

A technical perspective of Pacific history: Accessing information from regional technical organisations

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Abstract: This paper will focus on the libraries of the three main technical organisations: the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the Pacific Islands Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), and the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC). These libraries safeguard their organisation’s publications, as well as holding an accumulation of publications, grey literature, reprints, maps, photographs, etc., acquired over the years to support the work of these organisations. This material provides a unique perspective on the history of post-World War II Pacific. This paper will discuss the challenges and solutions for improving access to this valuable material.

Introduction

There are eleven organisations that cooperate to form the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP): the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), the Forum Secretariat (PIFS), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the Pacific Islands Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO), the University of the South Pacific (USP), the Pacific Islands Development Programme (PIDP), the Fiji School of Medicine (FSchM), the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA), and the Pacific Power Association (PPA).

These organisations are often grouped into three pillars with the FFA and PIFS serving a strong policy role, the PPA, SOPAC, SPBEA, SPC, SPREP and SPTO serving a technical role, and FSschM, PIDP and USP serving an academic/education role.

Some of these organisations have changed their names as regionalism was expanded to include the North Pacific. Regional membership to these organisations is not consistent, depending on the status of independence of the different Pacific Islands. For example, the French Territories of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia are full members of the SPC, but not of the FFA. The status of these organisations is also changing as CROP organisations harmonise and rationalise amongst themselves. For example, SPBEA will be completely folded into the SPC, and SOPAC is currently being split between SPC and SPREP. All of these variations and changes create interesting information management problems.

What are CROP libraries?

The libraries and librarians of CROP organisations do communicate and coordinate efforts. Several of the libraries have long participated in the PIMRIS network coordinating the provision of fisheries information in the region. More recently, the CROP Library and Archives Information Management (CLAIM) group was formed to help us coordinate our advocacy efforts in the region.

The libraries of these organisations can be grouped into three main categories: nonexistent, academic, and special/technical. The SPTO, the SPBEA and the PPA do not have formal libraries or librarians. USP, and FSchM are tertiary academic institutions with large academic libraries, and PIDP, while it maintains a small library of its own, has strong links to the University of Hawaii and all of its information resources.

The remaining libraries of FFA, PIFS, SPC, SPREP and SOPAC have varying degrees of resources, staffing and support. These libraries can be more difficult to access than their large academic counterparts. The main purpose of these collections and the priority of library staff is to serve the immediate needs of employees of the organisation, meaning the needs of external researchers often come second. Limited resources and staffing means that there is little room for professional specialisation. All library staff are cataloguers, reference librarians, circulation staff, serials librarians, ILL staff, etc.

What's in the collections?

The value of these collections is based on their subject specializations. Within these 5 libraries the specializations are as follows:

- SPC – public health, fisheries, culture, gender, youth, statistics, demography, agriculture, animal health.
- SOPAC - minerals, sea-level changes, wave energy, petroleum exploration, oceanography, marine geology and technology, meteorology, water management, disaster management.
- FFA – fisheries development, fisheries management and fisheries operations.
- SPREP – conservation, pollution, climate change, environment, sustainable economic development.
- PIFS – trade, industry development, constitutional policy, economic policy.

These libraries have been collecting a vast amount of material on their areas of interest over a very long period of time. As private and special libraries, there is freedom to focus and obtain information which may be extremely rare. One example would be the large amounts of grey literature (assessment and project reports, workshop and meeting papers, etc.) from government departments and NGOs throughout the region that have been accumulated in the course of supporting the work of organisation. This type of literature is difficult to obtain, even from the departments that originally authored them, and oftentimes these CROP libraries hold unique copies.

In terms of illuminating the history of the Pacific, arguably the most important parts of these collections are the meeting papers and in-country assessments conducted by staff of the organisations. These speak to the various developmental trends in the region, but are also collections of massive amounts of statistical data very difficult to find elsewhere. All of these organisations produce large amounts of reports, maps, videos, meeting papers, photographs, etc. that are directly relevant to region, and in the case of the SPC and SPREP, are often produced in both English and French. SOPAC has an amazing collection of maps, and the SPC Regional Media Centre has a long-running accumulation of footage from throughout the region. All of these libraries have a mandate to preserve, and to various extents, make accessible, the publications and output of their organisations. Some of these outputs are restricted to use by employees and members of governments, as the information is confidential.

Access to these libraries:

These libraries can be visited either during regular opening hours or by appointment. However, these libraries are scattered across the Pacific with locations in the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa, so gaining physical access to the material is not always possible.

All CROP organisations attempt to work within the goals of the Pacific Plan, and relevant to this is the Digital Strategy which notes that its objectives are to:

“ensure easy access to information through ICTs that strengthens cooperation between stakeholders, fosters good governance, develops the private sector and improves service delivery”

and

“ensure ICTs will be used to inform and connect Pacific Island populations and that they will benefit from flexible and appropriate education and training”

Presumably the role of libraries is to provide the information and documents. To this end, CROP libraries are putting in a greater effort to make information available online. Here are the various ways in which information from these libraries can be accessed remotely:

	FFA	PIFS	SOPAC	SPC	SPREP
Library Website					
Online Catalogue					
Online Digital Collection					

The online digital collections of SOPAC, SPC and SPREP all required special effort and all serve to make the organisations output more easily accessible. These digital collections provide access to the PDF versions of corporate documents. The more current born-digital documents are obviously less difficult to include, but the vast

wealth of older documents had to be scanned, OCR'd, and made logically accessible and searchable.

The SPC library received funding support from the Coastal Fisheries section (but therefore only includes fisheries documents), SPREP library was supported by the EU for its Pacific Environment Information Network, and the SOPAC library was given corporate support for its digitisation efforts. SPC and SOPAC both digitised in house, while SPREP outsourced its digitisation.

The SOPAC virtual library (http://www.sopac.org/tiki-sopac_virlib.php) provides access to SOPAC documents by a simple browse list by item type. There is also an easy Google search function. The SPREP Online Publications (http://www.sprep.org/publication/pub_list.asp) also has a simple browse, but by subject, as well as the Google search function. SPC's Fisheries Digital Library (<http://www.spc.int/mrd/fishlib.php>) has several browse options, including language, country, and item type. It has a very powerful search function. The metadata in this database was harvested from the SPC library catalogue and transformed into references. This digital library was also created as a DVD and distributed throughout the region to provide access for those departments that do not have adequate internet access to download large PDF files. Of these final products, the SPC Fisheries Digital Library is probably the most costly, complicated and powerful. It would also be the hardest to sustain or translate into a context with fewer resources.

The need to improve access to CROP information continues. FFA is starting to discuss making its holdings more consistently available online. SPC needs to digitise all of its non-fisheries holdings. All of these organisations need to improve the management of their current electronic documents and records. There are developments such as the collaboration between the Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange (ODIN) and the Pacific Islands Marine Resources Information System (PIMRIS) to create a Pacific Ocean portal. This project would encourage Fisheries departments throughout the Pacific to digitise and upload their documents into a shared collection, open to access. But again, the CROP libraries need think about how to apply this project beyond fisheries. CROP librarians, through CLAIM, will hopefully continue to strengthen collaboration to improve access.

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