

# Information Retrieval and Current Awareness in the Tropics: The Papua New Guinea Experience

PAUL DALZELL  
ICLARM

Amongst the problems that face fisheries and other scientific researchers in the tropics is the acquisition of reference material. Papers and books that may be essential for the success of a particular project appear difficult, if not impossible to obtain. This is further compounded by the fact that the majority of scientific research occurs in the developed countries, mostly in the northern hemisphere, and new advances and techniques take time to percolate down to researchers in remote areas. Geographic isolation is not the only problem; in many instances, research budgets are small and do not encourage subscription to scientific and abstracting journals.

For several years I worked as a fisheries scientist for the Papua New Guinea Government and encountered all of the above problems in obtaining references for the field laboratory at Kavieng where I was stationed. Kavieng is a small town approximately 500 km north of the capital city, Port Moresby. The accepted method of acquiring references and books was through the Fisheries Division central library in Port Moresby. Due to a variety of problems the library was often unable to provide the field laboratories with reference acquisitions. This article describes how my colleagues and I managed to overcome these problems and will hopefully demonstrate to other fisheries scientists working in the tropics and remote from the mainstream of information exchange that reference retrieval is not a lost cause.

In the absence of journals, researchers rely on receiving a photocopy or a reprint of a particular article. Unfortunately, photocopying costs money as libraries usually will not do it for free.

In Papua New Guinea and Australia an institution must belong to the Library Association of Australia (LAA) to request photocopying services from a particular library. This is because the LAA issues photocopy vouchers which are used by libraries and institutions in the region to pay for photocopying. Fortunately, laboratories such as at Kavieng can and did join the LAA as 'Voucher Only Members'. We could buy photocopy

vouchers and obtain photocopies of papers. Membership in LAA cost A\$25 (A\$1 = US\$0.65) and gave us access to the scientific libraries of Australia. We found the CSIRO's Division of Fisheries Research library the most useful, followed by several of the university libraries. However, we still had to buy photocopying vouchers which are currently A\$3 for ten pages of copying. We used this option as a last recourse when we could not obtain a reprint (which only costs the price of a postage stamp).

**"Any scientist who cannot access information is being denied an essential tool of the trade."**

For newly published papers, especially pertaining to tropical fisheries science, we at Kavieng found two ICLARM publications particularly useful. Naga (formerly the ICLARM Newsletter) contains an information section that acts as a current awareness journal for tropical fisheries science. Fishbyte, the periodical of the Network of Tropical Fisheries Scientists (NTFS), contains similar information. Both publications give the author's address with the article title and journal reference. Thus reprints may be obtained cheaply. Copies of many papers (e.g., FAO Fisheries Circulars) and reprints are often available on request for NTFS members, while ICLARM's free Selective Fisheries Information Service can provide material and references in response to specific enquiries.

Many readers of this article may be aware of the current awareness journal 'Current Contents' published by the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) in Philadelphia, USA. But few probably know of a service offered by ISI called 'Custom Contents'. Rather than subscribe to the main journal at a cost of US\$415,

one may nominate only those journals which are of relevance at a cost of about US\$10 per journal.

Another method found useful for acquiring literature was to get included on as many institutional mailing lists as possible (e.g., South Pacific Commission, US National Marine Fisheries Service, SEAFDEC), particularly where publications are free. Writing to embassies of various countries to help track down reports (especially old ones) published by government fisheries agencies also paid off from time to time. For books, we found it useful to establish an account with a major book seller in Britain. The account let us buy on credit and we received regular notification of upcoming publications in the life sciences field.

It would be naive to expect comprehensive information retrieval and current awareness entirely for free. Unfortunately, there are fisheries scientists in the tropics who have budgets so low that even postage is a problem. For these scientists this article is of little use since some funds are essential. It may help them, however, to lobby for some funding since costs can be kept to a minimum and any scientist who cannot access information is being denied an essential tool of the trade.

Naga would be interested to hear from other researchers how they face or overcome the problems of keeping up to date in remote areas. The best stories will be published.

*Please send a reprint of your article on coping with tropical rashes,....*

