

Toward an NPS "Virtual Library" Supporting Research Servicewide

By Diane Mallos

Forget your notion of "the library" as just a neatly organized room full of books. Instead, think of the universe of knowledge hidden away in unpublished research reports and field data as well as books, journals, manuscripts, photographs, sound recordings, video tapes, microforms, maps, data in geographic information systems, etc. Then imagine being able to find "the good stuff" or to connect with scientists in the Service or elsewhere in the world – without leaving your own park library!

NPS resources are among the most written about and studied of any in the world. More than 300 libraries in the National Park System house collections ranging in size from a few hundred to tens of thousands of volumes. In addition, most parks contain a wealth of research material that supports the park's mission. As a result, many parks contain unique collections of material that may be found nowhere else.

The current state of all this information could be said to be "available but inaccessible." The Service spends vast quantities of money on research and specialized bibliographies whose benefits are limited because of ineffective dissemination. The excellent work being done at CPSUs frequently is available only at the park or within the Region where the studies are conducted. An expensive result could be duplication of research efforts within the agency. Access to foreign research reports through such networks as Internet also could help parks avoid duplicating research done outside the Service.

Unfortunately these gold mines of resource material remain unorganized and inaccessible due to (1) lack of adequate funding and trained staff at most NPS libraries – only 4 out of the 10 NPS Regions have regional librarians, and (2) the lack of an information

network on which to share information within the NPS and internationally.

But there is hope – the hope of sharing NPS and outside research electronically – an NPS "virtual library." The great mass of knowledge held by NPS, other government agencies, and academic and research institutions worldwide could eventually be at the fingertips of NPS personnel, from scientists and resource managers to historical architects and exhibit designers – the whole array of personnel with the need to stay aware of what others are doing in the same or related fields.

The NPS Washington Office's Information and Telecommunications Division is taking this idea very seriously. In addition to setting up the technical workings of a Servicewide electronic communications network (ParkNet), they have hired a professional librarian on the Policy and Planning staff. As that new librarian, I am looking at ways to fully catalog and automate the NPS research resources now hidden in NPS libraries and other repositories.

Library software to make automation of library collections as simple and cost effective as possible is being examined. An NPS link with international networks is being investigated. Information distribution systems used by other federal agencies and various funding strategies also are being studied.

I am eager to hear from scientists, resource managers, park managers, and others regarding these issues. Please send your comments or questions to me, Diane E. Mallos, Library Coordinator, NPS Information and Telecommunications Division, Policy and Planning Staff, PO Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127, or call 202/343-4430. I will be reporting further in *Park Science* as this effort develops.