

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON THE NEEDS OF COMMUNITY BASED NETWORKS, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SAFEINHERIT NETWORK.

This document outlines the resources and tools available via the Internet of use to small networks of organisations and communities working together to find means of achieving specific aims for their areas. These resources and tools will be of specific relevance to the SafeinHerit Network, but will be assumed to be applicable to other networks of this nature, working in the field of sustainable development. The needs of the SafeinHerit Network in relation to the Internet are assessed and potential uses explored.

Partners and staff in networks such as this need to make regular **communication**, to liaise on joint projects, such as interpretative booklets for the regions or for organisation of conferences, as well as more practical issues such as budgeting, progress and whether the overall aims are being adhered to. This would have been virtually impossible before the proliferation of the Internet and its ability to provide fast and low-cost communication in the form of e-mail: for messages onto which files of various mediums can be attached, to individual partners or staff, or to all at once.

Despite these advantages, e-mail must be used with care. To portray the correct meaning, particularly in networks where face-to-face or verbal communication is minimal, is important. E-mail can produce a proliferation of communication to the state of overload. It is important to organise and control, either wise financial savings provided will be out-weighed by time spent in dealing with them. Those within networks, working on a number of projects and/or other partnerships, may wish to explore the use of a filtering system, available through most e-mail packages. This automatically tells the mailer what folder to put incoming mail in. Criteria could be categorised according to specific projects and other work categories. Those working within the network should abide by these criteria when titling a message, and only prioritise mail that really was a priority. Partners could deal with those messages related to the project they are working on at the time, and other priority issues.

Filtering helps deal with excess spam (junk e-mail) by deleting it. It is unlikely to be a problem in non-commercial organisations of this sort, since spam is more prevalent to those who give out their addresses frequently on the Internet, and use commercial server providers, such as AOL, who sell on subscriber's information (Conner-Sax and Krol, 1999). The quantity of spam is increasing, and indirectly has an effect on all organisations by putting increased traffic on the Internet. However legislation is likely to be in place to curtail it before it becomes much of a problem, since government at the UK and EU level are increasingly aware of the problem (Ollerenshaw, 2000). Equally issues of privacy and Internet abuse are not factors to consider regarding e-mail in this context, since many of those involved work from home and/or on a contract basis.

Even with prevalent e-mail use, relations and projects can be put to the test, without the ability to discuss issues frequently. In the case of the SafeinHerit Network trans-national telephone conversations are prohibitively expensive, and face-to-face contact at least six months apart. The need is for a cheaper form of verbal communication than international call charges by telephone operators. Telephony is worth considering in the future but the Internet currently has problems in dealing with interactive communication (data can travel various routes to get from A to B, so speech, packaged up into sendable sizes may not arrive at B in the right order) and is prohibitively expensive. Companies such as VocalTel are working to alleviate problems. In the mean-time, to enable more direct liaison, the web-site of a network, in this case www.safeinherit.net, could have a page open for discussion, for use to partners and others working directly on the projects. Prearranged times, via e-mail, to 'talk': typing in responses as the conversation develops, almost in instantaneous time, enabling more direct liaison.

If used effectively, the Internet provides a vast **quantity of information**, which networks should take advantage of. SafeinHerit has information needs for individual projects and formulation of strategies, and needs to create linkages with others by finding others working on similar projects. Users must be aware of the paradoxical

nature of the Internet: an abundance of information, but that of use and relevance is often difficult to obtain when required (Edmunds and Morris, 2000).

The size of the WWW, 720 million in 1999, is not quite so large as often imagined: equivalent to two million books (Lesk, 1999), no larger than a decent university library (Law, 2000). And, unlike other published literature, which goes through a process of filtering by publishers, editors etc., there is no regulation on what can be published. However, much of the population, particularly those working in peripheral regions, does not have the advantage of access to large university libraries. As long as care is taken in evaluating the quality of information for accuracy and objectiveness, by considering issues such as authorship, purpose, style, currency and whether it is possible to verify the authenticity of material, it can revolutionise projects. As time moves on, an increasing number of verifiable databases and gateways can be accessed online.

There is a lack of suitable services providing help to information seekers. There are a number of search engines, which automatically index documents with a specific keyword or phrase, differing in coverage (particular protocols, location, subject or server computer), facilities for searching, such as use of Boolean operators, truncation and proximity searching, and in the order results are ranked. There is a tendency for partiality (Law, 2000): not covering all pages on the web – in 1998, Lawrence and Giles found HotBot were the best with 34% coverage, and Lycos only 3%; and capable of manipulation - an increasing number of companies in the US guarantee businesses a position in the top ten ranking in any web search. Subject indexes, such as Yahoo!, operate through a series of menus, gradually narrowing down until suitable sites are found. This has the advantage of going directly to a site and related sites, and therefore more impartial (O'Leary, 1999).

Until search engines become more responsible in their mission (Rowley, 2000), information seekers can implement more effective searches by combining results from two or more search services. One of the individual projects within SafeinHerit is the monitoring of lobster stocks in the waters around Fair Isle, in an attempt to achieve sustainable management of stocks. A search of web-ferret, a web browser providing a

meta-search of eight or so search engines, for 'lobster research' provided two useful sites, for the Lobster Conservancy (www.lobsters.org) and the Lobster Institute (www.lobster.um.maine.edu). Both appeared authentic, with academic backing, and providing useful information on research, analysis, population dynamics, and possible ways forward, albeit for the American lobster. Yahoo!, provided similar results and the same two useful sites, whilst a search of the engine www.northernlights.com, the 'first research engine', provided a long list of articles on the subject of monitoring lobster stocks, in particular www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/cornwall/publicat/seaquest/sq1/. Those working on this project should explore Northern Lights, www.eblast.com, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and www.thescientificworld.com, providing access to the 'world's scientific literature', for further articles and information.

Other useful sites to consider of a general or specific nature to networks of this kind are specialist Information Locator Services (ILS) and/or gateways. Those specialising in environmental information of relevance to the northern periphery of Europe include www.eea.eu.int, 'Europe's gateway to environmental information', maintained by the European Environment Agency, with access to reports and services; www.bl.uk/services/stb/eis/resourc1.html, providing useful and varied access to environmental resources and guides, including online databases; www.sdinfo.gc.ca/ENG, a new electronic information system developed by Environment Canada providing comprehensive knowledge and information on sustainable development – issues, conventions, protocols, agreements and links and www.nwi.bibsys.no (Norwegian) or www.nwi.lub.lu.se (Sweden). Information on relevant legislation and discussions can be sort from the website of the Scottish parliament at www.scottish.parliament.uk, with links to the UK parliament and the European Union at <http://europa.eu.int>. More specifically www.SciQuest.com provides a gateway to scientific resources and news.

An aim of the SafeinHerit Network is to disseminate information relating to projects, processes and strategies, as well as to create forums. This is cost effectively achieved through **promotion** of the Network through the WWW. The Network website is experiencing an increasing number of hits, but software should be used to enable all

search engines to index the site. The need to establish further link organisations: those who would find information being produced by the Network of interest to themselves, and vice versa, can be achieved by contacting other networks within the Northern Periphery Programme, available at www.scotnordic.com/northernperiphery/, and others found whilst retrieving information for the Network, as mentioned above, either general or specific to particular projects. It would prove useful to visit http://www.yahoo.co.uk/society_and_culture/environment_and_nature/ and a further narrowing down to sustainable development and organisations. Organisations and networks particularly interested could be put on a SafeinHerit mailing list (within email, serving as an alias to many other email addresses) and, similar to the process of press releases, be notified of significant web-site updates and/or other news.

In time this mailing list could serve to link similar organisations by e-mail and disseminate mutually beneficial information. It would require one or more persons (the owners) to manage the list, acting as moderators if necessary. If the number of subscribers became too large, the organisations could consider changing to a Usenet, where messages are noticed on the website rather than delivered, with opportunities to reply and add new messages to a thread, creating a forum. Thousands of these topically named discussion groups exist, which, using www.deja.com, can be browsed through (none currently exist with the aims or ethos of SafeinHerit), or easily set up through www.egroups.com.

Further development and networks might consider pooling funds to set up an intranet: 'private computing networks internal to an organisation allowing access only to authorised users' (Curry and Stancich, 2000), which may include an internal 'web' like the WWW, e-mail, newsgroups, online meeting facilities and other applications. They are only an intrinsic component of strategic information management if the content and planning are well managed, requiring a strong IT staff (Curry and Stancich, 2000). With this pooling of resources, consideration should be made of the use of push technologies, which deliver information matching specific criteria to a user's desktop, rather than manually pulling in information, although the same care might be needed as when using search engines.

The Internet has enabled the formulation of community-based networks, particularly for those in remote regions, without it, there would be no SafeinHerit, since projects would be too costly to implement. Networks enable and strengthen communities in peripheral regions, giving them a louder voice within society, thereby helping sustain them. The WWW is not hierarchical in nature, putting peripheral regions and persons on a more equal footing than others, and as Alter (1999, in Ruggeri Stevens and McElhill, 2000) writes, e-mail provides a means of breaking through bureaucracy – another need for communities wanting to move forward.

The accessibility of information via the Internet further enables communities, particularly those in peripheral regions. There is no doubt that the quality of information on the Internet is often dubious, but with awareness and good quality searching, with knowledge of useful gateways and online databases, providing access to academic journals etc, the benefits are enormous. The leadership challenge of any organisation is to harness the potential of the Internet, working to control and improve inefficiencies. With time and understanding communication can be improved, useful information found and organisations promoted, perhaps with the development of forums, by use of the Internet.

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