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The Southern Oregon Digital Archives:

Unique Opportunity and Continuing Challenge

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The Southern Oregon Digital Archives (SODA) project (<http://soda.sou.edu/>) at Southern Oregon University Hannon Library began in one of those serendipitous moments that, in retrospect, seems to have unalterably enlarged our mission and the nature of a good portion of the daily work of several SOU librarians. One October morning in 2000 we received a telephone call from the Oregon University System's Washington, D.C. office. They asked us to provide ideas for a digitization project that could be funded by a congressionally directed grant through the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). There were several of us around that morning to overhear that call from Washington. The opportunity to attempt a cutting-edge digital project was absolutely irresistible and greeted with great enthusiasm.

I had recently acquired several local watershed assessments for our government publications collection and immediately realized that state, federal and local documents about our Siskiyou-Klamath-Cascades bioregion were full of possibilities for one part of a digital project. Mary Jane Cedar Face, our Collection Development Coordinator, was inspired to bring together a large collection of materials about regional tribes that were difficult to find, and scattered throughout Hannon Library and a myriad of other libraries. We gathered a team of five eager librarians to work on our newly born digitization project which we christened the "Southern Oregon Digital Archives," or SODA. Teresa Montgomery would be project director, keep us on track, shepherd the budget, and write the

reports back to IMLS. Jim Rible, our systems librarian and computer wizard, was project manager and would be responsible for the innumerable technical decisions that would make the project a success. Lisa McNeil would make the cataloging and metadata decisions. Mary Jane Cedar Face would gather the materials for the First Nations collection and make contacts with the tribes for permissions. I was to assemble a huge collection of local, state and federal documents on the ecology of the Siskiyou-Klamath-Cascades and check for permissions with local researchers.

Over the past 25 years in government publications at Hannon Library I had made a concerted effort to collect documents concerning the Southern Oregon Siskiyou-Klamath-Cascades bioregion, a unique area recognized world-wide for its ecological significance. The region is characterized by a particularly complex geology that contributes to unusually diverse plant and animal species. Natural resources include Crater Lake, the Rogue, Klamath, and Illinois Rivers, several National Forests, four mountain ranges and an incredible range of life forms, many of them threatened or



The Current SODA Team (from left): Dorothy Ormes, Cataloging & Metadata; Mary Jane Cedar-Face, Collection Development (First Nations); Deb Hollens, Collection Development (Bioregion); Teresa Montgomery, SODA Project Director; Jim Rible, SODA Project Manager; Kate Cleland-Sipfle, Cataloging & Metadata Coordinator; Tatiana Fox, Digitization



endangered species. Many federal and state agencies are devoted to the study and management of the region and over the years have produced thousands of research monographs that were languishing on our shelves and hidden on theirs.

My job was to gather together all of the bioregion publications in our documents collection of over 290,000 items. While we had a large body of fully cataloged state and federal monographs, many were still uncataloged and hiding in the stacks under the SUDOC numbers for the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Army Corps of Engineers, Geological Survey, and Congressional Committee hearings. I had large numbers of “fugitive” and “gray” documents, written by researchers that were not regular staff members of the state or federal government, but who had contracted with regional government offices to do environmental research. Many of these had long been sitting on our shelves, waiting for sufficient staff to process them.

None of us knew anything about the digitization process, but we knew what we wanted in a final product-- a digital library on our bioregion that was full text searchable across the entire library so that research would be as easy as searching a familiar journal database. That idea turned out to be a tall order at the time. After examining several options we found that software for full text searching of lengthy volumes was not easily available. Unfortunately the brunt of the initial stress to find an appropriate technical solution was placed on Jim Rible. I had recently heard Sheila McGarr, then Director of the National Education Library, give a speech at an ALA breakfast. She suggested that we investigate PTFs, Progressive Technology Federal Systems, Inc., a company that had a good reputation for full text capabilities. Jim evaluated their product, ArchivalWare, and found it to be just what we wanted. It offered full text searching of large PDF files in a variety of fields, e.g., author, title,

subject, abstract and more. (Jim wrote an excellent article, “The Digitizing Project that Made SODA” in which he described at length the technical components that make up SODA’s navigation system. (Rible, 2005)) PTFs also provided training in the process of scanning, digitizing and making our documents work as a searchable whole.

We were on our way. I spent most of a one-academic-quarter sabbatical gathering bioregion materials from the government publications collection. In the catalog I performed searches on every subject and geographic heading that I could think of that related to the Siskiyou Cascades—national forests, landmarks, rivers, endangered species (plants and animals) and also likely keyword combinations. Those searches reaped about 400 printouts of cataloged monographs, but I was sure there were many more hiding in those long ranges of uncataloged federal documents. As I gathered cataloged publications from the collection and closely examined our federal and state documents stacks I fell upon hundreds of uncataloged documents covering a period of about 1890 to the present that could be added to a library of bioregion research materials.

In addition we also sent letters to federal researchers in the area, requesting copies of reports that we found in the bibliographies of the last decade’s environmental impact statements. Faculty members donated publications they had done for the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. We found opportunities to partner with local federal agencies that had a desire to mount relevant documents on their own Web sites, but had neither the time nor the staff to complete such a project. We made lasting partnerships by providing federal agencies with CD-ROM copies of important documents, and in return receiving numerous studies we would not have acquired otherwise. (Cedar-Face and Hollens, 2005)

One of my major responsibilities was contacting the myriads of contracted re-




searchers who had authored some of these studies to request permission to mount their work on the web for free access. Although the publications of government employees who do research as part of their official duties are copyright free, contracted work is not in the public domain. We did Internet searches, combed phone books and wrote letters for permission to add documents to our digital library. Researchers were extremely enthusiastic about SODA. They began to use the digital library for their own studies and were extremely complimentary about the results. We have had entire collections of federally contracted research given to us by local scientists who recognize the value of the database.

SODA has changed the face of our government depository and the work that I do every day as the Government Information Resources Coordinator. As federal and state agencies add documents to their own Web sites, we add those relevant digital resources to SODA. We are constantly on the lookout for old or new documents that will contribute to the ecological history of our region. At present we add about 15 federal and state documents per month to the database which now numbers about 1800 volumes between the Bioregion and First Nations collections. I am in continuing contact with local state and federal agencies and federally contracted researchers. Collection development for SODA has become just one more piece of what we now do everyday in the Government Publications department.

Naturally, we must be constantly on the lookout for ways to support and grow SODA so that it can become an even more robust library of materials critical to the information needs of Southern Oregon. Recently, a new Hannon Library team headed by Kate Cleland-Sipfle wrote and successfully applied for an LSTA grant to digitize a collection of Southern Oregon history brought together through the cooperative efforts of Southern Oregon University, the

Southern Oregon Historical Society, and Jackson County Library Services. These heretofore relatively inaccessible materials will document the period of the 1840s to 1920s. This superbly appropriate collection will complement the many government publications that document the ecological history of the bioregion and the materials relating to the native tribes. Digitizing the Southern Oregon history collection will begin in Spring, 2006 and continue through January, 2007.

Hannon Library's enthusiastic commitment to the growth of SODA necessarily corresponds with changing some of our priorities and making difficult decisions regarding the time, energy and resources we can give to an activity that is an entirely new one for us. Collection development for SODA, contacts with authors, scanning, cataloging, and metadata creation for the digital documents are all additional responsibilities that must be accommodated along with database maintenance and annual software fees. SODA is now fully part of our regional commitment and an innovative means for us to serve a much larger constituency. We are dedicated to the development of our digital collections, both in growing those that already make up the database and in finding additional materials to benefit the region. Finding ways to continue that mission will be a continuing challenge for this small university library. 

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