

Environment libraries: endangered species?

Slashed budgets, accusations of political interference in science, protests from over 10,000 scientists, aggressive senatorial oversight hearings: who knew libraries could be at the center of such controversy. Such is the case, however, since the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has decided to shut down or reduce operating hours at many of its libraries across the US.

Conversely, north of the border, only a deafening silence surrounds the slow demise of Environment Canada's libraries.

In early 2006 the EPA began restructuring its network of libraries. The original intent was to respond to the President's FY2007 budget, which included a 35% cut to the EPA libraries. More specifically, 80% of those cuts were to libraries administered by the Office of Environmental Information, which was responsible for 10 regional libraries and the headquarters library in Washington. This amounted to a \$2 million cut out of a \$2.5 million budget.

Despite the fact that Congress adjourned at the end of 2006 without approving these cuts, the EPA headquarters library, the Chemical Library (administered by the Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances), and four regional libraries affecting 23 states have all been closed and their librarians laid off. Four other regional libraries have had their operating hours reduced.

Since the announcements of the cuts, protests have been raining down on the EPA for acting without congressional approval and without a clear plan for dismantling the libraries. EPA's administrators have tried to recast the closures as part of a transition from walk-in services to making the collection available online. This received even more critiques that were compounded when EPA officials announced that the digitization of many unique EPA print materials would take up to two years. This has left many documents boxed and lying in repositories, accessible only by interlibrary loan.

Protests abound

The response to the cuts has come from a variety of actors. Library associations have written letters to members of Congress, reminding them that EPA librarians handled over 130,000 research requests in 2005, saving EPA staff over 200,000 hours of research time and an estimated cost savings of \$7.5 million.

Democratic legislators have also written letters asking the EPA to stop library closures. In early February 2007, the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, now led by Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer, held an oversight hearing into recent EPA decisions, which included very pointed questioning over its library closures.

EPA staff have also been vocal about the cuts. A letter signed by 16 union presidents representing over 10,000 EPA scientists, engineers, environmental protection specialists and support staff, insists that libraries are essential in order to accomplish the Agency's

mission. Closures could mean that prosecution of polluters will be compromised or that researching effects and properties of chemicals slated to go onto the market will be difficult.

Research has shown that government publications are crucial to environmental scientists. Studies indicate that technical reports published by governments or organizations can comprise anywhere between 3 to 8% of the citations in an environmental scientist's research article^{1,2}. As a comparison, a study of articles written by biochemists demonstrated that only 0.5% of their citations come from technical reports.²

Canadian déjà vu

With much less media attention, there have been many budget cuts to federal libraries in Canada over the last several years. Following Paul Martin's 1995 budget announcing a \$13.4 billion reduction in spending, deep cuts were made to Environment Canada's libraries which resulted in major reductions in services, as well as cancellations of journal subscriptions and, in some cases, the complete obliteration of book buying budgets.

Consequently, Environment Canada scientists rely on surrounding university libraries for their information needs and on their own budgets to buy books and individual subscriptions to journals. As a result, small collections of books and journals are being duplicated throughout the Ministry.

Tom Furmanczyk, a scientist at Environment Canada who has been involved in many committees to evaluate the downsizing of Environment Canada libraries, wonders whether the overall cost of duplication and time lost hunting down information is costing more to the government than a strong, central library would. "The library needs to be the central pillar of an organization" he says.

Today, according to Furmanczyk, approximately 0.04% of Environment Canada's budget goes towards its libraries. In comparison, in 2004-2005, Concordia University allotted more than 4% of its budget to its libraries. But even as the environment tops the polls on issues which are of concern to Canadians, staff at Environment Canada have said that the library has faced another budget cut in 2006

The environment and political interference in science

Although Environment Canada's libraries are suffering, scientists across the country are taking environmental issues seriously. Over 700 Canadian environmental scientists signed a petition in December 2006, urging the government to strengthen the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. Dr David Schindler, the petition's organizer, believes that budget cuts undermine the government's capacity to control pollution. Dr John Smol, one of the petitioners, goes on to say that many scientists "are frightened almost by how current administrations around the world, including our own, are not taking the environment anywhere near as seriously as they should".³

"In an age of global warming and heightened public awareness about the environment, it seems ironic that the Administration would choose this time to limit access to years of

research about the environment” testified Leslie Burger, president of the American Library Association at the EPA oversight hearing.

Could the EPA library closings be one more example of political interference in science? The Union of Concerned Scientists in the United States certainly thinks so. Their *A to Z Guide to Political Interference in Science* is a long reading list of manipulation, suppression and distortion of scientific work by the current American Administration.

It could also be argued that the lack of funding to environment libraries, either in Canada or the US, is the result of a deep misunderstanding of the crucial role of libraries and librarians in the Internet era. In fact, both governments have justified their cuts by suggesting that digitized library documents with increased online availability would outweigh the need for the physicality of libraries and the research skills of librarians.

Whatever the case, the EPA and Environment Canada cuts diminish one of the best tools we have for protecting the environment: access to information. Public awareness and action are vital in the struggle to maintain these libraries, especially in Canada where there's so far been no mobilization on the issue.

Notes

1. Biradar, B.S. & Kumbar, M.. “Citation Pattern in the Field of Environmental Sciences.” *Library Science with a slant to Documentation and Information Studies* 35, no. 2, (1998):113-116.
2. Kelland, J.L. “Biochemistry and Environmental Biology: A Comparative Citation Analysis.: *Library and Information Science Research* 12, no. 1 (1990):103-115.
3. Mittelstaedt, M. “Pollution law is outdated, experts warn.” *Globe and Mail*, Dec. 11, 2006, sec. A5.