

REPORT OF A SUBJECTIVE REVIEW OF WEB SITES OF SCOR-SPONSORED AND AFFILIATED PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES OF MAJOR PARTNERS FOR THE “OCEAN SUMMIT” MEETING.

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As part of its grant for the project summit meeting, the Sloan Foundation included a small amount of funds for a review of project Web sites. The sites reviewed are those given on the SCOR web site at <http://www.jhu.edu/scor/ProjCoord-front.htm>.

The idea of this review was not to rank Web sites in comparison with each other - i.e., this is not a contest - but to identify general problems and areas where Web sites could be strengthened to improve their usefulness to a targeted scientific audience and to the ocean science community as a whole. If I cite specific examples for praise or criticism, this is meant to be helpful. I did not take into account the staff and resources available to each program to support Web site development and maintenance. It was obvious to me that some programs had funds and specialized staff to dedicate to Web site development and maintenance, although others do the best they can without jeopardizing the funds they need to support their science activities. Both approaches have merit.

A general criticism is that many of the Web sites do not fit on a standard 800 by 600 pixel screen, so that a user is constantly forced to scroll from side to side to find things. This is especially bad on the IMAGES Web site, which is divided into frames with more than one vertical scroll bar needed to find things. I think this problem arises because Web sites tend to be designed by people who use larger than standard computer screens than most of us. Our departmental computer specialist says this is just bad practice and it frustrates users of poorly designed Web sites.

Another general criticism is that few programs are using their Web sites to promote real science highlights. CoML does this extraordinarily well, right on their home page (by “home page”, I mean the main, or front, page of a Web site). GLOBEC does it well too, but their science highlights are buried until a heading called “Products”. For some Web sites, perhaps new science highlights are not appropriate (e.g., the observing systems). It may be too soon to expect other programs (e.g., GEOTRACES) to be producing science highlights. In summary, few programs are communicating real excitement about what they are doing!

Another personal pet peeve is the use of large, slow to load pdf files to show very basic information. For example, looking for a simple explanation of LOICZ, the ideal route would seem to be to click on “LOICZ in Brief”. After some delay a pdf file of the awkwardly shaped (for a Web site), 2 page LOICZ brochure appears - with the back page first and the looked-for brief explanation hidden until you realize that you need to go to page 1!

A final general comment is that major topic headings can be misleading. To cite one example - there is a very good explanation of the history, rationale and objectives of InterRidge on their Web site, but I only found it by accident, under the link entitled “Organisation”. I would usually look at the organizational link if I wanted information on the structure of the program, membership of the SSC, etc. The InterRidge background information would be better placed

under a link called “About InterRidge”. I had many experiences of finding things in unexpected or inappropriate locations, only because I was taking the time to look at Web sites very carefully. A busy scientist might become frustrated and give up, when a more effectively designed Web site could grab his/her interest and provide the general information most people are looking for on their first visit to a Web site.

Another example of this is the LOICZ Data Policy statement. For all programs I looked for a clearly stated policy on data issues. I found it for LOICZ, quite by accident, under a link entitled “How to get involved”. My reasonable expectation was that I would find it under the section on Data. For SOLAS, I found an out-of-date section on data management by clicking on a link in their organizational chart.

During this review I have concluded that all sites should have the following basic headings on their home pages:

- About xxxx - for general background information about the program - the program should be described in brief without requiring a reader to download an entire Science Plan to find out what it's about
- Organization - for structural and administrative information
- Science - recent research highlights (excitement!) and more detail on the scientific program - here it would be appropriate to link to sections of a detailed Science Plan.
- Data - separate from the Science section. Should include a clear statement on data management policy, clear information as to how to get data from the program, information on cruises, metadata, contacts, etc.
- Contact information - IPO, not the SSC members
- Calendar - for lists of meetings and other events
- News
- Publications (or Products) - can include presentation materials, newsletters, reports

The GLOBEC Web site is a good example of one that has used this format well. So has CLIVAR and others to a greater or lesser extent.

Ideally, all program Web sites should include presentation materials (providing appropriate permissions have been obtained), as well as a section that interprets the program's findings for the non-scientist - the “public outreach” aspect. Some programs have done a good job of providing educational materials.

We will be sending very brief comments specific to each Web site to the projects; I would be pleased to expand them and send them to you individually if you think this would be helpful. In reading these reviews, please recall that some programs rely completely on the willingness of a volunteer scientist to create and maintain a Web site at no cost, while others have staff and funding for this purpose.