Alaska's Discovery Portal: An Example of Sharing Polar Information

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Abstract

Alaska's geographic location places it at the forefront of research activity and information gathering about the Arctic and the changing environment of the Polar Regions. To facilitate sharing such information with the residents of the state, the Alaska Discovery Portal uses an integrated approach to retrieve materials from for-profit publishers, vetted websites, Alaska's Digital Archives, open access resources such as the University of Alaska's Institutional Repository, online topical Research Guides, and more. By licensing resources for all Alaska residents, the Discovery Portal can do what Google and other search engines cannot—pass through pay walls put in place by commercial publishers. Using whaling in the Arctic as an example, this presentation will demonstrate the wide variety of formats for different audiences that can be retrieved, and the interdisciplinary nature of those formats. From contemporary to historical, locating scholarly or newspaper articles, or multimedia, photographs, drawings, maps, or web resources in disciplines that span geography, ecology, and anthropology to name just a few, are possible through the Discovery Portal. This unique resource, available to anyone in Alaska with an internet connection from home, school, or library, is helping to bridge the digital information gap across the state. The cooperative efforts that created and developed Alaska's Discovery Portal, how it is maintained and by whom, both financially and in terms of ongoing input of materials, along with suggestions for implementing a similar network in other locations will be discussed.

Alaska's Discovery Portal: An Example of Sharing Polar Information

Alaska's geographic location places it at the forefront of research activity and information gathering about the Arctic and the changing environment of the Polar Regions. At the same time, Alaska's libraries have embraced the role of gathering such information and sharing it with the communities across the state and beyond. "Libraries in Alaska [also] have a strong tradition of cooperation, of working together to serve the residents of the state" (Alaska Libraries' Reciprocal Borrowing Program, 2018). Combined library catalogs and reciprocal borrowing privileges among as many Alaskan libraries as possible are some examples. Another is Alaska's Discovery Portal, available on SLED, the Statewide Library Electronic Doorway.

What is SLED?

SLED was started in the late 1990s by a group of Alaska librarians to showcase vetted websites. In today's information world, however, simply offering a list of websites is far too limited in scope, so the discovery portal was created, building on the annotated list of websites. Using an integrated approach, the Alaska Discovery Portal retrieves information from vetted websites, from commercial publishers, from open access resources, from local and statewide resources such as Alaska's Digital Archives and the University of Alaska's institutional repository, and from many other sources. Today, the Alaska Discovery Portal offers a wide variety of information resources to every resident in the state using an internet connection from home or from the local school or library. If you can get to the internet, you can get to SLED.

The Alaska Discovery Portal is organized, developed, and maintained by the SLED Advisory Group, made up of dedicated, volunteer librarians from public, school, and academic libraries across Alaska. Members test and evaluate potential resources of high quality, and consider recommendations by users according to established selection criteria such as information of statewide interest, Alaskan information, authority of sources, uniqueness—in that they may not be readily available on other search engines such as Google—and technical compatibility. The Advisory Group removes resources from SLED in accordance with the same criteria, or replaces them when a more appropriate substitute is discovered. SLED's resources are also periodically reviewed to ensure that they continue to meet the criteria (SLED, 2018).

As a public service supporting Alaskans' right to information, SLED's mission is to provide access to electronic information for all Alaska residents in an easy, concise, and coherent system. And, because the Alaska Library Network is able to license on behalf of SLED the resources and services from for profit publishers and educational providers, SLED can do what Google or other search engines cannot—access content behind pay walls. Because of the integration of information that SLED is built upon, SLED can incorporate for profit or commercial publications along with open access materials, historical documents, vetted websites, and much more. Again, to emphasize, not even Google can do this since it and other search engines are unable to pass through the pay walls put in place by the for profit publishers.

What does SLED include?

With the search capacity on SLED, users can retrieve over 200 million records covering a myriad of subjects including medicine, engineering, business, art, philosophy, history, and education. The materials also span different audiences, from elementary school students looking for picture books through college students doing research on scientific topics or adults seeking recommendations for novels to read.

SLED's discovery portal also provides comprehensive retrieval in that contemporary as well as historical resources are delivered in the same search. For example, Alaska's Digital Archives presents a wealth of historical photographs, albums, oral histories, moving images, maps, documents, physical objects, and other materials from libraries, museums, and archives throughout the state. One of the more recent additions to the Discovery Portal is ScholarWorks@UA, the University of Alaska's Institutional Repository created to share research and works by UA faculty, students, and staff. Graduate theses, both master's and doctoral, along with white papers and research reports from the various research institutes of the university are among the types of sources found in ScholarWorks@UA, and thus available through the Portal.

While anyone, anywhere, can search the Discovery Portal, only the residents of Alaska have access to the commercially produced publications like scholarly journals, newspapers, and magazines that have been licensed for SLED. With additional funding support from the University of Alaska, the Alaska State Library, and the state of Alaska, SLED delivers information at the cost of $1.09 per resident per year.

Alaska's Discovery Portal offers many services and provides access to an expanding collection of resources. Here are just a few:

- Educational videos for school children.
- Health information for teens.
- Websites to learn a foreign language.
- Access to a wealth of digital images documenting Alaska's history and culture.
- Online tutoring services for elementary through intro-level college students.
- Test preparation for high school equivalency, college entrance tests, graduate schools, professional school entrance tests, or civil service exams.
- Online reference books from Oxford University Press.
- Do-it-yourself guides for auto and small engine repair, crafts, and home improvements.
- Genealogy resources for researching family ancestry.

The search box on the Portal's front page opens up a whole world of discovery. For example, a search on "arctic" retrieves almost 700,000 records drawing from journals, magazines, news sources, books and book chapters, maps, and audio recordings. Historical images from Alaska's Digital Archives and University of Alaska publications such as doctoral dissertations are also retrieved. In addition, the search will access the high quality websites selected by the SLED volunteers that are included in the topical research guides. These guides, produced by librarians in Alaska as well as other colleges and universities in the U.S., are fully indexed and findable in the Discovery Portal.

For a more specific example, a search on the terms arctic whaling finds nearly 15,000 records from 12 different source types, a few of which are listed here:

Academic Journals
Full text PDF of a scholarly, peer-reviewed article:
> Jensen, A. M. (2012). The material culture of Iñupiat whaling: An ethnographic and ethnohistorical perspective. *Arctic Anthropology 49*(2), 143–161.

Book Chapters
Full text HTML of a book chapter:
> "Exhausted body and blistered hands" in Currie, S. (2001). *Thar she blows: American whaling in the nineteenth century* (pp. 34–49). Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing.

Magazines

Full text HTML or PDF of a magazine article:

> Kizzia, T. (2016, September 12). The New Harpoon: In a warming Arctic, a millennia-old culture adapts to a future without ice. *The New Yorker, 92*(28), 38.

News Sources

Full text HTML of a newspaper article:

> D'Oro, R. (2017, September 15). Alaska Eskimo group seeks hike in whaling harvest quotas. *The Canadian Press.*

Dissertations/Theses

Full text PDF of a University of Alaska Master's thesis from ScholarWorks@UA:

> Aho, K. B. (2016). *Transboundary agreement: case studies of marine mammal management in the Bering Strait.* University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK.

Photographs from Alaska's Digital Archives

Digitized historic photograph from Alaska State Library Historical Collections:

> *Arctic whaler, trapped in ice.* Frank H. Nowell Photograph Collection, 1901–1908. (ASL-PCS-48)

Topical research guide on Whaling

List of online links to web resources in these categories:

> General; Cetaceans and Marine Mammals; Environmental Impacts on Whale Populations and Whaling; and Politics of Whaling

Is SLED for you?

Alaska's Discovery Portal is just one example of a discovery system. A similar arrangement could be employed by any library or institution with joint licensing and/or consortial agreements. Such a system could include digital archives or other types of digitized information, an institutional repository if available, or a variety of other possibilities to populate your discovery portal.

In summary, SLED is a unique resource for Alaska residents, especially in two important ways. First, because it is bridging the digital information gap across the state by serving the community of all Alaskans, and second, because it accomplishes this at an economical cost to state residents. Alaska's Discovery Portal may look like Google in that it retrieves a variety of resources, but it differs in a significant way—by allowing access for Alaska residents to view material normally blocked by publisher pay walls.

SLED is also a place to share our stories about Alaska and how we can make them available to share with others. We are always interested in sharing your stories as well. If you have Alaska or Arctic content available in your libraries or collections, contact us about the possibilities and options for using SLED.

References

ALASKA LIBRARIES' RECIPROCAL BORROWING PROGRAM, INTRODUCTION BY STEVE ROLLINS. (2018, April 3). Alaska State Libraries, Archives, & Museums. Retrieved from http://library.alaska.gov/recipborrow/home.html

SLED. (2018, 26 April). Statewide Library Electronic Doorway: Information resources for, about, and by Alaskans. Retrieved from http://lam.alaska.gov/sled/