



From Caterpillar to Butterfly: The IFLA Caterpillar Project

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The Beginning

At the time of the IFLA World Library Conference in Berlin 2003 I was acting chair of the Mobile Libraries Section when we received proposals to help with an idea for supplying books to rural African communities.

There were about four different ideas but the universal favourite was dubbed the "Caterpillar Project" as it envisaged using a folding box shelf system to transport books to isolated communities.

The term "Caterpillar Project" was coined from an existing project in Kenya. Sam Culphe and June Baatjes worked together on the project, which was tested in the North (Kenya) and South (rural South Africa) areas of Africa.

As a result, a small sub-group was formed for the project and a bid made for IFLA funding to do a pilot scheme. The project group consisted of myself from the UK, Ruth Ornholt from Norway and June Baatjes from South Africa.

Funding

Designs were drawn up, and sponsorship was sought from Caterpillar tractors. Unfortunately, they chose not to take up the opportunity.

Undeterred the group did a short training programme on mobile libraries for Irish librarians in both Dublin and Belfast. We raised about USD1000 towards the project, some of which was used to

assist with expenses for June to travel to Ireland. In Ireland after each session, June gave the delegates a summary of our project. She presented the case, with passion and was unexpectedly rewarded with the donation of books to go with the finished product. This was from one of the delegates who had connections with a Catholic charity.

I had accurate drawings drawn up and at the IFLA Conference in Buenos Aires in 2004 these were shown to the group and June Baatjes gave a personal presentation on progress in South Africa.

June took up the project from design stage to implementation by using local craftsmen in South Africa to build the caterpillars and then demonstrated them to various organizations in South Africa. In Oslo at the 2005 conference the IFLA Public Libraries section decided to back the project with a further funding application which was approved by the Professional Committee in December of that year.

The design

The Caterpillar Book Box is a folding case, which is 1.8m high on castors for ease of movement, and the shelves accommodate approximately 100 books fuelled by a crate depot of approximately 500 books to replenish the stock in circulation. The first box has been used by an Adult Basic Education group who are using it at night, and a very small school group in the daytime.

The Pilot Scheme

The pilot scheme is located in Koekenaap, which is a very poor farming area where 60% of the adults are illiterate and only 30% of nine year olds can read. They are too poor to travel the 20 miles to the nearest library. The adults are nomadic as they earn a living during the grape season, which lasts only three months a year before they move in search of other work.

The Caterpillar Book Box is the only access that this community has to books. The children have been very excited by the existence of the first Caterpillar Book Box, which bears the IFLA logo.

It is the aim of the Public Library Section to seed fund a further 20 Caterpillar Book Boxes to be placed in rural communities in Kenya, Swaziland and Malawi and they should contain not only books but health information on HIV and AIDS. The work can be done by local carpenters who will make the boxes to the specification supplied and the local communities selected with the assistance of Librarians

and Information workers in the countries selected.

Update

June Baatjes who is unable to be present in Durban has given me an up date on progress with the project in South Africa

'I have been working for the Minister of Education in the Western Cape since June. He was very impressed with the Caterpillar Project. He wanted one in every class and I said lets start small. The Caterpillar has undergone a metamorphosis. I have developed the BABY CAT as I call it. Twenty of these very practical Caterpillars were launched in February and given to pre-schools attached to primary schools.

The one I developed according to our original design is at TONKO BOSMAN in the Stellenbosch Wine farming district.

I was given sufficient money for 20 BABY CATS and I wish to give 23 of the new streamlined version, which has a white interactive board as well, to the Adult Basic Education And Training Centres (ABET) where adult learners, especially farm workers learn to become literate.'

Finally

The Public Libraries Section of IFLA would now like to take the good work done by June Baatjes in South Africa and replicate it in other African countries and I would ask interested people to contact me, or fellow Public Library group committee members if you are interested in applying for funds to do this in 2007.

The project is now at the stage of changing from caterpillar to butterfly so that this simple but effective idea will be taken to other countries with remote and disadvantaged rural communities.

Ian Stringer, Information Officer, IFLA Public Libraries Section.