

Feeling rural and isolated?

Thelma Rungkat, RILSIG president

From time to time the Rural and Isolated Libraries Special Interest Group (RILSIG) is called upon to reconsider its role within ALIA and as a group catering for 'special interests'.

What do we mean by 'rural' and how 'isolated' are we? Is it necessary to be 'rural' to be 'isolated'? Are there some members who are 'rural' but not 'isolated'? Are there common features

of rurality and isolation that makes it sensible to cater for them in one interest group? And what can RILSIG do to make the work and professional life of its members more interesting and valuable?

The Macquarie dictionary defines 'rural' as related to 'country'. But what is 'country'? While the term 'rural' relates in most people's minds both to re-

moteness from service centres and population size the definition varies according to context.

On the basis of ALIA-RILSIG's 1995 membership lists 67 per cent members fall into non-metropolitan areas. Exactly half of these (34) are rural but not remote; 29 per cent are not in rural settings, but in large metropolitan cities; and 4 per cent are off-shore. The term 'off-shore' in these figures applies to overseas members only. 'Isolation' is a little easier to define in library terms than rurality. It can include remoteness indicated by distance from any small or large population centre and from other residences, or separation by physiographic features, such as sea, mountains or desert or climatic conditions. Political, religious or ideological barriers can also cause isolation, as can subject uniqueness or security requirements or format of library holdings or type of user served.

Some of the particular problems facing members and their libraries at the moment are:

RILSIG: the vision statement

Vision

Equal access to, and services for, library and information users across the country

Mission

- i. To work towards the improvement of library and information services in rural and isolated situations;
- ii. To provide a supportive communication network for ALIA members in rural and/or isolated locations;
- iii. To be an advocate for rural and isolated library and information workers and users with the profession and with governments and institutions at all levels.

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- inadequate equipment and software to operate networks successfully;
- telecommunications difficulties, especially with landlines, in rural and remote areas leading to disruption of service;
- a lack of follow-up service for equipment and software and intermittent or no maintenance of networked lines of communication in rural and remote areas;
- apart from those in universities, rural or isolated librarians have little opportunity to hone their information-searching skills using new networks nor have they been able to develop programs to assist users to make effective searches, even where appropriate equipment is available — because finance is too limited to allow extended use of the equipment;
- professionals in rural or isolated libraries with small staff cadres find it difficult to get leave of absence to attend conferences or training ses-

sions on Internet and other networks because they are often the library's only qualified person;

- teleconferencing, although a means of aural meeting and sharing of ideas, is severely limited by high charges and, for practical reasons, by restriction on the numbers of people who can participate concurrently.

RILSIG seeks to gather data from members on some of these and other issues which will support action to overcome their problems. This means that members need to be clear on their own needs and have specific evidence of their own problems in this area. It is no good lobbying without the facts. We need direct interaction between RILSIG members and those marketing Internet and other network connections about how networks can best serve rural and isolated libraries. We need concrete evidence from governments about when non-metropolitan telecommunications will be brought up to a standard equivalent to that of large metropolitan

communication systems. We need definite confirmation that finance will be available to carry out the necessary work and to provide rural and remote libraries with cheaper telecommunication links and good quality equipment. Pressure needs to be exerted to ensure that isolated libraries, wherever they are located, will be able to make use of large information networks.

Strategic planning and concerted action can best be initiated in a face-to-face forum tailored to the needs of rural and isolated libraries and librarians. Major conferences on automation are generally dominated by the latest in virtual library options for university and large research libraries and have little to offer the small rural or isolated library. That is why RILSIG is planning *Forum 96* to take place immediately after the biennial conference from 11–13 October this year.

We hope our members and others can afford time to come to this forum and help improve their services. ■

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