

# A Personal Perspective on Literature Searches in Remote

## Areas

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**H**aving spent most of my professional life working in remote places, my appreciation for things previously taken for granted grows with each posting. For example, at major research agencies or universities, logistics such as libraries, state of the art computers, good electricity, photocopy machines, and good historical data are readily available. For those of us who have had long-term assignments in remote areas, many of these are often only distant memories.

For this short discussion, I am focusing on literature. Literature searches are really part of the research process.

### Literature Searching

In remote areas, even a simple literature search can be a very time consuming activity. ASFA is often not available. A letter of inquiry can result in a computer disk with downloaded reference citations.

Mail is often lost. In one place in Asia that I worked, perhaps 25% of



*Marine Biologist Wajeaha Al-Baharna (standing) observes Librarian Jalla Habib Al-Arabi as the latter inputs Bahrain Directorate of Fisheries library holdings onto CDS/ISIS.*

my mail was lost. Here in the Middle East, mail seems to be more reliable, but airmail can still take 2 to 8 weeks one way.

In letters of inquiry, key words need to be very specifically stated. If you are sitting in front of a computer with ASFA, you can easily modify search words to target better the topic of interest. These refinements are not possible in a single letter. Refinement of the search parameters may require several letters and several months.

In addition, the goodwill of the institute receiving the letter of inquiry is critical. So far, research libraries such as ICLARM, PIMRIS and University of Hawaii have been very generous about doing a few searches. However, there are probably limits to this generosity.

One limitation to ASFA and other western databases is that in-house technical reports (the grey literature) are not listed. At this time, there does not seem to be a mechanism for accessing this information.

### **Collection of Key Articles**

The initial literature search identifies key articles. These then need to be collected and read. Common problems encountered when requesting reprints include: (1) incomplete author addresses, (2) time, (3) lost mail, (4) goodwill. In ASFA citations, author addresses are often not complete, or the author has moved. The other three problems are similar to those faced when doing literature searches.

The response rate for reprint requests can also be very low.

Local library resources in remote places are very limited. In many of the places I have worked, my personal technical library was far more complete than the fisheries library.

### **Catalog Local Fisheries Library Holdings**

Many local fisheries offices are beginning to organize their library holdings. In Bahrain, following guidance from ICLARM, we are using CDS/ISIS. Data input is a slow process, espe-

cially where computer and western language skills are just developing.

As other fisheries library holdings become electronically cataloged, an international database of holdings and local reports may eventually become available.

### **Budgets**

From a western perspective, costs for photocopies and mail may seem insignificant. However, the costs for getting a single copy of report may be equal to a month's wages for local staff. In one country, I once asked for a copy of an annual fisheries report. The head of fisheries there gave it to his secretary to retype. It was cheaper for her to retype than to photocopy!

In another place I worked, the entire operating budget for the local fisheries office (excluding salaries) was only \$1,000 for the year. Literature was a very low priority there.

### **Documentation of Results**

One issue which has repeatedly come to my attention in the past 15 years is the documentation of results. Sometimes studies are published, but never given to the host country. To counter this, one Pacific Island government began demanding a draft report before foreign researchers departed. In this way, at least they had something to use.

I have also been involved in several cases where researchers conducted studies, but a final report was never produced. In these cases, information collected is effectively lost. This is applicable to both foreign and national researchers.

### **Timeliness**

At the national level, literature searches are often done to support real-time fisheries management. For fisheries management practitioners, timeliness is critical. In academia, thoroughness is critical, but may not be appropriate if the patient (in this case the fishery) dies. There is a difference between an autopsy and corrective surgery.

Management decisions are often made

on the "best available" information. Information available to a major research organization and to a remote fisheries office can be worlds apart.

### **Thoughts for the Future**

On my recent visit to ICLARM, I had a short guided tour of FishBase. This will be a useful tool for researchers in remote places. I hope that the costs can be kept at a minimum. The cost of the complete ASFA set now is more than US\$5,000 (not including the CD drive). This is beyond the means of most remote fisheries offices (and many national offices).

One supplemental activity I personally would like to see is for fisheries literature (including grey literature) to be input into an inexpensive text database. Abstracts are useful, but it is still essential to examine the entire report/article to understand assumptions and conclusions.

If fisheries references were put onto electronic media at a central location, perhaps they could be downloaded and provided to users through e-mail or by diskette. Great improvements can be made in reducing transmission costs and turn around time.

Personally, I look forward to the day when journals and collections of fish references will become available on electronic media. I understand that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has a project to put their entire aquaculture collection on electronic media. At this time, full-page color laser scanners are becoming affordable (less than US\$800). In addition, storage media for computers are becoming larger and their price is dropping. Perhaps, one day soon I will be able to exchange my 20 boxes of references for a few CDs.

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