

KNOWLEDGE BASE

A World of Knowledge at Your Fingertips



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You're showing your age if you remember The Stacks. These university library annexes, largely unknown to the general public, were the haunt of us "wildlifera"

as we researched information for term papers, scientific articles, and simply to satisfy our curiosity about wildlife and the natural world. Navigating The Stacks meant combing through drawers and drawers of index cards and relying on the Dewey Decimal System to bring order out of chaos.

Today, the vast wealth of scientific knowledge is literally at our fingertips. Most scientists receive their journals online and use powerful search engines to access scientific information, including the latest findings not yet in print. Even more remarkable are the websites specifically designed to bring that wealth of knowledge to any and all, including hunter-conservationists who wish to stay informed on the status of species and places they care about.

The Encyclopedia of Life (www.eol.org) may well be the most ambitious and important biology endeavor since completion of the Human Genome Project. Launched in 2007, this online database aims to assemble scientific information on all the world's known species, estimated to number 1.8 million. Thus far content for 30,000 species is posted on the site. Another great site for wildlife information is NatureServe Explorer (www.natureserve.org/explorer/). NatureServe is a network that links many biological inventories, known as natural heritage programs or conservation data centers, which operate in all 50 U.S. states, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

A not-for-profit organization, NatureServe's mission is to provide the scientific basis for effective conservation action.

Fairly new on the scene is the Encyclopedia of Earth (www.eoearth.org), an "electronic source for scientific information about the Earth, its natural environments, and their interaction with society." It provides access to a free, fully searchable collection of articles written by scholars, professionals, educators, and experts who strive for clear, non-technical language that will be understood by the general public as well as scientists and professionals. If your conservation interests tend toward places rather than individual species, then you'll want to check out

study of selected ecological journals found that up to 30 percent of internet-based links were inactive, meaning that pathways to the information had been lost or disrupted. On the positive side, these researchers were able to use search engines to locate up to 84 percent of the lost information—a process termed "attrition recovery." What accounts for the loss? The biggest factor, the study concluded, is simply the dynamic nature of the internet.

Another caution is the quality and accuracy of information on the internet. A key question is, who creates and updates the content and how is it managed? In the case of the above websites, content is strictly managed by scientific organizations, the content is developed by experts, and peer-reviewed science is the standard for inclusion on the site. The details vary, but each website includes an explanation of its system of controls for maintaining information accuracy and quality.

What about websites, such as Wikipedia, where anybody can post information or modify the content that someone else has contributed? Such websites can be a convenient source of information, but caution is required on the part of the user. Such sites simply do not have controls in place to ensure the accuracy or validity of the posted information. As well, some websites are specifically geared to influence opinion on certain topics, typically controversial issues. By being highly selective in which articles to post and which to omit, these sites strive to shape opinion rather than to inform with a full and objective coverage of the issue. Here, too, the user needs to proceed with caution and a critical eye.

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LandScape America (www.landscape.org). This collaborative project of NatureServe and the National Geographic Society has a goal to "inspire and inform collaborative place-based conservation in the U.S. by increasing the pace and effectiveness of land-protection investments in every state." This site contains interactive tools that let you zoom in to a place you are interested in, examine aerial photography and satellite imagery of the area, obtain information on physical characteristics and biological resources, and generate a variety of maps.

Is there a downside in this mass migration of information to the internet? There are cautions to consider—for example, the persistence of information. A recent

