

The Pacific Islands Association of Libraries and Archives (PIALA)

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Introduction

The Pacific Islands Association of Libraries and Archives (PIALA) was established in 1991 as a regional association committed to fostering awareness, cooperation and resource sharing among libraries, archives, museums and related institutions of the Pacific islands. Although initially composed of members from the Micronesian islands, as PIALA's membership has grown, so has it expanded to encompass many other Pacific islands and countries worldwide.

The establishment of PIALA grew out of a need to address the serious lack of information resources and human networks for resource sharing within the region, due in no small part to the lack of reliable funding and a commitment to library and archival development. To this end, PIALA has worked to build networks and raise awareness of the importance of access to information and resource sharing through its conferences, publications, activities and training efforts.

Beginnings

The roots for establishing a regional association go back to the early days of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administration when a few unsuccessful attempts were made to organize regional librarians. These attempts failed as there were never enough people to form a critical mass

and no easily accessible, low cost methods of communication.

In October 1990, new seeds for a regional association were planted during the *Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI) Governor's Conference for Libraries and Information Services*. The conference was held in Saipan, funded in part by the United States government with observers met informally to discuss the formation of a regional association. The group called itself the *Western Pacific Library and Archives Association* and minutes were taken. Thereafter, at another informal meeting held during the *Guam Governor's Conference for Libraries and Information Services* in November 1990, concrete plans for an organizational meeting were developed.

With funding provided by the *United States Office of Territorial and International Affairs*, the organizational meeting was held at the University of Guam in February 1991. Two participants each from the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republics of Palau and the Marshall Islands, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and the Territory of Guam attended the meeting, where the group renamed itself the *Pacific Islands Association of Libraries and Archives*.

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At that meeting, By-laws were adopted, an executive board was elected, committees established and Koror, Palau selected as the site for the first conference, planned for November of that year.

Developing library and information access networks

Since the first PIALA conference in Palau, annual conferences have been held throughout Micronesia, moving from one island to another each year. Since 1993, the *Proceedings* of the conferences have been published. Distributed free of charge to regional libraries, they are also available for purchase.** During the past four years, pre-conference workshops have provided training opportunities to regional

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librarians and archivists, many of whom work in remote libraries and archives without any formal education or training in library skills. Moreover, by moving the conferences each year to a different island, people with no travel budgets have the opportunity to experience a professional conference and attend the training sessions.

Since the organizational meeting in 1991, PIALA's membership has grown to over 85 individuals and 36 institutions from countries around the world including Kiribati, New Caledonia, Japan, Tonga, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Western Samoa, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America. At most conferences, the membership has voted on changes to our By-laws, reflecting the growth and development of the Association.

Each year, the conference topics have expanded to include presentations about the cultural heritage and traditions of the island hosting the conference. Likewise, the involvement of local educators and government officials in planning and support has grown. The advocacy role of PIALA has also developed within the past few years. During the PIALA '96 meeting in Majuro, Marshall Islands, the first PIALA resolution was passed by the membership. The resolution addressed the serious telecommunications problems associated with Internet access and resolved that:

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"... each Island Government and Nation provide direct cost effective Internet access at a high performance data exchange rate to member libraries and archives in their respective areas."¹

This was a first attempt by local librarians and the association to assert their concerns in a formal way and the resolution has been widely distributed throughout the region. At subsequent conferences, other resolutions dealing with funding issues and most recently one formalizing a relationship with the Hawaii Library Association were passed.

Through its publications, conferences, activities and training efforts, PIALA is becoming a force in creating an awareness of the importance of information access and resource sharing. At the annual conferences, invited government officials are encouraged to speak on behalf of their governments, providing an opportunity to present their views. Their comments are subsequently published in the *PIALA Proceedings*, providing documentation and tangible evidence of their involvement and support of the association and its goals.

PIALA also takes part in publishing the *Union List of Serials in Libraries of Guam and Micronesia*, a joint project with the Guam Public Library and the University of Guam Robert F. Kennedy Memorial. The *Union List* provides a listing of journal titles available in libraries in Micronesia and is a valuable tool for interlibrary loan and collection development.

As the organization has grown and expanded its membership, PIALA members have networked and established relationships with other libraries and library associations in the Pacific Islands and throughout the world. PIALA is now represented in the *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)* and is a member of the *IFLA Roundtable for the Management of Library Associations*. Several articles about PIALA have appeared both in local publications and internationally in periodicals including the *National Library of Australia News*,² *Third World Libraries*,³ *FID News Bulletin*.⁴ Most recently, a chapter discussing

PIALA appeared in a book published by the *American Library Association*.⁵ Developing these human networks through publications and other efforts opens new

avenues for resource sharing essential to meet the information needs of users in Micronesia, as well as other areas of the globe.

Access to information for health users

Medical and allied health professionals within the region are among many groups of users with serious unmet needs. To help address the needs of this group, the National Network of Libraries of Medicine working through the Pacific "Southwest Regional Medical Library (PSRML)" with the Louise Darling Biomedical Library at the University of California, Los Angeles as the library designated to serve Micronesia, has been very supportive of PIALA. In their efforts, they are carrying out the goals of national Library of medicine (NLM) to provide access to and the delivery of information to health professionals, including those in rural areas and those serving minority populations. One goal is to foster information access and resource sharing among not only health science libraries but libraries of all types. To this end, PSRML Network Coordinators have been active in PLAL, presenting workshops and joint sessions at five PIALA conferences covering basic healthcare resources, health reference resources⁶ consumer health resources⁷, resource sharing⁸ and most recently accessing Western medical information.⁹ All but the first of these presentations have appeared in the *PIALA Proceedings*.

Recently, the University of Guam Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Library was designated as a PSRML Resource Library, further supporting the delivery of information and local resource sharing to all areas of Micronesia. By cultivat-

ing the human networks established within PIALA, and through working with the Pacific Community, the Pacific Basin Medical Association and other groups, it is hoped that these resource sharing networks will continue to grow throughout the entire Pacific. Moreover, with the support of PIALA, local librarians can be encouraged to work with medical and allied health professionals in their efforts to advocate for implementation funding initiatives and training opportunities essential to provide access to information.

Future challenges

Yvan Souares, in a paper discussing the Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network and PACNET, summed up well the challenging reality. In his words:

*"These islands are scattered over 30 million square kilometres of the Pacific, an area almost four times that of Australia. Ninety-eight percent of that area is water, leaving a total land area only half that of the Northern Territory of Australia. For seven million Pacific people, the development of human networks in these conditions is both a challenge and a prerequisite to socio-economic development."*¹⁰

Developing human networks remains the biggest challenge to those of us in PIALA as well. Communications between islands is still costly, although recently this is changing as private Internet service providers are beginning to offer lower cost telecommunication services. Unfortunately, local governments have been slow to support and fund the new technologies, so essential to the development of an effective health and educational infrastructure. This challenge, coupled with inadequate funding for library development and the lack of training of library personnel all provide a substantial agenda for this young association.

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For seven million Pacific people, the development of human networks in these conditions is both a challenge and a prerequisite to socio-economic development."

You must learn to talk clearly. The jargon of scientific terminology which rolls off your tongues is mental garbage.

M. H. Fischer in 'Fischerisms'