Managing information in the Territory

Northern Territory Library

Lea Giles-Peters

State librarian
Nortern Territory Library

I joined the Northern Territory Library in November 1995. From the cold climate of Melbourne to the tropics in the North may be opposite ends of the continuum, but for me the challenges that the Northern Territory Library pose, it is a natural progression.

Developing information services which meet client needs has been a driving force throughout my career. Working with local government and the Footscray Institute of Technology, I established a regional information service for Melbourne's western suburbs. Experience with the development of information products and services led to a lecturing position at RMIT in the School of Information Services.

While under my management, the CSIRO AUSTRALIS online information service underwent significant change. This included a new pricing structure for online services in Australia, the development of products to meet the specific needs of clients, and the introduction of the SAGE (Science and Geography Education) database distributed on CD-ROM.

For me, the challenge ahead is for the Northern Territory Library to develop equitable and effective information services which are culturally appropriate. This will only be achieved by working in partnership with other government agencies and information providers to provide Territorians with access to the information they need, when they need it, and in the form that they need.

Contrary to what one might imagine, Territorians are bookish sort of people. The first Northern Territory Library, the Palmerston Institute's lending library and reading room, was started by private initiative in 1877, only fourteen years after the settlement of Palmerston was founded. The library passed successively under the control of Darwin Town Council in 1934; to the Northern Territory Administration in 1937; to the 7th Military District of the Army in 1942; and then back to the Northern Territory Administration after the war.

Formally re-established in 1947, the Darwin Public Library developed progressively as the hub of a centralised Northern Territory Library Service until Christmas Eve in 1974. In the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy the service administration and the salvaged books, principally the Northern Australia Collection, moved to Canberra, returning in 1977. With self-government the service took a higher profile; the first director was appointed in 1980 and the State Reference Library opened.

The present-day Northern Territory Library is a result of the merging of the Northern Territory Library Service, State, and Parliamentary services. In most other states, the state and public libraries fall within the arts and cultural ministers' portfolios, in the Territory they were part of the community development and education portfolios.

Thus the Northern Territory Library goes beyond the traditional cultural focus of libraries as 'storehouses of literary and documentary heritage', placing the provision of library and information services within the fields of social and community development.

As the primary provider of library and related information services, the Northern Territory Library's special responsibility in the Territory's future is the management and delivery of those services in a way which will best ensure that the information needs of the community are met.

Vital partners in library development

Public library development is central to the Northern Territory Library's existence. It is a responsibility with many special, even unique, challenges brought about by the Territory's social and geographic environment.

Occupying an area of approximately 1.3 million square kilometres, the Territory accounts for one-sixth of the Australian land mass. Its population of 171 000 people, twenty-eight per cent of whom are Aborigines, comprise about one percent of the nation's total population. Local government boundaries are not contiguous and they may encompass communities as small as 125 people to Darwin's 70 000. Some thirty of the sixty-eight local authorities have not yet attained community government status.

Isolation, distance, traditional Aboriginal culture and evolving local government structures are just some of the imperatives which prescribe the Northern Territory Library's role in public library provision. The response has been a model based on strong Government commitment: high ownership of the materials held in public libraries, stock rotation, networked technology, generous operational funding and a nurturing relationship with those councils which are or are planning to provide library service. No mean feat when many communities are only accessible by light plane or a five to six hour drive in a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

The number of local government authorities operating public libraries stands at twenty-four. Postal services reach another 1200 indi-

viduals working in isolated locations. Never-theless extending service development in re-mote areas remains the Northern Territory Li-brary's most demanding challenge. Building on its pioneering experience, the Northern Terri-tory Library is repositioning its priorities to do just that.

Northern Australia collection
The Northern Australia Collection was estab-lished in the 1960s and despite its relatively recent beginnings now holds the most compre-hensive range of documentary material on the Northern Territory in the world.

Whilst the scope and range of the collec-tion are considerable, the Northern Australia Collection does have particular strengths that include:

Aboriginal information
With twenty-five percent of the Northern Ter-ritory's population of Aboriginal origin, the Northern Australia Collection endeavours to collect material that reflects these demographics. Holdings on Aboriginal mate-rial include works on Aboriginal history, cul-ture, anthropology, health, religion, sacred sites, land rights as well as encyclopedias and related reference material.

Historical material
The history of the Northern Territory has been one of optimism, hardship and perseverance and is dotted with many successes and failures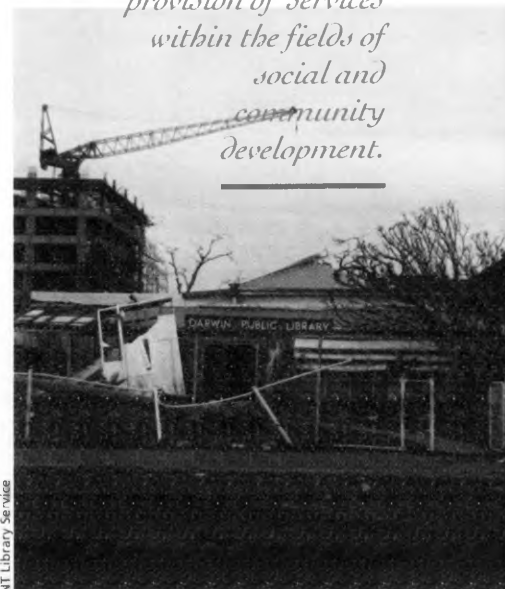. The holdings of the Northern Australia Collec-tion contain a considerable amount of histori-cal material and includes subjects as diverse as early exploration and settlement, trepang fish-ing, buffalo hunting, the Overland Telegraph, race relations, cyclones, the Japanese bombing of Darwin and immigration.

Territory images
One of the major strengths of the Northern Australia Collection is its magnificent collec-tion of historical and contemporary photographs. Pictures of people, places and events of significance have been collected over a number of years and the collection now numbers well over 100 000 photographs. Most of these photographs are available for public viewing through an electronic database *Territory images* and copies can be pur-chased for either private use or publica-tion.

With its modern technology and highly-skilled staff, the Northern Aus-tralia Collection provides a complete service to a wide range of users who need information on the Northern Ter-ritory. The collection is used by govern-ment departments, researchers, busi-ness, students, and the general public. With its commitment to excellence and client focused services, the Northern Australia Collection continues to act as the main gateway to Territorians' information requirements and recorded heritage. ■

The NT Library goes beyond the traditional cultural focus of libraries as 'storehouses of literary and documentary heritage', placing the provision of services within the fields of social and community development.

Darwin Public Library after Cyclone Tracy hit on Christmas Eve, 1974 — luckily some of the collection survived