

Canada's closure of science libraries riles researchers

January 11 2014, by Clément Sabourin

Canada's closure of science libraries containing a vast repository of environmental data dating back more than a century has researchers worried that valuable books and reference materials are being lost in the name of cost-cutting.

Unique in its shore access to three oceans (Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific) and with the largest number of [freshwater lakes](#) in the world, Canada over the years has amassed a huge cache of books and scientific reports on fisheries, meteorology and wildlife—on everything from beluga whales to songbirds.

Until recently they had been stored at seven Fisheries and Oceans and 12 Environment Canada libraries and reading rooms across the country.

But the [federal government](#) last year ordered most of them closed and fired dozens of librarians as they began consolidating the materials at three locations—in Sydney, British Columbia and in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia (both Fisheries libraries), as well as at Environment Canada's National Hydrology Research Centre in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where a single librarian with the help of a couple of students have reportedly been tasked with sorting through and cataloguing hundreds of boxes of materials transferred there, to date.

The closure of a [government](#) library at the Freshwater Institute in Winnipeg, Manitoba in particular was mourned by many marine scientists because it held unique data on freshwater lakes dating back to

1880.

More worrying, according to researchers, is that excess and outdated materials have ended up in dumpsters, which local media reports likened to book burning.

"This is a national tragedy," said Peter Wells, a professor at Dalhousie University and senior research fellow at the International Ocean Institute, both in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The government however says the impact of the closures has been exaggerated, and that the libraries were frequented by a mere dozen people (other than government staff) annually, and that it also plans to digitize much of the books to allow a larger audience to access them online, more cheaply.

"It is absolutely false to insinuate that any books were burnt," Fisheries Minister Gail Shea said in a statement.

Shea explained that the department's collections of information on fisheries, aquatic sciences and nautical sciences—which it claims are "one of the world's most comprehensive"—will be preserved and new materials will continue to be added.

Only duplicate books have been discarded after being rejected by other libraries, staff and the general public, Shea said.

The minister's reassurances however have done little to quell the controversy with scepticism running high, after several other controversial policies enacted by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government in recent years—including withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol and gagging government scientists—raised the ire of scientists. Researchers have called the measures attacks on science itself,

and efforts aimed at silencing critics of the government's agenda, which is focused on jobs and the economy, with environmental stewardship arguably playing second fiddle.

This now widespread view—rightly or wrongly—that Harper has an anti-science bias even provoked a march on Parliament by scientists in laboratory coats, waving anti-Harper placards, in 2012, accusing the government of a lack of evidence-based decision-making.

"This government doesn't like scientific information (being out there) on environmental issues," Wells summed up.

The federal government has taken an "ideological decision" on the libraries, accused Jeff Hutchings, another maritime researcher at Dalhousie University and past chair of a Royal Society of Canada panel on marine biodiversity.

"It's symbolic in a bad way," he said.

Hutchings told AFP he worries especially about the loss of marine data that stretches back before climate change and modern commercial fishing.

As well, he dismissed Shea's suggestion that the books and research would become more widely available online, as only works specifically requested have been scanned and digitized, according to him.

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