An international information exchange

Looking for environmental information and not knowing where to start? A good starting point may be Infoterra, a world-wide network set up by the United Nations to help organizations and individuals locate sources of technical, scientific, and decision-making information on the environment. In response to a query, the Infoterra system will provide the inquirer with a list of names and addresses of sources that can supply relevant information.

In Australia, the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs and Environment is the contact point. The Department's 'National Focal Point' office has on file more than 500 Australian sources, mostly government organizations and tertiary institutions, and a small number of private organizations. Some 30 CSIRO Divisions figure in this list.

Data on each information source are stored on computer files to allow rapid searching and retrieval. The files are currently mounted on the CSIRONET computer system.

A copy of all the Australian sources is sent regularly to headquarters of the United Nations

Infoterra's subject listing

atmosphere and climate
chemical and biological
  agents and processes
disasters
education, training, and
  information
energy resources
food and agriculture
fresh water
geographic references
human health and
  well-being
human settlements and
  habitats
land use and misuse
management and planning

monitoring and assessment
non-renewable resources
oceans, seas, and
  estuaries
physical energy phenomena
pollution
population
recreation
renewable resources
socio-economic aspects
subject disciplines
technology and industry
transportation
wastes
wildlife — animal and
  plant

Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi, Kenya, where it subsequently appears in an International Directory, which consists of about 9200 sources (covering 116 countries) on magnetic tape.

The subject coverage of Infoterra is very broad and takes in just about all topics that could be considered as environmental. The categories included are listed in the table.

Within each category a number of subdivisions further define the area of relevance. For example, within the category of 'atmosphere and climate' can be found the subdivisions air pollution, atmospheric models, ozone, transpiration and evaporation, weather forecasting, and so on. Altogether about 1000 headings are used to categorize Infoterra's listings.

These are coded, and are used to pick out the relevant sources when answering requests. No charge is made for this unique referral service.

One of the advantages of Infoterra is that it can provide access to information that has not been published and research that is still in progress. Many government departments produce research reports that are not generally available, and often are not written in English. Infoterra can make this information accessible by referring the inquirer to the register of international sources.

It so happens that many Infoterra sources are also users of data, so the system allows a linking up of sources with like interests.

Infoterra has expanded considerably since it began operating in 1977. In the system's early days it handled, world-wide, about 15 queries a month; today the figure is close to 500. It was created by UNEP as the International Referral System for Sources of Environmental Information following the United Nations conference on the human environment held in Stockholm in 1972. It operates as the information exchange component of Earthwatch, UNEP's program for the critical assessment of the global environment.

If you want to use the system, the address is: Australian National Focal Point, Infoterra, Environment Studies Branch, Department of Home Affairs and Environment, P.O. Box 1252, Canberra City, A.C.T. 2601.
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