

Editorial

Why Information?

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"If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an Idea. No one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me. Ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition"

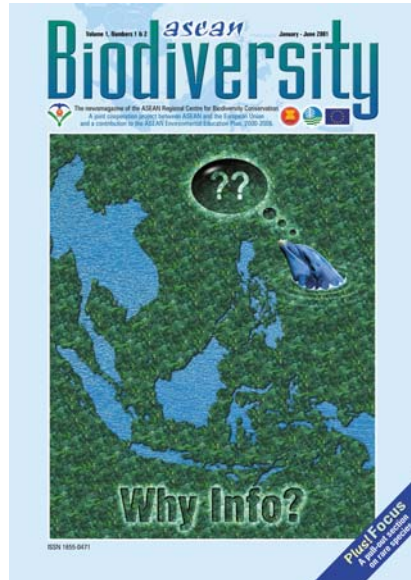
In Thomas Jefferson's inspiring vision, there are no barriers to the acquisition of information¹. Nobody owns it, everybody shares it, and humanity evolves because of accrued knowledge².

Two centuries later, when information management has taken over much of the economy, Jefferson's words seem to take on a new power.

Quality of and access to information have been shaping history. This pattern has dramatically accelerated with the onslaught of the Internet and flourishing of information technologies. The last decade has been definitely marked by increased production of and access to information used for education, research and decision-making. Thus "info" poses a great deal of influence on the present and future status of our planet.

¹ Information is defined as the meaning that human assign to data by means of known conventions used in their representation.

² Information requires a cognitive system (e.g. human) to become knowledge, which is therefore specific to the cognitive system that created it.



In fact during the last decade a number of countries have confirmed their commitment to the principles of Agenda 21 by becoming Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and other treaties related to biodiversity conservation, such as the Convention on Migratory Species, CITES, the Ramsar Convention, and the World Heritage Conventions. Adhering to global and regional treaties implies for Governments the generation of up-to-date information followed by regular reporting.

In the new "Information age," governments have realized that the key to strategy development and wise decision-making on sustainable use of natural resources, depends on having access to systematically organized information.

Huge amounts of raw data are shelved unutilized in many institutions. Some are analyzed, frequently in isolation, in the rush for being the first to publish or for generating legitimate and less legitimate profit (See also "Data Consistency and Exchange: Stepping Stones to Conservation", page 13).

Being complex and multi-disci-

plinary in nature, biodiversity information often requires inputs from a wide range of actors. In this context, information networks are instrumental in upgrading dispersed information to collective dimensions, thus generating tools for and leverage on opinion and decision-makers. Well-produced information generated by respected, wide-ranging groups has great potential to support sound decision-making processes.

Collaborating networks of data holders and providers are the key ingredients of successful biodiversity information systems. (See "Establishing a Biodiversity Network, its Organization and Objectives", page 16). For data to flow easily from one location to another, network participants must feel comfortable working with each other and in exchanging data. In this regard, the principle of custodianship is very useful. It provides a framework for selecting which organization is best placed to manage a dataset - a crucial step towards ensuring that data are professionally maintained.

The ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation has been set up in this context, to support the generation, exchange and dissemination of biodiversity-related information through the emergence of efficient information networks, embracing ASEAN and European Union-based organizations.

Provided the benefits from collaborative endeavors are internalized by all concerned, information may start to flow the way Thomas Jefferson was envisaging two centuries ago, for the benefit of natural resources and of humanity (hopefully) as a whole. ●

References:

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) to Isaac McPherson, 1813. ME 13:333

Reynolds J. and Busby, J. 1996. Guide to Information Management in the Context of the Convention on Biological Diversity. UNDP-WCMC.