

Carol Mills

There is a possibly apocryphal story relating to the appointment of the Director of the University of the South Pacific (USP) Tuvalu Centre many years ago. Arriving at his post, the (English born) Director was taken to his new residence. Apparently a low single-storey house, at atoll level, like much of Tuvalu a metre or so above sea level, with louvres in most directions to permit maximum cross-ventilation. The warm trade wind, smelling of salt, passed through the house from one side of that small country to the other. Filled with apprehension about the climate, he asked, "But what about my books?" "don't worry", came the friendly reply, "they won't last long here!"

That sums it up. Climate and less involvement with the printed word are besetting problems for books in the Pacific. Most people are still close to their orally-based cultures. Countries are relatively poor, and the perceptions of building library collections, let alone maintaining them, can be limited. In the face of the efforts of institutions such as the USP and theological colleges seminaries, appreciation of the needs of Pacific peoples to move with various non-indigenous influences which are print-related is shifting. Collections are acquired at the expense of someone, sometimes an aid donor. Those which are acquired under aid arrangements may be unbalanced and not totally appropriate to their purpose, or simply, as is human nature, not valued as much as they might be because there has been little effort on the part of the recipient, reducing the perception of their value.

Having said this there are many who do perceive the value of the limited library resources of the Pacific. However, they may be ignorant of the need to protect their collections, and even if they are well-informed, they may have an idea that there is little which can be done under the prevailing conditions, as preservation as it is reported is often a costly high technology operation. Speaking of technology, the electronic media are not yet an alternative to the book in the present-day Pacific. There is a lack of financial resources to install them in such a way as to make them readily available. It is hard to get people from developed countries to understand the lack of technological know-how in all but one or two large centres to sustain the telecommunications, the PC's, the software and other components which must be in place for these to succeed. Governments are unwilling to let go of the revenue which they receive from the use of public telecommunication lines, making cheap networking less feasible. Such facilities as exist, such as PEACESAT, are used by booking a time slot on the satellite from a station which is equipped for data transmission; which few are.

Back to preservation. Many people do not know that there are a number of simple things which can be done to protect collections. There is a problem that those that do, the Pacific achievers, are mobile, as they are poached for higher jobs as they become effective, or they emigrate. Then, because of small staff numbers (usually one), the library will have to start all over again once the perception has developed in the next custodian; whose perception will probably occur because the library falls into a parlous state whilst the custodian is learning on the job.

All of the tasks which must be done to maintain paper, which is not a Pacific artefact, are those of elsewhere, but the penalties for their neglect will show in one lifetime; at times

almost before your eyes. The very first requirements are cleanliness and air. Libraries should be as close to clean and free of dust and dirt as possible, to minimise the harbouring of pests. They should be cleaned and swept regularly, and their shelves cleaned. There should be no litter, inside, or around the perimeter. They should be well cross-ventilated. Air conditioning is admirable, but not affordable in an area of the world where much electricity runs on imported fuel, may shut down at night, and is subject to brown-outs and black-outs brought about by breakdown or cyclone. After a cyclone, with power out for sometimes weeks, a sealed building cooking away without power is far worse than a cross-ventilated one. Bookshelves should be arranged for good air flow between, around, under and THROUGH them: shelves should not have backs, but be cross-braced, slatted or whatever is possible, and away from walls. Many libraries in the Pacific have locally made wooden bookshelves. This is fine and metropolitan libraries would envy them this. Wood, properly varnished to minimise dust lodging on it, and to stop acids being released from the wood around the books, assisting in their decay, is better than steel, which has an on-going problem with rust. Shelves should not go down to the floor; there should be air space underneath which will allow cleaning and air flow.

Cross-ventilation is usually achieved by louvres. There must be some means of closing windows against the salt-laden winds. Salt lodges in the books, attracting moisture and setting up the brown spots known as 'foxing'. Window grilles may be needed to stop library users throwing books out. Permanent grilles on the outside can be used as a substitute for cyclone shutters, reducing the laborious task of battening down, which is usually necessary several times a season. Insect screens are advisable, but many libraries do not have them. In Vanuatu, for example, insect screens must be made of a particular expensive materials if they are not to rot in the acid air which is the result of volcanic activity.

Moulds are another enemy which damage and destroy paper. Air flow reduces their spread. Floor covering, despite the noise factor, must be shiny ones which are easily mopped up. Even 'all-weather' carpet surfaces hold water and breed a microclimate of moulds when they remain wet. Other soft furnishings and upholstery which are not easily removed and which will harbour moulds, should be avoided wherever possible. Books should be firmly but not tightly shelved, so that they do not shift unnecessarily, causing damage. They should never be shelved on their fore-edge (the side opposite the spine), but laid flat if necessary. Bookends should be used to keep everything firm, and boxes can be employed for smaller items so they too are firm. While these may be expensive in some countries, they can be admirably improvised with half beer cartons covered in good quality paper. There may be other substitutes in some countries.

Much of the Pacific has a potential earthquake problem. Shelves should be stable, and braced to ensure this stability, evenly loaded (both sides if double-sided) to minimise shaking and dropping books in a tremor, or even falling over regardless of bracing. They should not be too high, say not more than 220mm at the outside, as the further books fall (and some will), the greater the chance of damage. If planning a library building, placement of the anti-earthquake shear walls, which have no openings, requires considerable work in relation to airflow.

A stable temperature and humidity are important. The ideal is impossible in the Pacific; paper needs a temperature of about 60 degrees Fahrenheit or less, and a humidity of not more than 60% if it is to be kept in the best possible condition. One does the best one can to achieve stability at higher temperatures.

The possibility of cyclones for half the year is a major local factor. The old rule that books should never be left on the floor has an added meaning. Despite shutters rain does drive in; they are designed to protect the building, not make it water-tight. Staff must be aware of the special needs of libraries caused by cyclones. Equipment such as PC's should never be kept near windows because of the risk of water damage. It is better to put reader seating near windows as it is less likely to suffer permanent damage, and to house the books in the middle of the room, well away from the windows. Staff must be aware of exactly what to do before a cyclone and after. They are the experts who will lead the rest of the community in saving the library if this is called for. This requires attention to protection at all times; which is why the shutters will probably go up more than once a season, particularly on Fridays if the weather forecast is not fully clear for the next three days; preparation takes time.

Daylight contributes to the breakdown of paper, leading to 'brittle' paper, which is useless, crumbling to dust. The fast decay of newspapers is the best example of this. As elsewhere, books in the Pacific should not be in the direct sun, and preferably away from the light from windows. The exterior of the building should be surrounded by an awning or canopy or other shade and weather device to minimise the direct penetration of light (and rain) into the building. This exterior area should be kept free of birds, vegetation and litter which would encourage insects and rodents and dirt which could blow into the library.

A major risk to tropical library collections is insect infestation. Insect screens are advisable; however even with them insects will still be able to get in and attack the collection, and of course the users, with at times severe problems with malaria in some countries and to a lesser extent dengue fever, as libraries, as a place where people gather also assist in disease transmission. If possible all windows should be closed at night, as it is then that the various insect enemies of books are most active. Also, where possible the interior of the library should not be lit at night as light attracts insects in to breed in the library. By careful thought it may be possible to close off and not light some portions of the library after dark, or to do such things as turn the lights off straight after closing and have the cleaners come in the early morning after daylight, etc. Treatment of the library by pest exterminators twice a year if such services are available locally should be considered.

The books which go out can be the ones most at risk. One should do the best one can to lead users to consider cleanliness and good handling. The old world rules of no eating, drinking or smoking in libraries evolved for a purpose. Books with food smears attract insects and rodents more than those which are clean; smoking can lead to scorch patches on books. Adhesives react badly to the climate, and mis-handling can lead to damage to the spine, and other problems. In certain cases it may be possible to encourage keeping the books in the library rather than lending them, particularly as many Pacific students use the library, rather than their homes, as their place of study. This is an ideal with only some of the collection at best, and any book which is loaned out may itself be damaged or may bring back moulds or insects when returned.

Because of small populations (the entire twelve countries of USP have a population of about 1.6 million), certain trades training is not well-developed. This includes binding. It is rarely economic to send binding offshore, and local binders may be limited in their skills and materials. Libraries are on their own and must usually do their own repairs. The best solution is the undamaged book, as damaged books may have to be withdrawn.

Insect damage is a particular problem as even once the infestation has been stopped one is left with a frail book, possibly not useable. USP Library, with its own bindery, engaged recently in a book freezing programme, which is regarded as possibly effective in destroying the insect life, including eggs, in books. It has been labour intensive to prepare the books and get them to and from a suitable freezer, one with space available for a sufficiently long period. The resultant stabilised books are a long-term addition to the bindery's work load, and some will not be back in the collection for years. Meanwhile more are being attacked.

It is difficult to offer broad-ranging advice of good materials for book repairs. They should be strong, free of acids and used for processes which are reversible. They should not contain ingredients which are attractive to insects and rodents (such as occur in some glues). Poisoned glues have been tried, but there are other problems; both for the reader, and with the long-term stability of the glue as the poison reacts with it. We all know now about not using pressure sensitive tapes (there are no 'safe' tapes except those retailed by suppliers of preservation and conservation materials). So one must use glues, gums, pastes, papers and fabric which are 'permanent'; that is free of compounds likely to degrade. If in doubt, and there is no local advice available, try contacting the national libraries or archives of some of the larger donor-aid countries such as Australia and New Zealand, etc. seeking guidelines - send them samples of locally available materials for testing perhaps. In certain cases embassies may be willing to set up these contacts. Do not take the offerings of even library supply houses on trust. The Pacific is a hothouse where things happen more quickly than in milder climates, where air-conditioned libraries are more common.

On related matters, metal clips, staples and fasteners should never be used because they rust and do damage. 'Post-it' slips also do damage, both from the adhesive and the poor nature of the paper in archival terms. Tying up should be done with good wide cotton tape; avoid rubber bands. Wherever possible all marking should be done with soft pencil, not with ink or ball-point pens, as some inks degrade or damage paper. Storage in plastics is another problem. PVC plastics give off a gas which causes paper deterioration. Polyester, polyethylene or polypropylene plastics should be used. Many oven bags, for example, are made of the right sort of plastic, but seek advice.

I have talked mainly about paper. Libraries of course have other materials; film, photos, tape etc. The rules of cleanliness, air flow, restricted light, etc. apply here too. Photos, microforms and slides must have good air flow in their storage containers, and preferably with all light excluded. Do not use self-adhesive photo albums - they give off acid vapours which destroy the image on photos within about ten years. As with other materials you will find that major libraries are willing to advise if asked. The treatment of non-book materials is a special topic requiring more space than can be given here.

Those in libraries realise that their records are valuable not only to the people of today, but to those of tomorrow as well. It is their responsibility to do the best that they can to preserve them for the future. The Pacific offers its own challenges. There are many libraries in the Pacific which quietly manage their collections very well. A lot of this sort of low-technology work will go quite a long way to maintaining and preserving collections, giving them a better chance to survive.

*Carol Mills was University Librarian at the University of the South Pacific, from March 1992 to March 1995. She has resumed her duties as the Librarian at Charles Sturt University, Riverina, Wagga Wagga.*