

# A monopoly of knowledge

The dissolution of the libraries of  
Fisheries and Oceans Canada

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A WIKIPEDIA PAGE dedicated to “destroyed libraries” provides a condensed historical timeline of about 40 libraries and archives intentionally destroyed by human action.<sup>1</sup> Most of the examples are intimately tied to political unrest, and how such hostile acts often accompany human suffering and atrocities. Then, amidst historical precedents during the First and Second World Wars, and the destruction of libraries during the Balkan and Iraq wars, is an entry that seems, at first, to be an anomaly: the destruction of the libraries of Fisheries and Oceans Canada by the federal government. Its inclusion, however incongruous, captures the essence of the Harper government’s complicity in the systematic obliteration of internationally renowned Canadian scientific and environmental research collections. The eradication of bodies of knowledge, and cultural and historical records, is a strategy of ideological warfare.

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## Under the banner of budget cuts

In the fall of 2013, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) announced the closing of seven of its nine libraries. The initiative was part of a series of library and archive closures throughout various federal departments, instigated by the Harper government in 2012, and presented to the Canadian public under the banner of

**FIGURE 1** Number of items from the library's collection retained for consolidation in another regional library

i	St. Andrews Biological Station, St. Andrews, NB	33,587
ii	Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Centre, St. John's NL	22,721
iii	Pacific Biological Station, Nanaimo, BC	20,506
iv	Pacific Region Headquarters Library, Vancouver, BC	16,730
v	Eric Marshall Aquatic Research Library, Winnipeg, MB	38,699
vi	Maurice Lamontagne Institute Library, Mont-Joli, QC	0*
vii	Mère Juliette Library, Gulf Fisheries Centre, Moncton, NB	25,897

\* As the Maurice Lamontagne Institute Library has not yet closed, no publications have yet been sent to another regional library.  
**Source** Q-110: Order Paper on DFO Library Closures<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 2** Number of items deposited in other federal government collections

St. Andrews Biological Station, St. Andrews, NB	0
Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Centre, St. John's NL	0
Pacific Biological Station, Nanaimo, BC	0
Pacific Region Headquarters Library, Vancouver, BC	0
Eric Marshall Aquatic Research Library, Winnipeg, MB	0
Maurice Lamontagne Institute Library, Mont-Joli, QC	0
Mère Juliette Library, Gulf Fisheries Centre, Moncton, NB	0

**Source** Q-110: Order Paper on DFO Library Closures<sup>12</sup>

budget cuts.<sup>2</sup> In the last two years, two dozen federal departmental libraries and archives across the country have closed.<sup>3</sup>

When the DFO closures were made public, the department guaranteed that its collections would be consolidated at the Institute of Ocean Sciences in Sidney, British Columbia and the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. The Canadian public was assured the most important materials and records would be preserved digitally.<sup>4</sup>

Very little evidence exists to substantiate the government's claims that materials were organized or prepped for digitization. With each DFO library closure came witness accounts of the process: materials were removed chaotically and rapidly, devoid of any formal record-keeping as to where the items were transferred, and

**FIGURE 3** Number of items offered to libraries outside the federal government

Number of items offered	Libraries	Number accepted
St. Andrews Biological Station, St. Andrews, NB 33,504	New Brunswick Museum, University of New Brunswick, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Huntsman Marine Science Centre, New Brunswick Community College, Save Ocean Science, Bay of Fundy Ecosystem Partnership	Unknown
Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Centre, St. John's NL 28,177	Memorial University, Marine Institute, St. John's Public Libraries	0
Pacific Biological Station, Nanaimo, BC 250	Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs	Unknown
Pacific Region Headquarters Library, Vancouver, BC 0	Not Applicable	0
Eric Marshall Aquatic Research Library, Winnipeg, MB 2,820	University of Manitoba	187
Maurice Lamontagne Institute Library, Mont-Joli, QC 194	Ministère Agriculture, Pêcheries et Alimentation du Québec, Université du Québec à Rimouski	34
Mère Juliette Library, Gulf Fisheries Centre, Moncton, NB 19,122	Université de Moncton, Dalhousie University, Crandall University, University of Prince Edward Island, Département des pêches et aquaculture du Nouveau-Brunswick	Unknown

Source Q-110: Order Paper on DFO Library Closures<sup>12</sup>

bystanders reported seeing materials taken from shelves and placed directly into dumpsters.<sup>5</sup>

According to a secret document obtained by *Postmedia News*, the closures and consolidations of DFO holdings will save the federal government a meager \$443,000 a year.<sup>6</sup> The memo reveals that the goal of the closures and consolidations was to cull documents, not preserve or share them digitally.

An order paper released in October of 2013, in response to questions posed by Liberal MP Lawrence MacAulay, raises further questions as to where the 84,067 items offered by DFO libraries to libraries outside of the federal government have been placed (see *Figure 3*).<sup>7</sup> The order paper makes clear that few efforts were taken in tracking the movement of library holdings, and that despite assurances from the federal government none of the items offered by DFO libraries were accepted to Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

Thus, while budget cuts were cited as the rationale behind the closures and consolidations of federal departmental libraries, it is difficult to consent to such reasoning given four omissions.

First, the decision to close some libraries and consolidate others was made without any clear study or assessment of how these changes to federal libraries and archives might impact the communities that rely on the collections (e.g., researchers, scientists). Also lacking was any kind of formalized statement or engagement in public dialogue on how the reduction of knowledge might also impact the Canadian public at large.

Second, formal plans regarding the de-accession of the numerous collections were inconsistent. In certain instances where plans were in place, departments were assured that material of historical value would be transferred to LAC, but it remains unclear what has been relocated. Third, the savings from closing and consolidating libraries and archives are incomparable to the tens of millions of dollars of taxpayer money that went into building and sustaining these institutions and collections.

Fourth and finally, digitizing records will present ensuing problems if the technology to read and access materials is rendered obsolete in the future. The maintenance and care of physical records doesn't pose the same risk to access.

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## Monopolizing knowledge

The closures and consolidations of federal departmental libraries are not the result of isolated bureaucratic decisions made in haste to save money. The Harper government had already cut funding to scientific research, muzzled Canadian scientists and dismantled government bodies and agencies issuing environmental and scientific research and evidence.<sup>8</sup> Since 2006, the federal government has monitored and restricted the flow of scientific information between scientists, and between scientists and the public at large, while curtailing scientific research into climate change, fisheries and anything remotely connected to the Alberta tar sands or resource expansion in the Arctic.

In an editorial in *The New York Times*, Verlyn Klinkenborg compares the silencing of Canadian scientists by the Harper government to American scientists being asked to toe the party line on issues such as climate change and endangered species during the George W. Bush years. For Klinkenborg, however, “nothing came close to what is being done in Canada.”<sup>9</sup> The disassembling of libraries and archives is a continuation of the Harper government's efforts to undermine the value of evidence-based scientific, environmental and technical research in policy decision-making.<sup>10</sup>

The cumulative changes enacted on scientific and environmental modes of knowledge acquisition, production and distribution are a measure of what Can-

adian political economist Harold Innis referred to as a monopoly of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> For Innis, those individuals or groups monopolizing certain kinds of information have the power to define legitimate knowledge and determine reality. In the absence of information and an informed public, reality becomes a measure in upholding the ideologies of those in power. Attacks on knowledge, and on the ability to acquire, produce and distribute knowledge freely, are ultimately assaults on democratic governance.

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## Scientific and cultural amnesia

The dissolution of libraries and archives will have long-term effects on Canadian society, invariably reaching far deeper than the Harper government's immediate monopolization of scientific knowledge. As one scientist observed: "All that intellectual capital is now gone.... It's the destruction of our cultural heritage. It just makes us poorer as a nation."<sup>12</sup> The "stuff" lost in the rapid and chaotic dismantling of scientific and cultural repositories constitutes irreplaceable collections of intellectual capital.

For instance, DFO libraries contained journals, monographs and reports in addition to original research data and records (e.g., grey literature), including documents with rare knowledge dating back to the 1800s.<sup>13</sup> These were internationally renowned libraries and archives that established Canada as a world leader in environmental science and protection.

Environmental scientist Rachel Carson used the library at St. Andrews Biological Station (SABS) in St. Andrews, New Brunswick — Canada's oldest permanent marine research facility — to research her pioneering book, *Silent Spring*.<sup>14</sup> The Eric Marshall Library at the University of Manitoba's Freshwater Institute housed tens of thousands of reports, maps, charts and books, including material dating back to the 1880s. It was recognized as having one of the finest environmental science and freshwater book collections in the world.<sup>15</sup> Both of these libraries are no more.

Given both the intellectual and monetary investments that went into building these libraries and archives, it seems absurd, not to mention suspect, that the federal government would choose to close, cull and scatter these collections. The loss of federal libraries and archives is a loss of memory. Societies simply cannot function properly without the collective memory of their archives.<sup>16</sup>

This notion of the archive as memory is more than a metaphor. The documents and artifacts that constitute an archive extend communication over time and space. Without these linkages, without the capacity to revisit the past in order to make

sense of the present or make assessments for the future, we lose our ability to make critically informed decisions.

According to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, “[e]ffective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”<sup>17</sup> If we are barred access to libraries and archives, if these vestiges of historical and intellectual record are dismantled, then we lose our fundamental right to cultural heritage.

The inclusion of the DFO library closures in a Wikipedia timeline chronicling the destruction of libraries by human action, while seemingly dramatic, is actually quite appropriate. The annihilation of an intellectual and cultural past is a strategy of ideological warfare — an effort to control the future by obliterating our collective understanding of the past.

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## Endnotes

**1** “List of Destroyed Libraries,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 1, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_destroyed\\_libraries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_destroyed_libraries)

**2** “Federal Libraries, Archives Shutting Down,” *CBC News*, May 2, 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/federal-libraries-archives-shutting-down-1.1139085>.

**3** These include collections linked to federal departments such as Canadian Heritage, Citizenship and Immigration, Environment Canada, Foreign Affairs, Human Resources and Skills Development, National Capital Commission, Public Works and Government Services, Transportation Safety Board, and Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. Alongside closures, federal departments have also had their collections consolidated into smaller holdings, including Canada Revenue Agency, Parks Canada, Fisheries and Oceans, Natural Resources, Employment and Social Development Canada, Environment Canada, Health Canada, and Public Service Commission. The Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians compiled a detailed timeline of closures: <http://capalibrarians.org/2014/01/time-line-the-closure-of-canadian-government-libraries-archives-and-research-collections/>

**4** “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*, March 13, 2014, <http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/libraries-bibliotheques/FAQ-eng.htm>.

**5** See, for example: “DFO Provides Christmas Gifts for Scientists,” *Unmuzzledscience.com*, December 24, 2013, <http://unmuzzledscience.wordpress.com/2013/12/24/dfo-provides-christmas-gifts-for-scientists/>; Andrew Nikiforuk, “What’s Driving Chaotic Dismantling of Canada’s Science Libraries?” *The Tyee*, December 12, 2013, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2013/12/23/Canadian-Science-Libraries/>; Mike De Souza, “Harper Government Spends \$23,000 to ‘Cull’ Materials from Seven Libraries,” *Canada.com*, January 20, 2014, <http://o.canada.com/news/politics-and-the-nation/spending-and-cuts/harper-government-spends-23000-to-cull-materials-from-seven-libraries>; Sandro Contenta, “That’s No Way to Treat a Library, Scientists Say,” *Toronto Star*, January 12, 2014, [http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/01/12/thats\\_no\\_way\\_to\\_treat\\_a\\_library\\_scientists\\_say.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/01/12/thats_no_way_to_treat_a_library_scientists_say.html).

**6** See Andrew Nikiforuk, “Secret Memo Casts Doubt on Feds’ Claims for Science Library Closures,” *The Tyee*, December 30, 2013, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2013/12/30/Harper-Library-Closures/>; and Jen Gerson, “Suspensions Over Library Consolidation as Critics Complain Harper Government is Trashing Important

Book,” *National Post*, January 7, 2014, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/01/07/suspicious-over-library-consolidation-as-critics-complain-harper-government-is-trashing-important-books/>.

**7** Q-110: *Order Paper on DFO Library Closures*. See: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/202910721/Q-110-Order-Paper-on-DFO-Library-Closures>.

**8** Robert Chisholm. “Conservatives’ War on Science Hits DFO libraries,” *Robertchisholm.ca*, January 13, 2014, <http://www.robertchisholm.ca/conservatives-war-on-science-hits-dfo-libraries>.

**9** Verlyn Klinkenborg. “Silencing Scientists,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/22/opinion/sunday/silencing-scientists.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/22/opinion/sunday/silencing-scientists.html?_r=2&).

**10** John Dupuis. “The Canadian War on Science: A Long, Unexaggerated, Devastating Chronological Indictment,” *Scienceblogs.com*, May 20, 2013, <http://scienceblogs.com/confessions/2013/05/20/the-canadian-war-on-science-a-long-unexaggerated-devastating-chronological-indictment/>.

**11** Harold Innis. *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951.

**12** Andrew Nikiforuk. “Harper Government Shuts Down ‘World Class’ Collection on Freshwater Science and Protection,” *The Tyee*, December 9, 2013, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2013/12/09/Dismantling-Fishery-Library/>.

**13** Erika Thorkelson. “DFO Library Closures ‘Unworthy of a Democracy,’” *Desmog Canada*, , April 24, 2013, <http://www.desmog.ca/2013/04/23/dfo-library-closures-unworthy-democracy>.

**14** Prior to its library closure, the government spent \$62 million dollars modernizing St. Andrews Biological Station. See: Nikiforuk, Andrew, “Secret Memo Casts Doubt on Feds’ Claims for Science Library Closures,” *The Tyee*, December 30, 2013, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2013/12/30/Harper-Library-Closures/>.

**15** Andrew Nikiforuk. “Harper Government Shuts Down ‘World Class’ Collection on Freshwater Science and Protection. *The Tyee*, December 9, 2013, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2013/12/09/Dismantling-Fishery-Library/>.

**16** UNESCO, *Memory of the World: Lost Memory – Libraries and Archives Destroyed in the Twentieth Century*, 1996. <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm/administ/pdf/LOSTMemo.PDF>.

**17** Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 4.

