

Beyond bare bones

The ICSF Website has been continuously evolving to keep pace with the varying collection and dissemination needs of its multilingual constituency

The ICSF Website, first set up in 1996, has been undergoing periodic updates to reflect new content, and, at times, better Web technologies. The first Website, hosted in the UK, had only bare-bones information on ICSF and its programmes. After a couple of revisions, the site was enhanced to include online versions of SAMUDRA Report (in a printer-friendly PDF format) in all three languages (English, Spanish and French), as well as details of all ICSF publications.

Early in its operations, ICSF had realized the importance of a repository of information that could be used by its globally scattered constituency. This could finally be realized in 1998, when ICSF set up its Documentation Centre at Chennai, India. The Centre's primary objectives were collating, organizing and disseminating information of importance to artisanal fisheries. The inputs to the Centre included all possible media: books, journals, newspaper articles, photographs, slides and videos.

While the Centre first attempted to classify and organize around its own schema, it was decided, in 2000, that it would be better to standardize this around UNESCO's documentation package, WinISIS. By early 2001, over 2,000 references were entered into the WinISIS database. By now, it was clear that the Internet would be the most efficient and cost-effective manner to disseminate information gathered at the Centre. The next challenge, therefore, was to integrate the information collated at the Centre into the ICSF Website.

There were several difficulties in this process. The first had to do with the storage format of WinISIS. WinISIS uses a proprietary format, not very conducive for Web-enabling storage of the database.

The only export facility was to the ISO format, which was also not easy for direct use online. The second challenge was to synchronize the Chennai database with the online database, since WinISIS was not a distributed database. The third challenge was handling media elements such as images, slides and videos, as the support for these in WinISIS was minimal.

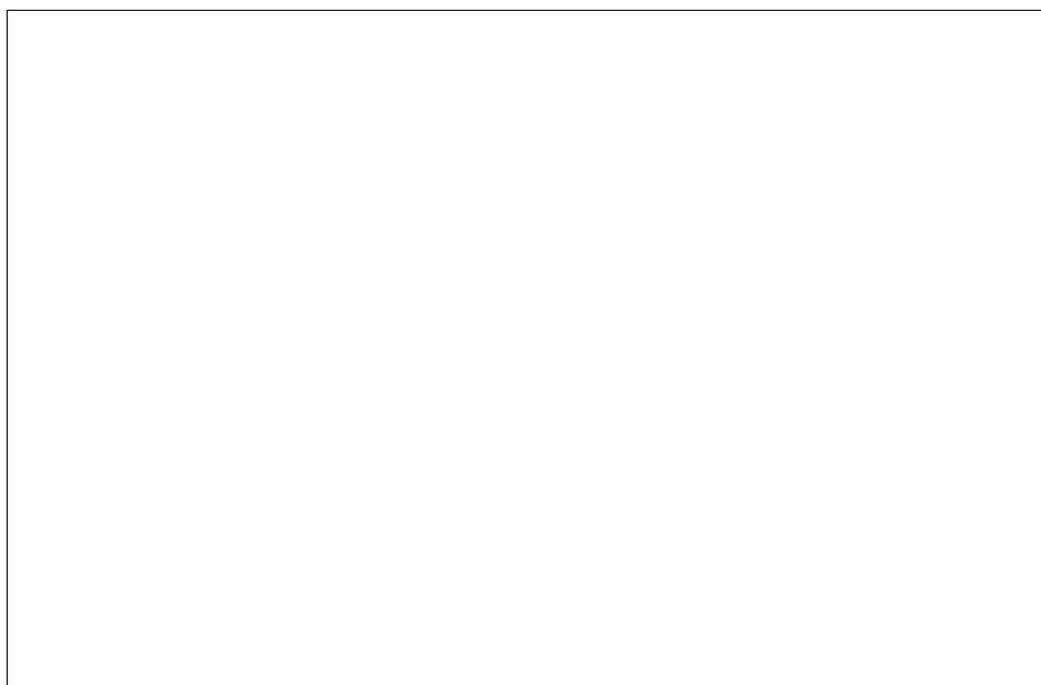
Another interesting challenge came up on account of the geographically distributed style of information collation. Since ICSF wanted to collect field-level information—and much of this was in local languages such as Spanish, French and Portuguese—the collection and dissemination mechanism had to be multilingual and distributed.

Work on the new Website started in January 2001. The first milestone was the porting of the ISO format into MySQL, the Web database used for the site. This was carried out within a month by a team of three people.

Once in the MySQL format, the database was easily searched using a Web-based front-end. Writing the search front-end was the second major milestone. The search had to be flexible enough to yield all matching records, and also had to organize the results in the order of relevance. The search programme was written in Java (using Apache's JavaServer Page technology, Tomcat).

Advanced search

The first beta version of the site was tested at Chennai in March 2001, and some more fine-tuning recommended. The site could do two kinds of searches: a two-tier, keyword-based search, and a keyword-or-author direct search. Each item of the search output would be given a score based on its relevance. Clicking on



the link would take the user to a details page, where more details, including abstracts, where applicable, are displayed.

In addition to the search, the site had other enhancements as well: an alphabetical list of online resources (URLs); an events calendar; news flashes; and a mechanism for ordering publications or documents output by the search process, using the familiar 'shopping cart' model.

All the earlier information at the site, such as ICSF programmes, membership and publications, was incorporated into the new site as well.

The site also incorporates an Admin(istration) interface, protected by passwords, for managing various aspects of the site. The Documentation Centre personnel can directly make changes and update all the dynamic portions of the site through this interface.

In addition, the Admin interface makes it possible to manage the multilingual thesaurus (the master list of keywords) that is simultaneously managed between India, France and Brazil.

The present site runs on the popular Free Software OS, GNU/Linux, and is physically located in the US. The Web server used is Apache, with Tomcat interfacing with the Java classes that run the dynamic portion

of the site. All tools and technologies are Free Software or Open Source.

In order to evolve a uniform methodology for information collation in other languages, ICSF's Documentation Centre organized a five-day workshop at Chennai, from 5 to 9 March 2001.

Participants at the workshop included representatives from Brazil and France, ICSF staff from Chennai and Brussels, an expert in WinISIS, and a member of the team developing the ICSF Website. The satellite Documentation Centre from Brazil (NUPAUB) was represented by Daniela Andrade, and from France (Pêche et Developpement), by Cedric Pincent.

The workshop discussed the overall strategy of ICSF's information gathering and disseminating operations, as well as specific issues relating to the proposed distributed and multilingual methodology.

WinISIS expert

While the French representative was aware of WinISIS and had used it before, the Brazilian representative was new to the programme. Prof. A. Neelameghan, the WinISIS expert and a member of the original UNESCO team that developed WinISIS, explained the different aspects of the programme to the participants. He also explained the existing means of interfacing WinISIS to the Web.

The workshop decided that the documentation centres at India, Brazil and France would develop a common thesaurus, which would be used for the keywording of documents in the respective centres. The system of documentation to be followed would be the CCF format in WinISIS, with the addition of two new fields to the existing database, namely, language and the location of the document. In the case of the Portuguese and Spanish documentation centres, the field stating the theme of the document would also be highlighted (for example, whether the document relates to fisheries or not). There would be a separate database for Spanish and Portuguese documents.

The new Website for ICSF is expected to open up access to the resources of the Documentation Centre to a much wider audience. The next step in the evolution of the ICSF Website would be to incorporate the three languages into the existing site (which is, at present, English-based, although several publications exist in the three languages). This is expected to take about a year. ¶

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