A Librarian Among Sphagnologists

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Swedan and Norway have just experienced the hottest, driest summer ever recorded. The thermometer rose to near 90 degrees Fahrenheit in Orlandet, on the mid coast of Norway, where summer is cool and wet and the mean July temperature is about 57 degrees Fahrenheit. The North Sea was a still pool for two weeks at a time, cereal crops were harvested a good month earlier than usual, and in mid-August there was a nasty biting insect to be found. In the midst of this peculiar summer, a group of scholars and would-be scholars from around the world gathered to study species in a genus of moss, Sphagnum, that thrives in cool, wet conditions.

In a less tolerant land, this mixed age, mixed gender and mixed nationality hodgepodge of humans dressed in an unflattering melange of field pants and shorts, sandals and boots, tank tops and shirts, carrying bags, vials, packets and magnifying lenses, leaping off a very high class German tour bus fan out over the landscape, peering at the ground would have raised eyebrows, if not worse. But here in Scandinavia, nobody noticed. Even the driver admitted that it was not the strangest group he had ever ferried around the countryside.

What were these people doing? This group of roughly 40 people were on a mega field trip, traveling by coach from Uppsala, Sweden, through Sweden and Norway, organized by academics at Uppsala University and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, visiting sites where participants could see first hand both many species of Sphagnum and the different habitats in which they thrive in different climatic zones in the two countries. This is indeed the sphagnum of horticulture, the peat that has been used for fuel in northern places for centuries, the cutting of which has sometimes revealed remarkable artifacts of the past including human corpses known as bog bodies. (See P.V. Glov, The Bog People: Iron Age Man [Prepared] The soft, dried shreds that are used horticulturally bear little resemblance to living sphagnum.

Live plants are remarkably beautiful, especially when seen under magnification, and species are found in varying shades of greens and reds and brownish tones, from one to many inches in length, forming mats or floating in pools, the plants sometimes forming star shaped tips. It is the accumulation of dead plants that forms peat. Sphagnum coal has even been discovered in China. Sphagnum has a great many other uses in the hands of scientists.

The final destination, Trondheim, Norway, was the site of a two day symposium following the field trip. At every stop, specimens accumulated in packets and bags to be studied later. The coach, pristine at the outset, began to accumulate dirt and debris. Various sorts of bags, growing fit with packages of plants, occasionally liberated themselves from the overhead racks and plopped onto the aisle. The nuances of habitats and plant communities were noted. Photographs were taken. Differences between this locale and that were pointed out. The fine differentiations between species of Sphagnum were explained and sometimes argued.

All were in this together, the experienced professor and the aspiring student. There were some rebels in the group whose interests extended beyond Sphagnum to other plants, especially other mosses and liverworts, inhabiting the field trip sites. They tended to wander off seeking small plants of little interest to their colleagues. The unrelenting sun produced the “Sphagnumologist’s tan” on the legs of those who wore shorts and boots — trail middle legs between the bottom of the former and the top of the latter. Hats and sunglasses were de rigueur, insect repellent was not — mosquitoes had dried up along with their habitats.

The orderly Scandinavians had thought of every detail and kept the group very much on schedule. Each person was issued a hard plastic drinking cup to use for the duration. Lunch was provided each day, served up from the bowls of the bus. When breaks were needed, coffee and tea were served in mugs, sometimes with accompanying pastries. The newest graduate students were elected to cart such amenities to and fro. At day’s end, indelible, most eagerly attend evening lectures on, you guessed it, Sphagnum.

Why were they doing it? They share an interest in Sphagnum, but not necessarily the same interest and their different viewpoints added, not dissension, but a way to learn and ignite ideas in each other. For some, the passion is distinguishing one Sphagnum species from another (not always easily done) and discerning the evolutionary history of those species. For others, it is the unique habitats occupied by Sphagnum that matters. By understanding the biological development of Sphagnum, one may gain a better understanding of how species are created in general. Peatlands themselves may be important contributors to climate change. As they degrade, they release carbon dioxide.

Peat deposits are studied as windows on past climates. By identifying species, including species of Sphagnum, present at given times in the past and knowing their essential habitats today, it is possible to envision not just the climate but also the landscape in place at the time.

Ultimately this is about scholarship — teaching and learning and figuring out what this planet is all about and about communication which went on incessantly. And about publishing and finding information. Despite diverse nationalities (including Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, England, Scotland, Canada, Japan, Argentina, and the U.S.) verbal communication was virtually non-stop — in the field, on the bus, at meals — and in English. Topics ranged from why Americans mispronounce Latin to Sphagnum speciation, to the big scientific publishers. (Well, yes, one would think, every academic subject to find ourselves explaining the U.S. form of government and discussing George W. Bush’s IQ.)

Somewhat to my surprise, there was understanding of the profit made by big publishers from scholars’ work and an interest in breaking out of that mode. The publications accompanying the field trip and its grand finale, the Third International Symposium on the Biology of Sphagnum, made very clear that fine publications are possible outside of commercial channels. Each participant received a handy list of locality data and lists of Sphagnum species for each field trip site. Three other publications, another “excursion guide” containing detailed information on each locality complete with maps, colored illustrations and reprints of relevant papers; the schedule and abstracts for the symposium; and a 200 page book, The Norwegian Sphagnum: A Field Colour Guide, all published in the Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet Vikenstipansmuseet, Rapport botanisk series, were also given to participants. These publications of the Museum of Natural History and Archaeology of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology were issued on good paper with images printed in color on the covers. The excursion guide was in a format particularly well suited to its purpose: a sturdy ring binder with reprints placed in plastic sleeves and pockets in the front and back covers to hold additional material. Easily laid flat for reading or writing, pages easily removed and placed in a plastic sleeve for action use in the field with detailed, pertinent information and citations which could hardly be improved upon. What commercial publisher would take on such a project, unusual in format and limited to 100 copies? The Guide to Norwegian Species of Sphagnum includes 54 spectacular color plates of Sphagnum plants, much enlarged. Scholars prepared these publications and an academic museum published them, and the world is richer for it. Admittedly, these differ from the usual refereed article in a journal that is used to gain tenure, but they are examples of what academic publishing can and should do — issue high quality publications that advance knowledge regardless of limited markets for them. The model has extended to journals and certainly can continue to do so.

Also available was another memorable pub...
Angi Herold Faiks

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Name: Angi Herold Faiks

Born & lived: Born in Kalamazoo, MI. Raised in Greenville, MI. Undergrad education at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Spent a year abroad in Aix-en-Provence, France — studying French. Lived in Chicago for 5 years. Moved to Urbana-Champaign, IL for library school. My first post-degree job was at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Recently moved to the Twin Cities to work as an e-resources librarian at the MINITEX Library Network.

Education: 1997 M.S., School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, IL. 1990 Year abroad, Faculte des Lettres D’Aix-en-Provence, Aix-en-Provence, France. 1990 B.A., French & Philosophy, Double major, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

First job: (First library job) Reference Librarian, Mann Library, Cornell University. Mann is the Life, Biological & Agricultural library at Cornell.

Professional career and activities: See attached CV.

In my spare time I like to: Run, run races (slowly) to raise money for charity, do yoga, cook, read, eat all different kinds of food.

Favorite books: All Anne Lamott, Michael Chabon books, Me Talk Pretty One Day — Sedaris, Middlemarch — Elliot, Sophie’s Choice — Styron, A Suitable Boy — Seth and on and on....

Pet peeves/what makes me mad: Overall lack of concern for our environment. People who are vehemently opposed to change.

Philosophy: Keep getting up. Be nice.

Most meaningful career achievement: It is probably the book chapter that I wrote with my previous director, in a yet-to-be-published book.

Goal I hope to achieve five years from now: I would like to move into a management position where I can more effectively help shape and nurture an organization and its people.

How/Where do I see the industry in five years: I think we will continue to see the exciting development of our library systems. As the new generation of library systems are becoming more robust, I believe that the next phase will be to try to make these systems work better for us and our patrons — heading towards the ease of Google with a library touch. I also am excited to watch the work force change as many retire. I think the new round of library managers will bring a new approach to the workplace, making libraries even more vibrant for staff and patrons. And, I think eBooks will make their mark.

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
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Electronic access has shaken (but not entirely dislodged) the roots of library services. For more than a decade, libraries have made materials available electronically. Major vendors have emerged to make access easier and seamless to the user. Libraries, eager to make materials available to users, have quickly and enthusiastically made this access a primary part of their document delivery. Unfortunately, it has given space to a spate of nonsense about how libraries are becoming obsolete, but we'll save that for another discussion.

Electronic access is often costly. With limited budgets, libraries have to make either/or decisions: either make materials available in print, or offer them electronically. Many, if not most, have chosen to deliver the bulk of their serial materials electronically. Because the presentation of subject matter in, for example, the Humanities (often text-based only) made digitization easy and quick, materials in these areas were often chosen first. Although the total number of full-text electronically accessible materials is small, those materials chosen are often frequently consulted.

Several participants used global positioning systems (GPS) to record the location of their finds. Every public form of transportation that we used — the grand SAS Air Bus, the coach in which we rode from locale to locale, and the hydrofoil ferry that took us from the island of Hitra to its neighbor, Frøya — all had GPS. Monitors displayed maps on which a small moving target represented the vehicle's position. Outside temperature was also displayed inside the plane and the bus. Never had a traveler known so acutely where he was in relation to the planet or what temperature he was experiencing. I thought of the Vikings setting sail from Frøya with only their knowledge of the heavens and currents, a few pieces of equipment for determining location, and accumulated experience to guide them.

Librarians seldom immerse themselves in the work of scholars or accompany field biologists into the field. It is enlightening to do so! The people I was with spent their lives studying Sphagnum (as others spend theirs studying other seemingly esoteric topics) for the same reason that an artist paints — to get at the essence of things. Ultimately they are a testament to the power of scholarly communication — in any format.


by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University)
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Please Note: This is part three in a four part series. See Against the Grain, Sept. 2002, v.14#4, pp.42-59 for part one. See Against the Grain, Nov. 2002, v.14#5, pp.32-59 for part two. — ATG

Only recently, however, has it come to the attention of librarians that almost no vendor is archiving electronically accessible materials for more than five years. Every time a year is added, another, earlier year is dropped. Thus, what scholars and the public were able to access in the early nineties will most likely not be available early in the new millennium and it will not be a "computer" problem but a "management" decision! With the exception of JSTOR, no other vendor is offering a full retrospective back file (Volume 1, Number 1) online. Various individual titles may be available, but the price is often formidable and, for many libraries, prohibitive. Electronic archive access is generally out of reach for all but the largest of libraries.

Meanwhile, vendors making electronic access to magazines available are also dropping titles annually, and often without any warning to the libraries under subscription. Thus, if a given title is not being accessed as frequently as the vendor wishes, it will be replaced by a title that the vendor thinks may be more popular. The library subscribing to this service is generally never made aware the title has been dropped unless and until a patron using the title inquires of its whereabouts. The electronic access is often so unstable that titles come and go from the database almost as frequently as patrons to library buildings. More recently it has come to our attention that the recent effects of the Taíni decision are proving true. Sage publications has recently yanked its materials from ProQuest owing to its inability to continue its profits while paying its freelancers. Other companies will, if they haven’t already, follow suit. How will scholars access electronically defunct materials? What are the coming changes for scholars and authors? What will be the impact of eBooks? Or other electronic configurations? If many companies pull their materials, then what? Are we back to print alone?

Three very capable speakers (one did not submit a paper for publication) enlightened us on this matter. Ron Chepesiuk stepped to the dias first and delivered an overall discussion of eBooks and libraries. Mr. Chepesiuk made the case that librarians may not be as fully ready as they ought to be. He further warns that if librarians believe the eBook revolution will have the same impact on libraries as microforms have, they’d better think again: it will be far greater. Mr. Chepesiuk is professor and a librarian at

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