifically for that purpose. Most libraries are in buildings which were deemed “temporary” structures, built over 30 years ago. Few have had significant renovations or improvements. Library facilities in Palau contribute significantly to the deterioration of the collections, as the ability to control temperature fluctuations and infestations is limited.

No one central agency has responsibility for Palau’s statistical data, and many people feel that in a place so small this would be worthwhile as a means to make this information more readily available. For example, the Marine Resources Division and the Palau Federation of Fishing Associations compile monthly catch statistics, but it can be difficult to obtain the most recent data. Similarly, personnel in planning positions are not necessarily trained to gather or compile the most useful data.

Another ongoing problem is the inability to identify basic biographical data on people in Palau, which becomes an issue when a local notable figure is giving a speech and needs to be formally introduced, or for state funerals. A striking example of Palau’s information crisis came to light in July of this year. As the celebration of Constitution Day was being planned, the original signed copy of Palau’s constitution could not be located, and is still “missing.”
All of you know the continuing bibliographic challenges posed by “grey literature;” in Palau, this problem is further exacerbated by the fact that a lot of research results completed by outsiders is never shared with Palauan scientists.

When I envision the future, I hope that Palau will enact legislation for both a depository law and a national library, and strengthen existing archives legislation. We need a national bibliography. We need to link our automated systems, and become more adept at resource sharing.

CONCLUSION

The future for library development in Palau will continue to be a struggle, but I am optimistic that Palau’s leaders will soon recognize the impact on future generations if we remain information ignorant. Clearly, the need for information is no less on our islands than anywhere else in the world. I enlist whatever support IAMSLIC and its members can give to the developing libraries of Palau. I am grateful for this opportunity to share with you, and to benefit from your individual and collective expertise. And, I look forward to the day when Palau hosts the annual IAMSLIC conference!

REFERENCES


