

Kathleen de la Peña McCook

EDITOR



COMMUNITY BUILDING

Alaska Resources Library and Information Services

Building Community in the 49th State

Juli Braund-Allen and Daria O. Carle, Guest Columnists

The Institute of Museum and Library Services recognized the community-building achievements of an unusual library in Anchorage, Alaska when it bestowed one of three 2001 National Awards for Library Service on the Alaska Resources Library and Information Services (ARLIS). This award, the highest in the nation, is given to libraries that “demonstrate a core commitment to public service through innovative programs and active partnerships that address the urgent and changing needs within the communities they serve.”¹

This statement is remarkably descriptive of ARLIS, whose story begins back in the mid-1990s during a time of government downsizing and national budget constraints. It was also a period of decreased oil revenues and a dwindling economy in Alaska, a state that relies heavily on the management and conservation of its natural resources. These resources are managed by federal and state agencies, most of which are head-

quartered in Anchorage. At the time, these agencies operated their own libraries to support their research and decision making. By 1995, however, one of the libraries had closed due to budget cuts, another was threatened with closure, and the services and hours of several others, including one university library, had been severely limited by reductions in personnel.

Realizing just how deeply these events were eroding research activities—and thus sound resource management—librarians from the different agencies and the university began meeting weekly to brainstorm about what they could do to save their libraries. The librarians were keenly aware that

although their libraries were small, staffed mostly by one or two people, there were no other resources to replace the collections. Alaska is a book-poor state: “All of the books in all of the libraries in Alaska equal fewer than half the number in the library collections of Stanford University.”² To stretch scarce collection dollars as far as possible, Alaska libraries had participated in cooperative collection development for more than a decade. Conducted both formally and informally, on community, regional, and state levels, such cooperation enabled Alaska’s individual academic, public, and special libraries to collect more heavily in certain agreed-upon

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to: **Kathleen de la Peña McCook**, Professor of Library and Information Science, University of South Florida, P.O. Box 1027, Ruskin, FL 33575; e-mail: kmccook@tampabay.rr.com

Juli Braund-Allen is AEIDC Program Manager/ARLIS Management Team Librarian/Associate Professor, Environment and Natural Resources Institute/ARLIS/Consortium Library, University of Alaska, Anchorage. **Daria O. Carle** is Science Librarian/ARLIS Reference Librarian/Assistant Professor, Consortium Library, University of Alaska, Anchorage.

subject areas than they otherwise would have been able to do. This sharing provided the most in-depth resources possible and fostered close day-to-day working relations between librarians. But it also meant that the closure of even one library left a gaping hole in the Alaska library landscape. Even worse was the fact that much of the collected material was unique—gray literature, research and technical reports and data, and other material not available anywhere else in the world.

A Community Crisis and a Community Solution

U.S. Minerals Management was the first library to close. Its collection of materials relating to Alaska's offshore exploration and development had already been boxed and warehoused when word came that the Bureau of Land Management's Alaska Resources Library (ARL) might face the same fate or, at the very least, lose personnel from its small cadre of workers. ARL was the largest and most heavily used natural resources library in Alaska. It served as a central repository of extensive information on Alaska's lands and resources for U.S. Department of Interior and other federal agency researchers, business consultants, and public users throughout the state. Any cuts to ARL's budget would severely impact all of these groups. Librarians and users alike were gravely concerned.

It was at this point that the agency and university librarians banded together in earnest to explore their options. Calling themselves the Alaska Natural Resources Library Group (ANRLG), they proposed merging the collections into a single, consolidated library that would be managed, staffed, and funded

through a partnership arrangement. The rationale for this consolidated library was to: safeguard and ensure access to the collections; offer "one-stop shopping" to users by locating the collections in a single place; continue to serve the specialized needs of the participating agencies; be open to the general public; and after initial outlays, ultimately save money by consolidating services and overhead, particularly the cost of building space.

The librarians informally canvassed their users for their thoughts on the concept. Agency staff raised many concerns, including loss of control, costs, level of service, and the inconvenience of an off-site location. Other users shared these same concerns and also wondered how costs would be spread equitably among all parties. The librarians broadly mapped out how these issues might be addressed and how a consolidated library could be established and managed. They then went about engaging the support of upper management for the idea.

This was no small feat, especially since the libraries belonged to four federal agencies, one state agency, one university unit, and one joint federal-state agency. The missions of the libraries differed as well. Some served the public, others served only their agencies, one was affiliated with a university that included a broad student population, while another served users ranging from grade school children to attorneys. An added complication was that not all of the libraries were threatened by funding cuts. One faced no extraordinary budget difficulties at all, and its agency feared involvement in the proposed effort might actually put it at risk.

Partners were scattered throughout Anchorage. They included the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (Habitat Library); the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS

Library); the U.S. National Park Service (NPS Collection); the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS Library); the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (Alaska Resources Library); the U.S. Minerals Management Service (MMS Library); the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council (Oil Spill Public Information Center); and the University of Alaska Anchorage, including the Consortium Library and the Environment and Natural Resources Institute (Arctic Environmental Information and Data Center).

The Community Building Process

Even though the obstacles were daunting, the idea of a consolidated library was compelling. If such a library could be made to work, it would answer the needs of many in the community. Vice President Gore's Reinventing America Program was being conducted across the nation, and ANRLG applied for and was granted federal Reinvention Laboratory status through the Department of the Interior. Now designated an official Laboratory, ANRLG was joined by the collection development librarian from the Anchorage Municipal Libraries and by a researcher with the National Park Service to help balance the mix and represent the information needs of public and agency users. In November 1995, they underwent formal team training and found that emphasis was on activities that come naturally to librarians: defining the needs of a user community and responding to those needs in direct and innovative ways. Reinvention Laboratory status also empowered ANRLG, giving it valuable federal advisory benefits, shortcuts in dealing with restrictive regulations and policies, and long-term support that included time for the project to

mature. All of these advantages contributed to the eventual success of ARLIS, which was honored with the Hammer Award in 1997 by Vice President Gore.

Laboratory status provided something else that proved absolutely vital. The Reinvention process required each Laboratory to have a Management Advisory Group (MAG) composed of stakeholders who could make the decisions necessary for the project to succeed. ANRLG realized its MAG members needed to be individuals who were highly placed, had the power to allocate funding, and could push for legislative or other changes that might be necessary for the consolidation to work among the state, federal, and university entities. The librarians sold the idea of a coalition library—whose operation would consolidate and preserve resources, enhance services, and conserve funds—to the top managers who controlled the money. Members of the MAG included the Department of Interior's Special Assistant to the Secretary for Alaska, the Regional Director of the Minerals Management Service, the Chancellor of the University of Alaska Anchorage, the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, and others. The unwavering vision, political acumen, and support of these key participants were crucial in making ARLIS possible.

In their early planning meetings, the librarians had decided that all decisions would be made by consensus. This was done intentionally to preserve librarian and agency buy-in; it ensured that every voice in ANRLG was heard and that every need would be accommodated in forging the new library. The librarians held focus groups and administered surveys to formally identify user needs, uncover patterns of information use, measure levels of current satisfaction with service, and determine whether agency personnel

and others could support the concept of a consolidated library that would no longer be located "just down the hall." Ninety percent of survey respondents said they needed information from a library to do their job, and that professional librarians and support staff were essential to facilitate research within the agencies. Comments received from researchers indicated that if the agency libraries were to close, they could not accomplish their work. A consultant commented, "We rely heavily on the service provided through the library . . . it would greatly increase our costs of doing business if we had to send staff to libraries [out of state] to conduct research which is part of our day-to-day business."³

The librarians pored through the literature looking for best practices of comparable organizations against which to benchmark, but found little. There were many models of joint federal-state ventures, but these were cooperative efforts rather than true consolidations. One similar model was identified in southeast Alaska, but it had failed. Several other models were also located, but their organizational structures were not directly applicable.

The librarians plowed ahead and worked out basic circulation and cataloging policies that would best serve the interests of each agency, as well as those of the public and private sectors. They measured the existing collections for the new library's spatial needs and plotted how many people in what kinds of positions would be needed to operate the library when it opened. They planned how they could combine and provide access to collections that used differing catalog systems and, in some instances, were not cataloged at all. They calculated the shelf space required to accommodate materials that might have up to five or six different call numbers for the same book. They debated how many

copies of an item they might need, and what would happen if an agency researcher needed a source that was checked out to a public patron or a student. They drew up budget after budget, and realized that projected cost-savings would not accrue for some time, at least until after the necessary initial outlays for establishing ARLIS had been paid. They figured out how they could most advantageously pool existing resources and staff, and what a fair monetary or in-kind share would be for each of the founding agencies to contribute annually. They discussed differing levels of service and how those levels might relate to annual contributions. They devised an organizational structure that allowed future partners. They brainstormed new partners and innovative fee-based services that could help support the new library. They met with attorneys. They learned that federal libraries could not collect fees for service, but that state and university libraries could. Over time, they painstakingly mapped out how agencies with different missions, different fiscal years, different reporting structures, different procurement methods, and different personnel policies, procedures, and holidays could operate a single library whose services and collections could meet a host of differing needs while still providing exemplary service to users.⁴

Ultimately, the operating structure of ARLIS was formalized in several documents, all signed in 1997 and in effect for five years. The first was a Memorandum of Understanding between all participants. It laid the framework for establishing ARLIS, stating the purpose, background and objectives, authority, organization and responsibilities, and administrative provisions, including those for withdrawal from ARLIS. The second was an agreement among the federal agencies (including the joint federal-state agency) that out-

lined the cash and in-kind contributions of each. The agreement designated a lead agency to collect funds from the others and distribute them to the university. A third document drawn up between the lead agency and the university spelled out the contributions and other responsibilities of the participants. It also addressed how people and resources would be combined into a single library. The sole state entity participated in the Memorandum of Understanding, but entered into its own separate agreements with the federal agencies and the university.⁵

Open at Last

ARLIS opened in 1997 and continues to be managed through consensus-based teamwork, just as it was conceived and developed. An ARLIS Management Team composed of six of the federal, state, and university founding librarians guides its daily operation. The librarians have a dual purpose in that they are dedicated ARLIS librarians, but also serve the missions of their parent agencies, in whose employ they remain. Together, they incorporate into ARLIS management a working knowledge of agency perspectives and changing project emphases, as well as the university's educational and research needs. As a consequence, agency staff and university users feel ARLIS is "their" library and that they are being served by "their" librarians with "their" books. An ARLIS Founders Board has replaced the Management Advisory Group, although many of the original members remain. The Founders Board exercises policy approval and budget authority, and provides agency direction and overall support for ARLIS. The Founders Board meets twice yearly with the Management Team, and the two work closely together throughout the

year. To garner added support, the community has recently formed a "Friends of ARLIS" group to promote ARLIS and develop ongoing funding sources.

Today, ARLIS provides information and research assistance to more than 2,300 agency staff working throughout the state. It also serves the diverse information needs of the business and legal communities, environmental groups and consultants, Alaska Native corporations, the petroleum industry, miners, educators, and students, as well as other libraries, locally and internationally. Public service statistics, including numbers for interlibrary loan, circulation, and reference, have continued to increase every year that ARLIS has been open. In 2000, ARLIS had 20,000 on-site users and answered 25,000 requests for information. Of these, nearly half (48 percent) were public users. Agency personnel made up 33 percent of ARLIS clientele, with the remaining 19 percent coming from the university's student and faculty population.⁶

Improving Community Access and Creating Synergy

A year after ARLIS opened, the records from some of the different agency library catalogs that had been combined into one database were loaded into a web-based catalog shared with the local public library. Two years later, the university and the Anchorage Museum of History and Art began adding their records as well. Today, this shared online catalog makes it easier to do research in Anchorage. The catalog has heightened awareness of locally available materials, particularly for patrons interested in Alaska's resources who had not known that ARLIS existed (www.arlis.org). In addition to sharing a

catalog, the libraries continue to cooperate in collection development.⁷

In 2001, ARLIS, the university, and the local public library engaged in a cooperative borrowing agreement, in which each library honors the others' borrowing cards. Library patrons, who previously had to have three separate cards, can now check out and return books at any location with a card from any one of the institutions. This popular service has increased access to all of southcentral Alaska's publicly available library resources.

ARLIS serves as a location in the community where public review documents are available for interested parties to read. It also offers a conference room as a neutral meeting place for persons on all sides of resource management issues to hold discussions. More and more collections are being given to ARLIS as well, including selected materials from libraries no longer maintained by a number of Anchorage-based petroleum companies. Specialized researchers who have used the library and recognize the depth and value of its collection have donated professional-level materials to ARLIS. The literature cited in the environmental report for the right-of-way renewal of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System is soon to be housed at ARLIS, and a major collection of aerial photographs was recently acquired from the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) contributed a unique commercial fisheries collection that documents agency decisions and fish harvest numbers since Alaska's statehood in 1959. Of significance to the environmental community, the fishing industry, and the rural population of Alaska that exists on a subsistence-based economy, this historic information is crucial to understanding the nearly five decades of state management of fisheries resources.

A collection of specimens of furs, skulls, and bird mounts also donated by ADF&G has become especially popular. Consistently one of the most heavily used collections at ARLIS, the materials are searchable in the online catalog and circulate like books to patrons. Elementary schoolteachers, scout leaders, wildlife artists, and agency personnel doing outreach activities find the specimens to be an invaluable source for hands-on education.

In a stroll through ARLIS, it is possible to encounter middle school students studying oil spills, graduate students analyzing wildlife survey techniques, public patrons interested in mining, agency and academic researchers investigating causes and impacts of melting glaciers, consultants gathering information on Alutiiq culture, an artist painting a still life using a stuffed loon as a model, and members of the private and public sectors browsing the shelves during a break from a day-long discussion of how to best route the city's proposed coastal trail extension with the least impact to wetlands, existing development, and scenic resources. In her testimonial supporting the 2001 Institute of Museum and Library Services award, Fran Ulmer, Alaska's Lieutenant Governor, wrote: "ARLIS is an excellent example of city, state, university, and federal government reaching across agency boundaries to make resources available to the widest constituency."⁸

ARLIS would not be possible without the strong and continuing support it receives from its founding partners and its Founders Board. The library is truly the result of the ongoing efforts of many people and many organizations who believe wholeheartedly in the value of information and public service. The State of Alaska clearly agreed when it honored ARLIS with a Legislative Citation in May 2002 for its contribution to the people of Alaska.

Now in its fifth year of operation, ARLIS continues to thrive. Success has not always come easily, however, and ongoing problems—some anticipated, some not—continue to plague and puzzle. A few of the issues that still remain include stabilizing and increasing funding, gaining the ability to offer fee-based services, and creating a truly cohesive internal culture for ARLIS. As the library struggles with these and other problems, fresh challenges are already on the horizon. In 2004, ARLIS plans to relocate into the newly remodeled and expanded university library building, a move that will bring two of Alaska's major research libraries under one roof. Co-locating these two libraries—whose identities, missions, and services are so different—raises many questions. With the support of all of its partners, ARLIS looks forward to meeting the challenges as new possibilities and community-building opportunities unfold. ■

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