

Afghanistan's First Electronic Library

By Carla Long Casler



Sherief Fayez (far left), Minister of Higher Education at Kabul University cuts ribbon to open the Agriculture Electronic Library, assisted by Atifa Rawan (far right).

On June 26, 2004, war-ravaged Afghanistan opened its first electronic library. The Agriculture Electronic Library (AEL) in the College of Agriculture at Kabul University started with a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by officials of Kabul University, the Ministry of Higher Education, the U.S. Embassy, and the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA).

This happy day was the result of a collaborative effort between The University of Arizona Library's federal depository librarian Atifa Rawan and the UA Arid Lands Information Center's director Barbara Hutchinson and assistant director Carla Long Casler. Support was provided through the International Arid Lands Consortium's Sustainable Development of Drylands in Asia & the Middle East Project, directed by Robert Freitas.

The desperate condition of Afghanistan's agriculture is described in several reports prepared by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) which document specific needs for vocational and university level agricultural programs.

www.icarda.org/Afghanistan/index.html

About 80 percent of the country's population had been engaged in agriculture in the past, but the drastic decline in productivity during the 1990s has led to widespread

malnourishment and even starvation. The Sustainable Development of Drylands Project is working to ease this crisis, developing both short-term training programs to fill knowledge gaps and agricultural education curriculum for higher education.

In planning to create an agricultural library for Kabul University, it was clear that simply adding to an existing collection would not be possible, given the lack of trained staff to catalog, process, and maintain collections of books and journals. To provide a broad range of information quickly, the decision was made to go electronic. Electronic sources also have such advantages as compact storage and ease of use, once computers and software are installed. Since phone lines are not currently dependable and Internet connections are rare in Afghanistan, CD-ROM products were chosen as the most useful for this situation. The following CD-ROM products were selected:

- *The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library (TEEAL)*, which includes full-text articles from 140 major agricultural journals, compiled specifically for institutions in developing countries by Cornell University's Mann Library with support of the Rockefeller Foundation
www.teeal.org/

IALC

The International Arid Lands Consortium (IALC), an independent, nonprofit organization formed in 1989, promotes cooperative arid and semiarid lands research and the dissemination of knowledge necessary to apply that research in the United States and abroad. The IALC funds research, educational and training initiatives, demonstration projects, workshops, and other technology-transfer activities related to the management, restoration, and reclamation of arid and semiarid lands.

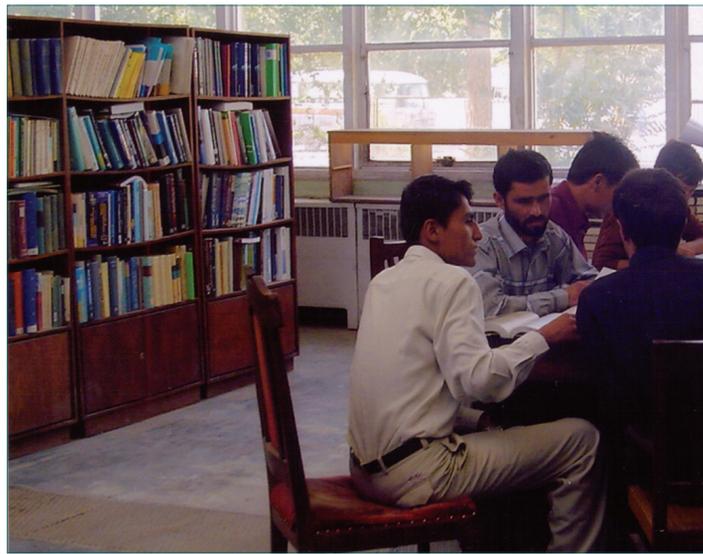
ialcworld.org/

The Sustainable Development of Drylands in Asia & the Middle East Project is funded under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the International Arid Lands Consortium (IALC). This project supports the sustainable development, management, and restoration of arid and semiarid lands in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Jordan, India, and Yemen.

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Libraries in Afghanistan

After Atifa Rawan, a librarian at The University of Arizona Library, returned from a 2002 trip funded by the Asia Foundation to assess Afghanistan's libraries, she told the press, "There are books with bullet holes. Books were burned. Books are full of dust. ... Most (libraries) lost their experienced personnel. ... I wouldn't even call them libraries anymore." (*Arizona Republic*, May 7, 2002). Since that time and with additional support from the Asia Foundation, The University of Arizona, Canadian medical schools, and the Library of Congress, that picture has changed considerably and Kabul University and Kabul Medical University are developing clean, functioning libraries, under Rawan's guidance.



Atifa Rawan

Students studying in the library before renovations.

- *CAB International's Compendia* on crop protection, animal health, and forestry
www.cabi.org/compendia.asp

One web resource, free to non-profit institutions in eligible developing countries, also was selected: *Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA)* www.aginternetwork.org/en/. This resource provides full-text access to more than 500 journals from major scientific publishers in the fields of food, agriculture, environmental science, and related social sciences.

Publishers were alerted to the extreme importance that the products be delivered to Kabul University before Rawan's arrival on June 16, 2004. Upon arrival, Rawan first met with Sherief Fayez, minister of higher education; Akbar Popal, president of Kabul University; Mohammad Yasin Mohsini, dean of the faculty of agriculture; and Nasrat Wassimi, executive manager for ICARDA in Kabul, coordinating the Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan (FHCRAA). They were aware of the purpose of her trip as she had contacted them previously to determine the best delivery address for TEEAL. They agreed to provide staff and other assistance to help her with shopping and coordinating all the activities necessary to prepare for opening the Agriculture Electronic Library.

The existing library in the College of Agriculture was small, dark, and housed 10 dilapidated bookcases, which held few current textbooks and a number of outdated, dusty books and journals. The facility also had three large tables, but many of the chairs were broken. In spite of this, eager students still came to this inadequate facility and were struggling to learn and study with the limited resources at their disposal.

To prepare the room to become the Agriculture Electronic Library, Rawan needed to shop for equipment and supplies. There were no purchase orders in Afghanistan; credit cards and travelers' checks were not accepted at the time. Rawan had to take U.S. dollars and male escorts assigned by the College to help her. Ismail Khan, an administrator in the College, accompanied her on many of her errands. The Asia Foundation also loaned Rawan one of their drivers and a car to provide safe transportation.

With Khan's help, Rawan shopped for computers, bookcases, curtains, carpeting, and painting supplies. They hired a painter and a tailor to make curtains for the windows. The college foreman assigned 20 people, a majority of the college's employees, to empty and clean the room. Staff and students worked overtime, removing books, bookcases, and chairs from the room. Students also sorted the books, using Rawan's guidelines to determine



Paint was purchased and painters hired to renovate the room.



Students volunteered to sort through the old books to identify which to keep and which to discard.

which were useful for the collection and which should be discarded. Then the painters started their work, followed by drape hangers, electricians, and carpet layers.

In the meantime, the Asia Foundation invited Rawan to their offices to select current agriculture books for the College of Agriculture from their recently acquired donations.

By the last day of her two weeks in Kabul, Rawan had the facility renovated and decorated and ready for the ribbon-cutting ceremony to officially open the Agriculture Electronic Library. Fayezy Roy Glover of the US Embassy, deans of Kabul University colleges and other university officials attended this opening and the reception. Fayezy stated in his opening remarks that this was the “first electronic library in Afghanistan” and that “this day, June 25, 2004, will be a great day in the history of higher education in Afghanistan, and will be remembered by many people.”

Before leaving Kabul, Rawan and Mohsini discussed the need to hire a coordinator for the AEL. Khalid Madadi, who was attending an agricultural training course in Pakistan taught by the University of

Illinois, Urbana-Champaign at the time of the opening, was hired for the job. Madadi and Rawan now communicate regularly by email.

Further development of the AEL continued through into 2005 with IALC support. Plans are being developed to seek additional funding to expand the AEL and to create Agriculture Electronic Libraries at other universities in Afghanistan, as well as to devise training programs for information specialists to staff them. These plans will involve collaborating with the USDA National Agricultural Library and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

For her tremendous efforts and bravery, Rawan received the American Library Association’s Elizabeth Futas Catalyst for Change Award for 2005. The award recognizes a librarian who invests time and talent to make positive changes in the profession of librarianship by taking risks to further the cause; helping new librarians grow and achieve; working for change within the American Library Association or other library organization; and inspiring colleagues to excel or make the impossible possible. ❖

Kabul University

Although the first College establishing Kabul University began in 1932, the entire system collapsed by 1994 under Taliban rule, with only a few students left in the department of religious studies, and even this was closed in 1998. Under the Taliban the physical infrastructure for higher education (classrooms, dormitories, libraries, laboratories, and research farms) was attacked and, in many instances, destroyed. Faculty were killed, maimed, or exiled. After this period of devastation, every aspect of the higher education system had to be reconstructed and reconstituted.

In 2002, Kabul University was re-opened to 3,200 students returning to finish their studies in 14 general fields such as agriculture, engineering, and social sciences. There are now 6,684 (5,324 male, 1,360 female) students attending Kabul University and 422 faculty members (358 male and 64 female).

Kabul University’s College of Agriculture was established in 1956 and now has 850 students — 25 of them female — enrolled in a four-year program. The College has 40 teaching faculty (1 female faculty) and 25 staff members. In fall 2004 there were 35 faculty members available at the college and five others enrolled in training abroad.