1 INTRODUCTION

Many organisations are beginning to realise that knowledge is one of their greatest assets. They are also discovering that the costs of maintaining this asset, and exploiting the opportunities it creates, are significant. Given these costs, which may be significant, organisations are looking to gain maximum value from their data holdings. Increasingly, they are using data for multiple purposes and are recognising the need to develop documentation and ensure compliance with established standards. They are also beginning to understand the benefits of sharing data and collaborating with others within information networks (see Volume 4).

The development of policy-relevant information on environmental concerns often requires access to a wide variety of data sources, from numerous organisations and disciplines (see Volume 3). If the process of information production is to be efficient and cost-effective, such sources need to be readily accessible, as should the people and tools necessary to convert them into information for decision-making.

Preferred sources of data are those organisations (occasionally individuals) which are in the **best position to ensure the quality and accessibility of their datasets**, and to advise on appropriate uses. These are referred to as **custodians**.[1] If custodianship is not assigned and managed carefully, then users may face a bewildering set of incomplete and incompatible datasets, with inadequate documentation and poorly defined and inconsistent access procedures. As a result, they may find it virtually impossible, within the limited time available, to integrate data into information that will usefully support decision-making.

Custodianship is the means by which responsibility for the management of a dataset (or part thereof) is assigned to and accepted by the most appropriate organisation. Its principal aims are as follows:

- To minimise duplication of effort.
- To ensure that data are available for use (i.e. they exist and are accessible).

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1 Although most references in this handbook concern the custodianship of data, the term applies also to *tools*, *applications* and other *technologies* which transform data into information, or communicate that information to users (see Janzen, 1993).

- To ensure that data are quality-assured (i.e. they are valid, maintained, documented and secure).

Custodianship provides a mechanism to ensure that important datasets exist, are maintained and are accessible to legitimate users. It **ensures accountability for and reliability of datasets** within a specific jurisdiction (e.g. a sector, discipline or theme), thus ensuring that information products used by governments and other decision-makers are accurate, complete, identifiable and auditable. In summary, custodianship is the core of an efficient, responsive information infrastructure, capable of serving the interests of individual organisations or networks.