

Consult the Cat

by Shannon Roy, Continuing Education Coordinator

Project Wombat is a free e-mail discussion list for difficult reference questions. It is the heir to the Stumpers list once hosted by Dominican University.



The Cat, like all cats, is very curious. She is fond of obscure facts and on silly-kitten days will even describe herself as a connoisseur of useless knowledge. Still, she probably subscribed to Project Wombat partly because of the name, which has a more satisfying sound than Stumpers. The project manager obviously anticipated that some people would not like the name and quite rightly told them to stuff it, since he was doing the work.



***Cute, Fuzzy Marsupial
Native to Australia***

One of the nice things about Wombat is that there are three ways to subscribe: The Classic List is not directly moderated and a reasonable amount of jokes and discussion are considered part of the list culture. The Filtered List stays on topic and tries to prevent duplicate answers for the sake of busy subscribers. Project Wombat Open is for off-the-wall subscribers and anything goes, as long as it's civilized.

The Cat subscribed to Wombat Classic and finds it fairly feasible. There is not a tremendous volume. The

traffic is much less than Publib, which frequently has the Cat hissing and spitting and tangled in yard-long threads. And Wombat will throw up something interesting, entertaining or funny often enough to make it worth a little extra abuse of the delete key. The Cat often skims PW messages after the end of the workday, rather in the spirit of a child opening a grab bag.

All the Project Wombat lists are easy to subscribe to and one can send a message with the address list@project-wombat.org.

Many Wombat questions do fall into categories:

- source of quotations
- source of popular expressions
- forgotten books and stories
- hard to find music
- information on people who are not famous
- information on emblems, symbols or heraldry
- questions about history
- identification of historic objects
- information on current or historical agencies
- information on science
- information on medical conditions

Some of the more interesting questions that the Cat remembers include:

- how to find mosquito densities in different locations
- how DNA could show both male and female material in one person
- research on the effect of crying babies on parents' blood pressure
- where there was a siege when the women walked out carrying their husbands and were allowed to pass because they had been promised whatever they could carry
- when the word "gay" was first defined in a mainstream dictionary as a homosexual reference.

And of course, the Cat remembers well the one answer that she could offer: *Operation Chaos* by Poul Anderson.

After months of lurking, the Cat became curious as to how useful Project Wombat was to real-life reference librarians and sent a query to KANLIB-L. There were a few enthusiastic responses, but the most common were: "I like to watch it," "I sometimes post an answer" and "I occasionally post a question." One librarian said, "You may not use it often, but there are times when you really need it."

The Cat is impressed with Project Wombat as a good example of the Long Tail. The niche market is all the people who need information that is hard to find. The distributor uses lots of people who happen to have the answer or who are very good at finding information. And the information is free. The Cat

herself has been frequently entertained through a very dark, very cold winter, and places a feline value on that. And the entertainment is free. The people who created Wombat and continue to maintain it certainly deserve a purr from the

Cat.