



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW INSTITUTE

Libraries as a Community Resource for Environmental Information

An Environmental Law Institute
Report on a September 18-20, 2000
Online Dialogue

**LIBRARIES AS A COMMUNITY
RESOURCE FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION**

**AN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW INSTITUTE REPORT
ON A SEPTEMBER 18-29, 2000 ONLINE DIALOGUE**

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Libraries As a Community Resource for Environmental Information, An Environmental Law Institute Report on a September 18-29, 2000 Online Dialogue

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Table of Contents

Background 1

Overview of Online Dialogue 2

 EPA Information Collection and Dissemination 2

 Use of Online Dialogue 3

Key Issues with Respect to an EPA/Public Library Collaboration 5

Model Projects 8

Suggested Initiatives or Pilot Approaches 10

Conclusions and Next Steps 14

This report summarizes the results of an online Dialogue entitled “Libraries as a Community Resource for Environmental Information” that was conducted from September 18 through September 29, 2000. Environmental Law Institute (ELI) managed the project under a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Information Renaissance, a non-profit corporation that promotes the use of networking infrastructure to support education, community development, and democratic expression produced the Dialogue.

BACKGROUND

The project builds upon earlier research that is described in an ELI report titled “*Building Capacity to Participate in EPA Activities: A Needs Assessment.*” The 1999 study, or Phase I of ELI’s research, examined through interviews as well as research on various capacity building models, the capacity building tools that could foster community participation in EPA activities. The research found that information is a key capacity-building tool. Specifically, ELI’s needs assessment indicated that, with respect to EPA activities, citizens want information that is timely (*i.e.*, early in the process), pro-actively distributed and understandable. The information should also explain the relevance of the EPA activity to the community. The credibility of the messenger or deliverer of the information was also viewed as critical. Finally, because of a strong preference for in-person, local delivery of information, the report suggested the potential value in exploring the use of existing infrastructures and programs to deliver information, given the difficulties and possible inefficiencies in creating a new information delivery infrastructure. For additional, related findings of the study see “*Building the Capacity to Participate in EPA Activities: A Needs Assessment,*” Environmental Law Institute, Copyright © 1999 (available online at www.eli.org and www.network-democracy.org/epa/bb/eli/capacity-0.html).

Following the 1999 study, ELI began work on the second phase of its research which focused on whether a collaboration between EPA and the public libraries could serve to increase capacity of communities to participate in EPA activities. ELI was interested in using an online Dialogue approach to gather information and foster discussion because it uses a technology that is likely to be used increasingly by private and non-governmental organizations as a means of disseminating and exchanging information, as well as by government agencies as a means of public participation in environmental policy making. In addition, a core aspect of any collaboration between EPA and public libraries would be likely to rely heavily on web-based information sources, such as EPA’s web site, to provide information to communities, because the web has become a major vehicle for disseminating government information in a cost effective and efficient manner to large numbers of stakeholders. Furthermore, libraries can provide access to the Internet in many communities. The electronic infrastructure of the library system is likely to continue to expand as the Federal Communications Commission’s education rate or “e-rate” program subsidizes the connection of more libraries to the web.

Information about the Dialogue, background briefing materials, participants, and the archived discussion will remain available online until September 2001 at www.network-

information about how to participate in the Dialogue, which was open to the public, was distributed by ELI, Information Renaissance and EPA to possible participants and other stakeholders. In addition, in advance of the Dialogue, nine panelists were asked to participate each day to ensure regular involvement by a core group of experts representing key perspectives on the Dialogue topics. The panelists included librarians, environmental groups, the business community, and a state and local government representative. A list of the panelists is available online at www.network-democracy.org/epa/about/panelists/panelists.html. Over the two week period of the Dialogue, approximately 161 or 31 percent of the registered participants posted messages and, in total, 701 messages were archived. The demographics of the group are available online at www.network-democracy.org/epa/cgi-bin/info.plx. The largest groups represented included librarians (28.5%), environmental organizations (15.15%), federal government agencies (11.8%), and state agencies (9.7%). In total, the web site for the Dialogue received 120,000 hits and 60,000 page views.

This report has not been reviewed by the participants in the Dialogue, due to time and resource constraints, but it will be available on the Dialogue web site for review and comment.

OVERVIEW OF ONLINE DIALOGUE

EPA INFORMATION COLLECTION AND DISSEMINATION

Although the primary and initial focus of the Dialogue was the use of libraries as a community resource for environmental information, during the preparations of the agenda and in the course of the Dialogue itself, it became clear that participants were interested in addressing general issues related to EPA's handling and dissemination of information, including EPA's web site as a vehicle for accessing and distributing information. As a result, the Dialogue discussion focused on two general subject areas. The first area of discussion focused on the types of information that EPA should provide and how that data should be maintained, disseminated and presented. The second focused on how public libraries and EPA could work together to provide the public with environmental information. The daily summaries of the discussion posted by Information Renaissance summarize the points made in both of the general discussion areas and are available on the Dialogue web site. In addition, an overall summary of the two week dialogue prepared by Information Renaissance is available on the web site. This summary focuses on the findings with respect to an EPA/public library collaboration. The Dialogue archives, however, could also provide a basis for further research and analysis of EPA's collection and dissemination of environmental information, independent of any activities with public libraries. For example, the types of issues and questions that were covered in the Dialogue and which may warrant further examination at a later date include:

- What types of information stakeholders need and how EPA can address their wide ranging priorities;
- How to ensure data integrity and accuracy without sacrificing data availability;
- How to fill perceived data gaps;

- How EPA can revise its web site to serve stakeholders' interests and needs more effectively, including new and improved online tools and format choices that would make the EPA web site more user friendly;

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Efficacy:

- Whether the Dialogue achieved the goals of the participants;
- Whether the Dialogue achieved the research goals of ELI and Information Renaissance;
- How an online dialogue compares to other processes for gathering information from stakeholders on this topic, including meetings, interviews or notice and comment procedures, particularly in terms of allowing for interaction among participants and development of ideas and proposals;

Participation:

- Whether the participants in this and other online dialogues are representative of a larger group of stakeholders or are they self-selected according to certain factors, such as level of comfort with and access to the Internet;
- Whether the use of an online dialogue raises concerns with respect to the digital divide and how these issues could be addressed, including by the use of libraries, to ensure that low-income and communities of color have access to participate in such dialogues;
- How should success of an online dialogue be measured in terms of participation. For example, 31 percent of those registered for the Dialogue participated by posting messages. According to Information Renaissance, the participation rate is typically around 10 percent of those registered.

Implementation:

- Whether the Dialogue discussion adequately focused on the issues selected and whether the tools used for guiding discussion were effective, including the use of a moderator, short comment forms and daily summaries;
- Did the duration of the Dialogue and the volume and length of comments affect participation. Are there ways to make participation in an online dialogue less time consuming or should the Dialogue have been longer as some participants suggested; and
- What lessons can be learned from participants in the Dialogue about what worked and what needed improvement from a logistical and a substantive perspective.

KEY ISSUES WITH RESPECT TO AN EPA/ PUBLIC LIBRARY COLLABORATION

In general, participants supported a collaboration between EPA and the public libraries

take a pro-active role in disseminating environmental information they could raise questions about their objectivity. This was troubling to some participants from an ethical perspective, while others were concerned that librarians in small, rural libraries could be subject to funding cuts if local interest groups perceived that they were biased on environmental issues. Others did not see this as a concern and said libraries should serve as “neutral forums for communities to come to grips with controversial issues.” An environmental group participant even warned that “over-sensitivity” on the issue of neutrality could “lead to self-censorship.”

Wide Range of Information Needs: The Dialogue discussion mirrored ELI’s findings in *“Building Capacity to Participate in EPA Activities: A Needs Assessment”* in emphasizing the critical importance of information and how information is the foundation for public participation and empowerment of all types of stakeholders. Consistent with this theme and the traditional role of libraries, participants focused their discussion of possible EPA and public library collaborative efforts on information issues. Many variations on this theme emerged, as discussed below, but the majority of suggested approaches centered on providing online and print information to

may lack computers. Community members may also be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with how to

use computers and the web. One Native American representative recognized, however, that in the long term the web is a valuable resource.

Dissemination of Print Versus Electronic Documents: The issue of whether it is necessary to make available printed copies in addition to electronic copies was discussed extensively by the participants. Several librarians voiced a need for a consistent policy on this issue. Some participants questioned whether it was adequate to rely on electronic sources and whether hard copy resources would be preserved over time or essentially disappear when web sites are updated, thereby making it difficult or impossible to obtain older materials. These concerns were voiced in part in connection with the Federal Library Depository Program which provides for government documents to be sent to designated depository libraries. Participants reported that Congress had recently taken steps that would limit the amount of print material sent to libraries under the program and instead would heavily focus on the transfer of electronic information. Another aspect of the discussion focused on the need for a “publish on demand” function that would allow libraries to print out and bind publications from the Internet for customers upon request. Some participants said this ability was critical because it would basically allow libraries to be “repositories of all publications.” The need for some access to hard copies or “multiple mediums” was also seen as a digital divide issue by some participants concerned about limiting access to information in communities that do not have easy access to the Internet. Participants also noted that it is often easier to read hard copies and refer people to page numbers. Furthermore, older computers may not be able to access electronic data, depending on the format used.

Level of and Limits on Library Use: Despite the fact that many participants thought that librarians could provide valuable assistance to communities in obtaining and understanding environmental information, some participants questioned whether people would actually use libraries for this purpose, particularly given how many people now have access to the Internet at home. Several participants also noted that libraries may charge for printing and may restrict computer use to short time frames, if they only have a limited number of computers and demand for them is high. This can make efficient search and navigation techniques particularly important. Others were concerned that library hours are limited and may not be convenient for customers. A thread of the discussion focused on additional venues, such as conveniently located kiosks or modified automatic bank machines, where Internet access could be provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

State Information Dissemination: Several participants recognized that states have a substantial amount of the information that communities need, particularly because many environmental programs are delegated to the states or are outside the federal government’s jurisdiction. Participants wanted, for example, to be able to obtain permits, permit applications, and permit renewal and issuance notifications online and from library archives.

Definition of the Public: A thread of the dialogue focused on defining the public that libraries are suppose to serve and the importance of this definition for designing an environmental information initiative. Depending on the public that will be served, information needs may vary. Some participants offered lists that included: educators, researchers, planning

particularly water-related systems. The project involves multiple stakeholders in providing online environmental information on water resources. See

California Digital Library (CDL): CDL is a collaborative effort of ten University of California campuses. Several CDL projects focus on collaboration with other California universities and organizations to create and extend access to digital material to University of California partners and to the public at large. Participants cited the CDL's environmental

community meeting places when possible.

Consolidate Clearinghouses Funded by EPA/Develop National Database:

Consistent with a theme voiced by several participants, it was suggested that EPA should consolidate the many sources of information or clearinghouses it funds and combine them into a single source of information that could be easily accessed by librarians. Several models were offered, including the World Data Center of the National Academy of Sciences, the Natural Biological Information Infrastructure and the National Library of the Environment of the National Council for Science and the Environment. The Institute of Museum and Library Services was suggested as a possible partner in such a venture. According to a participant, EPA should consider the infrastructure that has already developed around libraries, consolidate the best clearinghouses, and then integrate them into the libraries' infrastructure. It was also noted that EPA should at least include on its web site links to all clearinghouses.

Enhance Interlibrary Loan Programs: Several participants mentioned the importance of making documents available to the public even if copies can not be stored in every library. They emphasized interlibrary loan programs as one way to achieve this goal and pointed out that EPA already does this with its publications through the EPA libraries. On a related point, it was suggested, as noted earlier, that central libraries could be used to disseminate information to smaller, subsidiary libraries.

Increase Cataloguing of EPA documents: Several librarians noted that EPA should catalogue all of its documents, both print and electronic, and make the catalogue available using international metadata standard Z39.50, which allows compliant browsers to search multiple catalogues and databases. Thus, libraries could search their collections and these resources from their catalogue software.

Establish Issue Collections and Repositories for Community Groups: Participants noted that libraries can house repositories of information for community groups, such as Clean Air Act permits and Superfund records, so that the larger community can access the documents easily. Furthermore, "issue collections" tailored to specific community needs could provide an important service, according to some participants.

Fund Guides and Other Materials: The need for EPA to assist library efforts to provide environmental information was emphasized by many participants. A specific suggestion was for EPA to fund online and print guides, such as the third edition of the Environmentalist's Guide to the Public Libraries, by Public Libraries for the Future, that would assist librarians in responding to community needs.

Provide "Publish on Demand" Capability: As noted above, some participants said it was important that libraries be able to obtain print copies of certain documents in order to serve their communities' information requests. A key suggestion in this regard was to make available a publish on demand feature so libraries can print and bind documents. A participant suggested the government could make every document available electronically and libraries could print them out locally. Costs could be billed to the government for documents that the government would provide free. For documents not available free from the government, libraries could pay

Collaborate with and Fund Library Associations: Several participants emphasized that EPA should work with established library and related organizations. Some of these organizations were established for the purpose of fostering librarians' efforts to provide environmental information, while others have missions that could accommodate EPA efforts to increase the flow of information to public libraries. A few participants suggested that instead of establishing a new initiative between EPA and the libraries, EPA should simply fund ALA efforts to assist librarians in disseminating environmental information to communities. ALA was recommended in part because it already has an established network and has conducted similar initiatives, such as its Libraries Build Sustainable Communities Initiative. EPA's role would be to provide funding and the raw data that libraries could use. Participants mentioned the following library groups:

American Library Association, Task Force on the Environment (TFOE):

TFOE promotes awareness of environmental issues for ALA members and facilitates networking among peers. Key issues include acid rain, global warming, and lead poisoning prevention. TFOE works closely with the EPA Library Network and uses EPA librarians as speakers at TFOE programs at ALA annual meetings. EPA Regional and Headquarters libraries have served as meeting places for EPA-TFOE discussions, database demonstrations, library tours, and Internet site reviews. A participant noted the value of a publication entitled "A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building," published in conjunction with the ALA theme of building on sustainable communities, that provides examples of librarians going into communities to listen to needs and building partnerships with community organizations and government agencies. See www.ala.org/alaorg/rtables/srrt/tfoe/index/html#objectives.

Environment and Resources Management Division, Special Libraries

Association: The Division, established in 1989, is dedicated to disseminating information to support researchers and practitioners in the fields of natural resources management and environmental studies. Topics of interest include environmental regulation and policy issues. See www.wco.com/rteeter/ermd/ermd.html.

National Commission on Libraries and Information Sciences:

The Commission is a permanent independent agency of the federal government that advises the executive and legislative branches on national library information policies and plans. The Commission also advises the Institute for Museum and Library Services on general policies with respect to the duties, powers, and authority of the Institute relating to library services. See www.nclis.gov.

Institute for Museum and Library Services: The Institute is an independent federal grant making agency that works with the National Commission on Libraries and Information Services. The Institute supports and funds all types of libraries, including public libraries, by investing federal funds to enhance their resources and ensure broad access to information. See www.ims.gov.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The online Dialogue produced a wealth of comments and information about the role of libraries in providing communities with environmental information. It is beyond the scope of this particular project to evaluate and make recommendations about the many proposals and suggestions offered during the course of the Dialogue and, in any event, most of the proposals would need considerable fleshing out and further stakeholder discussion to be assessed adequately. Although EPA, the public libraries, and interested stakeholders should continue to explore ways to enhance the information and tools available to libraries so that libraries can provide environmental information to communities, many issues will need to be further examined before an optimal approach can be developed. Among the key issues to address are resource constraints, the wide range of community information needs, the role of the states in providing information to libraries, the level of library use by the public, digital divide concerns, and the various options for partnerships.

It does seem clear, however, that further exploration of possible collaborative efforts between EPA and the public libraries is warranted, given the level of interest among a wide range of stakeholders that includes both librarians and potential library customers. Any further steps to develop proposals for moving forward should broaden the parties involved to increase representation of groups that may have been under represented in the Dialogue, such as members of the environmental justice community, business sector, and states. While further online discussion may be valuable, particularly for communicating with the Dialogue participants, it will also be important to use other means of gaining public input to ensure that those without Internet access, or who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable using it, are able to contribute.

Several participants offered support for participating in pilot programs to develop collaborative efforts. While pilots have been used by EPA successfully in the past for testing new ideas and allow for working with organizations as diverse as public libraries where a single approach may not be appropriate, a more comprehensive national level initiative should not be ruled out. A key reason for exploring the potential role of libraries in providing environmental information to communities is the extensive infrastructure that is already in place. While libraries clearly vary considerably in their customer bases, resources, and interests, the commonality among libraries in the services they provide, their customers' needs, and the national associations they share also make a national level initiative worth considering.

In sum, the Dialogue provides EPA, public libraries, and stakeholders with a strong basis and plethora of ideas for moving forward to work together in designing an initiative or pilot programs for increasing the role of public libraries in providing environmental information to communities. The Dialogue archives also provide valuable suggestions for EPA and stakeholders to work with in improving EPA's information collection, storage and dissemination.

