

## ALASKA RESOURCES LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

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**ABSTRACT:** At the 1996 Colloquy, a poster reported on a multi-year effort to combine a number of special libraries in Anchorage, Alaska, into a single library. We are happy to report that the project is a smashing success. The Alaska Resources Libraries and Information Services opened its doors to the public in October 1997, offering the cultural and natural resources collections of nine separate agency libraries. This paper focuses on the non-technical problems involved in establishing this library. It addresses some of the political, administrative, and just plain people problems we encountered, and it discusses what turned out to be a problem and how we overcame (or got around) it, what worked for us and why, and what did not work. Many of the technical problems related to actually merging the collections have not yet been overcome, but three of the collections have been merged and all are in a single, very nice location, and everything can be found.

We believe our experiences can be of help to those of you who find yourselves with a similar opportunity.

**KEYWORDS:** Alaska Resources Library and Information Services; Library consolidation; Partnerships; Library Management; Alaska; Teams

**Introduction:** At the last Polar Libraries Colloquy, Juli Braund-Allen (1997) described a multi-year effort to merge nine individual natural and cultural resources libraries into a

single library. This effort was undertaken to safeguard and maintain their collections and services for users in Alaska. The partnership involved the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (Habitat Library), the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council (Oil Spill Public Information Center), the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (Alaska Resources Library), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS Library), the U. S. Geological Survey (USGS Library), the U.S. Minerals Management Service (MMS Library), the U.S. National Park Service (NPS Collection), and the University of Alaska Anchorage (including the Consortium Library, as well as the Environment and Natural Resource Institute's Arctic Environmental Information and Data Center).

We are happy to report that the project is a huge success. The Alaska Resources Library and Information Services (ARLIS) opened in Anchorage, Alaska, in October 1997 in a roomy and attractive setting. It contains nine formerly separate collections in one integrated facility. Three collections are already merged; three others are shelved separately, but electronically integrated in the online catalog; and another three collections, which had never been automated, are in the process of being merged. Within the next two years, all of the collections will be seamlessly merged into a major northern resources library, serving resource management agencies, Native corporations, private industry, and the general public of Alaska.

This paper discusses lessons learned in the creation of this new library. Its actual genesis occurred within the working rank and file rather than at a high management level. Because of this, the library's establishment involved a far different process than would have occurred in a top-down decision to merge collections, where the focus would have been on the physical and technical aspects of the merger. The creation of ARLIS was conceived of and largely accomplished by the librarians, and the lessons discussed here deal mainly with the political and financial problems involved in carrying it off.

To begin at the beginning: by the spring of 1995, governmental downsizing had reduced the number of staff of most libraries serving natural resource agencies in Anchorage to bare bones. In fact, one library had actually been closed and its collection boxed and moved into storage. The probability of further cut-backs galvanized Anchorage librarians into action.

Their commitment to maintaining and preserving these collections in Anchorage was based on the shared knowledge of how extremely poor Alaska is in library resources. All of the books in all of the libraries in Alaska equal fewer than half the number in the library collections of Stanford University. Moreover, Alaska librarians had depended upon one another and collaborated for more than a decade to reduce unnecessary duplication between local collections, thus stretching available dollars as far as possible. What this now meant was that the loss of any one collection constituted a significant loss to every other library. There were no other sources for many of the materials in the collections threatened with closure.

**Why it worked:** The factors of success can be summed up in three words: blood, sweat and luck. Alaska's economy is almost exclusively related to the development and protection of its natural resources. Federal and state agencies that manage most of Alaska's resources are headquartered in Anchorage, and the libraries in the coalition were all involved in supporting resource management. The loss of any of the collections could have significant impact on the ability to make wise decisions concerning resource management -- the life blood of Alaska's economy.

To develop, justify, and implement this project, the librarians involved met weekly for the entire morning for two years. During that time every one of them devoted more than forty hours a week for some periods in order to accomplish specific special projects necessary for the merger -- all this while trying to maintain services at their home libraries.

The luck factor came under the heading of timing. First, federal agencies had undergone serious downsizing for several years, and state agencies were now beginning to face the same problems. Every agency manager was desperate for an innovative way to save money. Second, all of this came about at the time Alaska had become a force in the U.S. Congress. Committee chairs in Congress are decided by seniority, and Alaska had re-elected its Congressmen repeatedly. In spite of having the minimum number of Congressmen (three), Alaskans held the chair of both the House and Senate Natural Resources Committees, and our senior Senator was chair of the powerful Appropriations Committee -- the one that decides where federal funds are spent. And while this didn't necessarily guarantee funding, it certainly held the attention of the various agencies we dealt with. Finally, for several years Vice President Gore had been building a program called "Reinventing Government" within federal agencies. Each department had programs to assist groups looking for innovative ways to function. Our project received a special "laboratory status," one of only a few hundred in the whole country. This designation provided us with special training and mentorship from the Washington, D.C., office of the U.S. Secretary of the Interior. It gave us a presence and voice that was listened to.

One more critical factor in our success was the commitment of the librarians to preserving all of the libraries by merging them into one. This commitment was so strong that each was willing to accept a completely new and unknown form of organization. In addition, most had to come to grips with giving up the autonomy of a one-person library for an unknown management structure.

These were profound and difficult changes for all involved.

**How it worked:** The first major hurdle for the librarians was to get the attention of their managers. This meant employing both a direct and logical approach, as well as the appeal of users. Because one agency with important collections, the U.S. Bureau of Mines, had

just been shut down, Alaskan miners had already gotten the attention of our Congressional delegation. Since our project would preserve the collections the miners were afraid of losing, we were able to use their concerns to our advantage. Agency managers were forced to at least listen to our plan and reasoning. They did so, some with great skepticism.

Our argument of saving the resources -- the collections -- to serve the agencies in Alaska was primary, and the merger of the collections into one large library made sense because the libraries involved all focused on resource management. A single, larger collection would be more efficient. Users would be able to find everything in one place. It would also allow combined staffing to provide services that an overworked one-person library could not provide.

Taking advantage of the national impetus to streamline government in innovative ways, we applied for and were named a Reinvention Laboratory. This federal program was critical to our success. We were trained, particularly in how to work as a team; we were required to do several important things that we might otherwise have neglected, such as conducting user surveys and forming a senior advisory group; and we received support from the Washington, D.C., headquarters.

Training included the Myers/Briggs personality analysis for each member of the team. The results were tabulated, and we analyzed what this meant to the team as a whole. Everyone brought different strengths to the team, and everyone had weak areas. By looking at the team as a whole, we were able to take advantage of our strengths and cover our weaknesses in selling and garnering support for the project. Discussions of the implications of the test results helped us understand each other, as well. This made it easier for us to work together as we thrashed out issues and brainstormed ways to make the project succeed.

Forming a Management Advisory Group (MAG) is required of Reinvention Laboratories, and it was probably the most important step we took. In determining who should be invited to be on the MAG, we were advised by our trainers from Washington, D.C., to "follow the money." They pointed out that we only had to sell the project to a handful of decision makers -- those who would be funding the coalition, namely, our own managers. So our MAG consisted of the top managers of each of the agencies of the libraries in the proposed coalition. Since most of the agencies were federal, and since we were a federal Reinvention Laboratory, they were inclined to accept our invitation to serve on the MAG.

We learned one trick with our MAG. The meetings were in the afternoon, and to keep the sessions from dragging, we provided a variety of expensive cookies and soft drinks at the meetings. Their blood sugar stayed high and we never lost their interest.

Finally, every decision we made was unanimous. The project worked by consensus. This may sound utopian, but we had no choice. Any library or any agency, could pull out at any time. Each librarian and each agency had distinct perspectives and concerns, and we had to satisfy these before we could move on.

**Problems:** As you can imagine, reaching a unanimous decision was often a problem. However, through in-depth, sometimes very heated discussions we eventually managed to reach consensus. Many times as we talked a matter over, we found that we were already in agreement -- we just voiced our solution in different terms.

There were, however, some problems that took a very long time to solve. We found that by approaching particularly thorny issues slowly, we could whittle away at them. We would focus on the issue during a meeting and usually find some areas of agreement before the discussion became too heated. Then, by skipping the subject at the next several meetings, we had time to discuss the problem with each other, individually and less heatedly. The next time the topic came up there were a few more areas we could agree on, and eventually the problem was reduced to a practical solution.

Two issues in particular -- the new library's circulation policy and the new library's name -- could not have been solved without bloodshed had we not used this method of kneading and resting. We were merging libraries with circulation policies that ranged from one extreme to another. One agency did not circulate outside its own staff, another circulated to anyone anywhere, and the rest were somewhere in between. Coming up with a rational circulation policy took a number of months. Eventually we developed a hierarchy of materials, as well as users, with different borrowing privileges for each. The policy is not simple, but it is logical, and it seems to be working.

Probably the hardest problem was the choice of a name. This caused real heartburn during a number of meetings. The trouble was there was some concern that if we did not come up with a completely new name, it would appear that one library had swallowed up the others. Further, we wanted to find something descriptive, with an acronym that was not already taken. And we wanted to please everyone! We had planned to give the MAG two or three choices and let them decide, but in the end the librarians could only agree on one name, ARLIS. We simply asked the MAG to approve it -- and they did.

**Future plans and possibilities:** We expect ARLIS to be a completely merged library within the next year or two. We hope to get federal legislation allowing us to collect fees for special services to non-supporting users. In this way, the costs of the resources would be more equitably shared, and all users would have access to our particular areas of expertise. We also expect to digitize many of the holdings to make them more accessible for resource managers throughout Alaska. ARLIS is fortunate in that its most important materials are unique resources produced by governmental agencies and are not covered

by copyright. Finally, because of its focus on Alaska resources, ARLIS is a prime candidate for membership in the Polar Libraries Colloquy.

**Conclusion:** For any of you who may be faced with such an opportunity as we were, remember to involve your management from the very beginning. This kind of project will take much more time and effort than you can imagine, but if it works, it is worth it. We wish anyone undertaking such a project as much success as we have had.

**References:**

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