THROUGH THIN AIR: THE CREATION OF THE ATMOSPHERIC SCIENCE LIBRARIANS INTERNATIONAL

Lisa Wishard
105 Deike Building
Earth and Mineral Sciences Library
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802 USA

ABSTRACT: In January 1998 the Atmospheric Science Librarians International (ASLI) held its first inaugural meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. The meeting was attended by more than a dozen atmospheric science librarians from around the world. At the meeting participants profiled their libraries and services, discussed issues related to site licenses, electronic publishing, metadata and archives for polar and oceanographic data. In addition the group met with representatives from the World Meteorological Organization, the American Meteorological Society and several commercial vendors. ASLI is a free and open forum for librarians around the world to discuss and exchange information relating to the atmospheric sciences. This paper describes the evolution of the ASLI organization, its goals and activities and looks at ways that the Polar Libraries Colloquy, the International Association of Aquatic and Marine Science Libraries and Information Centers and ASLI could benefit from future collaboration.

KEYWORDS: Atmospheric sciences, information science organizations, Atmospheric Science Librarians International (ASLI), collaboration

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share the history and activities of the Atmospheric Science Librarians International or ASLI organization. Appropriately presented in the 'Networks' session at the joint Polar Libraries Colloquy (PLC) and International Association of Aquatic and Marine Science Information Centers (IAMSLIC)—the ASLI organization is an information network for information professionals which has evolved over the world's largest network, the Internet.

ASLI is a free and open forum for librarians and information professionals around the world to address issues and exchange information on atmospheric science topics. ASLI is specifically aimed towards librarians and library staff from around the world involved in the atmospheric sciences, but anyone is welcome to join. Membership is free and benefits of membership include participation in the ASLI listserv as well as the opportunity to attend the annual ASLI meeting.

II. The When and How of ASLI's Formation

The idea for ASLI 'brewed' over a cup of coffee in 1994 between Janice Beattie and Carol Watts (of the NOAA Central Library) and Betty Petersen (then of the National Climate Center). These three were discussing the fact that the marine science librarians had IAMSLIC and that atmospheric science librarians could benefit from an organization similar to IAMSLIC. This conversation planted the seeds for the creation of ASLI (Beattie 1998).

With support from Janice & Carol, Betty Petersen began working towards creation of an organization for atmospheric science information professionals. In 1995 she and Janice conducted informal phone and email surveys of several atmospheric libraries where they knew the staff, including the libraries at the U.S. Naval Post Graduate School, Environment Canada and the U.S. Air Force Air Weather Service, among others. In the summer of 1995 Betty visited the World Meteorological Organization and British Meteorological Office libraries, while there she discussed the formation of a new organization for atmospheric science librarians. Interest received from the surveys and visits was unanimous in support of creating an atmospheric science librarians group (Beattie 1998).

With ASLI's momentum on the rise, Judie Triplehorn (Geophysical Institute University of Alaska Fairbanks) began a nine month sabbatical at the NOAA Central Library in the fall of 1995. Part of Judie's work while at NOAA was to work with Betty to establish an international database of atmospheric science libraries. Judie was also tasked with coming up with a 'name' for the fledgling society. Her first choice was the IASL—International Atmospheric Sciences Librarians—however, upon inspection of the *Encyclopedia of Associations* she found that this acronym was already in use by the International Association of School Librarians. So, upon further reflection she coined—Atmospheric Sciences Librarians International or ASLI (Triplehorn 1998).

While Judie and Betty were working on identifying potential ASLI members, discussions regarding the structure of ASLI were taking place. Several ideas were considered such as affiliation with the American Geophysical Union, as well as forming a Special Libraries Association (SLA) Round Table. It was decided however to pursue a structure similar to the Geoscience Information Society, which operates as an independent member Society of the American Geological Institute. The Geoscience Information Society (GIS) holds its meetings at the Geological Society of America annual conference which allows GIS to meet with the researchers and vendors of the field it supports (Beattie 1998). In June of 1996, with the GIS model in mind, Carol Watts and Maria Latyszewskyj (Environment Canada) met with representatives from the American Meteorological Society at the AMS headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts. At the meeting AMS expressed great interest in the formation of ASLI and offered support to the organization in the form of space and equipment at AMS meetings (Latyszewskyj 1998).

While in Boston, Carol and Maria also attended the 1996 Annual SLA Conference, where they advertised for a meeting of the "new ASLI group." This first informal gathering of ASLI was held around a table in the crowded Haines Convention Center with approximately a dozen librarians representing institutions from all over the world. Institutions that were represented at the meeting included: NOAA Central Library; Environment Canada; the United States Air Force Air Weather Service Technical Library; the Geophysical Institute University of Alaska Fairbanks; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Haystack Observatory; the Consortium for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN); the Desert Research Institute; the Pennsylvania State University Earth and Mineral Sciences Library; Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the Goddard Space Flight Center Library and the Global Change Research Information Office. The focus of this meeting was to share information on ASLI and to gather information about potential new members (Latyszewskyj 1998).

A list of participants from this first ASLI meeting in 1996 became the basis of the ASLI listserv. The listserv is the backbone of ASLI. It is the primary means by which ASLI members exchange information. The listserv reflects the true nature of ASLI as a free and open forum for exchange of information between atmospheric science librarians and fosters the ASLI goal to serve information professionals from around the world. From the beginning it has been the goal of all those involved in the creation of the organization that ASLI be international and that membership be affordable to members from any size institution from anywhere in the world. At the same time that the listserv was created an ASLI homepage was also unveiled [Figure 1]. The homepage is the archive for ASLI meeting minutes and also provides a place where people can join ASLI via a membership form [Figure 2].

ASLI hit some rocky weather during the fall and spring of 1997. A major loss was the death of Betty Petersen who was a driving force behind the creation of ASLI. In addition, several other ASLI members faced personal challenges which did not allow them time to concentrate on ASLI. The AMS had extended an offer to host an ASLI meeting at its 1997 annual conference (Seitter 1997). Unfortunately the set-backs which faced several of ASLI's primary members resulted in a dip of ASLI's momentum, so a meeting with the AMS was not able to be coordinated for 1997. In June of 1997 however, another informal meeting of ASLI was held at SLA, this time in Seattle, Washington. This meeting also had approximately a dozen attendees representing Environment Canada; the Goddard Space Flight Center Library; Scripps Institution of Oceanography Library; the Kresge Physical Sciences Library at Dartmouth College; the North Carolina State University Natural Resources Library; the Australian Bureau of Meteorology; the NOAA Seattle Office Library; the University of Washington Natural Sciences Library and Earth Observing System Data and Information System (EOSDIS). In addition, Dr. Keith Seitter from the American Meteorological Society attended the meeting. At this meeting Dr. Seitter gave an update on AMS products including their forthcoming electronic journals as well as information about the Meteorological and Geoastrophysical Abstracts database. Dr. Seitter also reiterated the AMS offer to host an ASLI meeting at the AMS annual meeting (Wishard 1997).

After the Seattle meeting, ASLI's momentum picked up once again. Through the early fall of 1997 Janice, Maria and Lisa Wishard (Penn State University Earth and Mineral Sciences Library) collaborated on a preliminary program for the first 'official' meeting. Janice outlined a preliminary program and Maria and Lisa worked at filling the holes. With the help and patience of the AMS, ASLI's first 'official' meeting was a success. About a dozen librarians, publishers and interested meteorologists met for two and a half days in Phoenix, Arizona. Attendees at the inaugural meeting represented NOAA Central Library; NOAA Boulder Labs; National Center for Atmospheric Research; Desert Research Institute; Environment Canada; NOAA Miami Regional Library; Geophysical Institute University of Alaska Fairbanks; University Consortium for Atmospheric Research; American Meteorological Society, Meteorological and Geoastrophysical Abstracts; German Military Geophysical Office; Kluwer Academic Publisher and the Penn State University Earth & Mineral Sciences Library. The program included presentations from the World Meteorological Organization, the National Climatic Data Center, and a demonstration of the NOAAServer, among others. The were profiles about programs sponsored by the World Data Center-A for Oceanography as well as the U.S. National Center for Environmental Prediction. In addition there were also presentations about the archives for arctic data, electronic journals, meta-data issues and site-licenses. One of the most successful sessions was the ASLI round-robin where attendees shared information about their libraries, collections, and services. The meeting also included an ASLI booth and a chance to meet vendors, publishers and scientists from all over the world. Several attendees also took a field trip to Tucson, Arizona to visit the University of Arizona Atmospheric Sciences Library and the Biosphere 2 ecological laboratory (Wishard 1998).

The meetings and history described in this paper have contributed to the development of a solid core for ASLI. Each year enthusiasm and participation in the organization grows. Plans are well underway for a program at the AMS meeting in January of 1999 and there are preliminary plans for ASLI to participate in the GeoInformation VII conference in Canberra, Australia in 2002.

III. ASLI Uniqueness

ASLI serves a unique scientific information niche. Similar to the Polar Libraries Colloquy (PLC), IAMSLIC and GIS the resources and needs of the researchers, students, and enthusiasts that ASLI serves are unique. Success in atmospheric science librarianship depends heavily on the ability to know where to find, how to acquire, and how to deliver a wide variety of meteorological and climatological information and data. Many of the bibliographic tools used in atmospheric sciences are very specialized—for example there are less than 300 subscribers to the Meteorological and Geoastrophysical Abstracts database which is the primary bibliographic database for the atmospheric sciences. In addition a lot of the information and data for atmospheric sciences are not found in traditional library sources—often they can only be found in unpublished observation logs and obscure publications from long-gone observatories and societies. In this era of digital

information, keeping track of what information center is gathering hourly data on temperature, and who has historic snowfall records (historic sometimes being only 1993) requires familiarity with cutting-edge search engines and searching skills—as well as knowledge of people and collections. These are challenges that many of the members of PLC and IAMSLIC have also faced. An example is the challenge of getting data about the 30 year average relative humidity of Badulla, Sri Lanka into the hands of a researcher who has to get his/her grant proposal in yesterday. The networks and knowledgeable colleagues, upon whom you can call when faced with situations like the one described, that are established in specialized societies like ASLI, contribute to the value of the societies as well as our ability to successfully locate the in information and resources that are needed to help researchers unlock the mysteries of the earth.

ASLI is also unique in that virtually all of its growth in membership and content has occurred electronically. Membership has grown steadily since the listserv was started in 1996. There were approximately 30 members that originally subscribed to the ASLI listserv (NOAA Central Library 1996). Today membership has more than tripled to 100 members (Edstrom 1998). The international reach of ASLI has also continued to spread across the globe with over a quarter of ASLI membership residing in Europe, Asia, Canada and Oceania [Figure 3]. In addition to the growth in membership, the traffic on the ASLI listserv has also seen steady growth. Traffic has increased from only 8 posts in 1996, 50 posts in 1997 to well over 60 posts to-date for 1998 (Edstrom 1998). As listserv membership grows so too do the energy and accomplishments of ASLI. Email, phone and fax provide electronic structure for the organization. Nearly all of the planning and communicating for the annual gatherings of ASLI have been done electronically. This electronic precedent continues with a proposed distance learning session to be delivered by video conference during the ASLI program in January 1999.

IV. Collaborative Opportunities

There are many areas in which PLC, IAMSLIC and ASLI can collaborate not only to promote the goals and objectives of each organization but also to affect change in issues related to earth science data and information. An obvious area for collaboration is to establish liaisons between the organizations in order to share information about projects and accomplishments. Another way to promote information sharing between the organizations is to consider future joint meetings or joint participation in an established meeting such as the quadrennial GeoInformation meeting. PLC, IAMSLIC and ASLI could also collaborate on continued development of guides to data such as the Arctic Environmental Data Directory or Oceanography on the Net that both contain climatological information. By establishing contacts with additional atmospheric science information centers through ASLI, both of these existing data collections could potentially strengthen their coverage of climatological and meteorological data. Also, many of the publications and products used by PLC, IAMSLIC and ASLI member institutions are produced for small, specialized markets and are often not priced or licensed appropriately. If the membership of all three organizations negotiated collectively, vendors and publishers may be more likely to adopt more appropriate

product pricing and licensing practices. These are just a few of the many opportunities for PLC, IAMSLIC and ASLI to collaborate. While each organization has separate identities and goals there is a common goal to not only help preserve but also provide access to earth science information.

V. Summary

ASLI's membership continues to grow and as it grows ASLI will need to incorporate and establish financial footing. To date ASLI's activities have been supported by the NOAA Central Library, the institutions of ASLI members and the AMS. ASLI recognizes, however, that in order to succeed it must establish a financial base and a formal organization structure. It is time for the organization to establish funding to better promote its goals of providing support and sharing information between and among atmospheric science librarians. At the 1998 meeting the WMO expressed interest in providing travel support for a WMO member institution librarian to attend a future ASLI meeting. AMS continues to offer space and equipment for ASLI meetings. But in order for ASLI to be able to complete projects (such as a directory of world atmospheric science libraries or a union list of WMO publications), or to participate in beneficial joint meetings (like the joint PLC/IAMSLIC meeting) ASLI will need to establish bylaws and a financial infrastructure. This is a big goal that can only be reached with the hard work and dedication of atmospheric science information professionals from around the world working together.

REFERENCES

Beattie, Janice. Conversation with the author. 3 August 1998.

Edstrom, Cathy. [cedstrom@nodc.noaa.gov]. "Re: ASLI Numbers." Private e-mail message to Lisa Wishard, [LAR14@psu.edu]. 4 August 1998.

Latyszewskyj, Maria. [Maria.Latyszewskyj@ec.gc.ca]."RE:HELP! Please..." Private e-mail message to Lisa Wishard, [LAR14@psu.edu]. 4 August 1998.

NOAA Central Library. "ASLI Electronic Mailing List Members." [http://www.lib.noaa.gov/asli/members.html]. 3 June 1996. [Viewed 18 December 1996].

Seitter, Keith. [kseitter@ametsoc.org]. "ASLI's help with AMS jorunals [sic]." Private e-mail message to Lisa Wishard, [LAR14@psu.edu]. 10 January 1997.

Triplehorn, Judie. [fygilib@aurora.alaska.edu]. "Re: HELP! Please..." Private e-mail message to Lisa Wishard, [LAR14@psu.edu]. 6 August 1998.

Wishard, Lisa. "ASLI SLA Meeting Minutes."
[http://www.lib.noaa.gov/asli/seattle.html].16 December 1997. [Viewed 5 September 1998].

-----. "ASLI Meeting, Phoenix, AZ January 14-16, 1998."
[http://www.lib.noaa.gov/asli/asli.html]. 12 May 1998. [Viewed 5 September 1998].