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Geocaching: Hide and Seek at your Library

by *Ruth Funabiki*

A raincoated figure silently approaches the public library at 83352 on a cold and foggy Wednesday night. The handheld GPS reads N 42° 56.160 W 114° 24.514. Almost there. “Nyy fgnsb fubhyq or njner bs guvf pnpur Yvoen! Ubhef” might be the key to the last few steps. Or is it time instead to consult *The Almost Complete Idiot’s Guide to Geocaching?* Idaho’s gifted researcher Roberta Longdon finds a decryption key just in time: “All staff should be aware of this cache.” A decoy, Longdon snorts, as she heads straight for the library catalog.

Once in the stacks, a large volume sits on the shelf. It looks suspiciously like a re-covered Webster’s Dictionary, 2nd edition. Has she come to the right place? Is this the object she has been seeking? Longdon slowly opens the book. In its hollowed-out center are a small black book and numerous small objects. Longdon selects an object and pockets it quickly, replacing it with a similar tiny token. Then she examines the tiny black logbook for familiar names before using a tiny pen to add her own name to the list. She replaces the log, closes it inside the larger book and slips it back into its space on the shelf. Mission accomplished!



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Our Ms. Longdon (with a nod to Dan Brown) has just located the geocache at Shoshone Public Library. Geocaching is increasingly a popular pastime in Idaho, and the Shoshone library’s registered geocache is one of over eight thousand

Idaho caches. Shoshone librarian Pat Hamilton reports that she has sometimes found cachers waiting outside the library doors first thing in the morning. Pat's cache is named "**Get a clue at your library**," and it's one of fourteen caches within five miles of Shoshone.

There are a variety of cache forms, but basically a cache is a hidden container with a logbook and some small "treasures" inside. Although caches are forbidden by statute from some locations such as cemeteries and historical sites, they are located in all sorts of rural and urban areas. Caches are described in a national registry and they are located using GPS technology. In contrast to the recent inaccurate portrayal on Law & Order SVU, geocaching is a safe and pleasant hobby. A more accurate and humorous example of geocaching is found in the **YouTube teaser for an upcoming film called Splinterheads**.

It is easy to get started in geocaching. One begins by registering at: <http://www.geocaching.com/>. Then click on "Hide & Seek a Cache" to search for caches near your library or elsewhere around the world. For a quick overview of hardware & software possibilities, try another YouTube video by Derrick Perrin called, "**Geocaching, Lets Go Caching – 0001**." There's also a **weekly podcast on caching**.



A related activity is called "Letterboxing." In this activity, caches contain rubber stamps, a logbook, and often a stamp pad. Participants, called "Finders," record the letterbox's stamp in their own log book, and add their personal stamp in the letterbox's logbook. The stamps can be garden-variety commercial rubber stamps, but they are often unique, hand-carved stamps. **Letterboxing North America** reports that there are over 20,000 letterboxes hidden in North America, with over 400 in Idaho. The website's "Getting Started" page is extremely helpful, and a book, **The Letterboxer's Companion** by Randy Hall is another aid for beginning letterboxers.

A third GPS-based hobby is called Waymarking. There are approximately 100 waymarks in Idaho or within 100 miles of Idaho, and over two hundred thousand locations have been waymarked worldwide. A good description of waymarking appeared recently in the **Groundspeak Portal** website forums. As **OmegaLimit put it**, "As for 'getting' waymarking, as someone new to the hobby, I tend to think of geocaching as 'Indiana Jones' while waymarking is 'Lewis and Clark.' In geocaching, you want to get the treasure (before everybody else). With waymarking, you want to share what you have found (even though it has been known for years). I have found the latter more appealing."

The central website for waymarking is **Waymarking.com**. A tiny "Let's get started" button is located in the upper right-hand corner of the home page. Waymarking differs from Geocaching and Letterboxing in that participants sort the locations into categories.

Participants in geocaching, letterboxing, and waymarking will (with some exceptions) need GPS capability. Waymarkers will also want to use a digital camera. Handheld GPS devices are available for sale at sporting goods stores, or online. In addition, many cell phones now contain GPS apps.

Library participation in all of these GPS-based activities is a low-cost opportunity to draw in new community members. And, once established, library geocaches, letterboxes and interior feature waymarks require hardly any maintenance.

Will a geocache lead new patrons into your library? Your results may vary, but it seems to be working for Shoshone. Tbbq yhpx!

Ruth Funabiki is Head of Technical Services at the University of Idaho Law Library.

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