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THE GREEN LIBRARY

The challenge of environmental sustainability

DIE GRÜNE BIBLIOTHEK

Ökologische Nachhaltigkeit in der Praxis

Edited on behalf of IFLA by
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a responsible operator!”**

Vallila Library in Helsinki shows the greener way

DE GRUYTER
SAUR

Harri Sahavirta

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Vallila Library in Helsinki shows the greener way¹

Abstract: The discussion around green libraries has been largely limited to the buildings, i.e., to subjects like the energy efficiency of new constructions and basic renovations. However, we cannot rebuild all libraries and we have to operate environmentally in existing buildings and without new resources. Libraries can express their commitment to green values and offer an open and easy access to environmental knowledge. Moreover, offering shared space and new kinds of items to be borrowed are examples of new environmentally sustainable activities. To take a clear stand and to create a visible green image for the library is an important part of environmental work. Sustainability and new, environmentally friendly services are ways to create a good image and thus to market libraries to decision makers and customers.

Zusammenfassung: Die Diskussion über ‚grüne‘ Bibliotheken war bisher weiterhin beschränkt auf die Gebäude, bspw. auf Themen wie die Energieeffizienz bei Neubauten und bei Renovierungen. Allerdings können nicht alle Bibliotheken neu gebaut werden, denn auch in bereits existierenden Gebäuden muss umweltfreundlich und ohne neue Ressourcen gearbeitet werden können. Bibliotheken können ihr Engagement für grüne Werte deutlich machen und einen freien und leichten Zugang zu umweltbezogenem Wissen anbieten. Doch darüber hinaus sind gemeinschaftliche Räume und neuartige Ausleihobjekte gute Beispiele für innovative Umwelt- und Nachhaltigkeitsaktivitäten. Deutlich Stellung zu beziehen und ein sichtbar grünes Image zu entwickeln, ist ein wichtiger Teil der Umweltarbeit einer Bibliothek. Nachhaltigkeit und neue umweltfreundliche Angebote sind ein Weg, ein positives Image zu gestalten und so Bibliotheken gegenüber Entscheidungsträgern und Kunden als ‚Marke‘ zu präsentieren.

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1 Introduction

Vallila Library² is a small public library quite near the city centre of Helsinki, Finland. It has turned out to be an advantage to be a small branch of the huge Helsinki Library as it is easier to experiment and innovate in a small entity. One of our development projects is the “Green Library” project.

Environmental work in Vallila Library began when we decided to apply for the “EcoCompass” label.³ We were awarded the label a couple of years later in the spring of 2011 as the first public sector operator. By then, we had learnt something about environmental management, in general, and drafted our own environmental programme and policies. Moreover, we were trying to reach and define a suitable meaning of the concept “environmental sustainability” for libraries. It had been a surprise for us that we had not come across much debate about the issue. Environmental sustainability in libraries is obvious as such, but no one has systematically spelled out why or how it should be implemented.

The discussion around green libraries has been largely limited to the buildings, i.e., to subjects like the energy efficiency of new constructions and basic renovations. It is important that there are the kinds of projects where solar panels and hyper-technical air-conditioning systems are combined with automatic lighting and automated book storages. We do need new sustainable solutions. However, we cannot rebuild all libraries and make them energy efficient, and we have to find other ways. Libraries have to operate environmentally now and in the future in existing buildings and without new resources. But how do we achieve this?

Another line of thinking about, or delivering, green libraries develops from the “old-fashioned” ideal of saving (money). As a child, I was taught to save electricity and water because they were expensive. At the time recycling old clothes and furniture was also common place – but no one thought about environmental sustainability while doing so. It was realized only later that living in this way is also living in a greener way.

1 This paper is an updated version of the author’s presentation at the 77th IFLA Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, 13–18 Aug 2011, titled “Showing the Green Way: Advocating green values and image in the Vallila Library, Helsinki, Finland.” <http://conference.ifla.org/past/ifla77/109-sahavirta-en.pdf>. Also publ. in *IFLA journal* 38(3): 239–242. www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/publications/ifla-journal/ifla-journal-38-3_2012.pdf. Accessed on 8 January 2013.

2 www.helmet.fi/en-US/Libraries_and_services/Vallila_Library. Accessed on 20 February 2013.

3 For more information, see www.ekokompassi.fi/en/. Accessed on 27 January 2013.

To a great extent, the green actions in Finnish libraries have grown from this basis: saving energy and recycling like one's grandma did. Only a few libraries have created an environmental strategy or policy.⁴

The situation in Finland seems to be the following: libraries are only now learning what “environmental management” means and they cannot afford expensive basic renovations. Environmental work is limited to saving energy and recycling wastes. There is a will to do more.⁵ And some actions have also been taken.

In Helsinki, we have some advantages. The City of Helsinki takes a very positive approach to environmental issues. Helsinki endeavours to be an environmentally friendly city, and municipal offices, like libraries, are expected to develop their own environmental programmes. At Helsinki City Library, we do not have the problem of having to justify the sustainability of sustainable development to the municipal decision makers – decision makers require that our actions are environmentally sustainable. For this reason, at the municipal level there are professional and good practices in place for environmental work, such as an eco-support system and a designated model for an environmental policy. The situation is different in many other municipalities. The library could be the catalyst that makes others to realize how important these issues are. Libraries can make a stand, and need not remain neutral in this respect.⁶

2 Are libraries doing well? Sure, libraries have always been environmentally friendly

In principle, libraries are environmentally friendly, since their basic activities include the lending of collections, information retrieval and provision of an open, shared space. Activities in libraries do not heavily burden the environment. Bringing environmental awareness to libraries does not necessarily imply huge changes. We do not have to implement innovations that would make our work-

⁴ This was shown by the survey for public libraries compiled by *The Sustainable Development in Libraries Project*. See Sonkkanen (2012) and Sahavirta (2012c).

⁵ See Sonkkanen (2012).

⁶ One thinks often that libraries are and should be neutral and offer an open access to knowledge without limiting the range of knowledge. This is true. However, libraries can and should take a stand in certain questions. “An open access to knowledge” already includes the requirement that knowledge should be open to all, also to women and minorities worldwide. In a similar way, one might say that the fact that libraries offer access to foreign cultures (via literature) is making a stand: libraries advocate multicultural understanding and respect for other cultures.

ing methods less detrimental to the environment. This is fine, but it is hard to find real targets for improvement and ideas can easily be met with a rejection or arrogance. One hears sometimes comments like “We no longer need to improve, since we have already been recycling for 150 years”, or “How could our meagre improvements have any impact, when others are far worse in destroying the environment?”⁷

Is it even worth a try? Would it make any difference? These are questions that anyone with an interest in environmental issues will have to answer at some stage. It may be true that the environmental endeavours of one small library do not change anything. It does not stop the climate change nor does it help to save the oceans. However, Gandhi was but one small man and Rosa Parks one woman ... One could just point out here that change has to begin somewhere.

It is also noteworthy that sometimes small deeds have greater effects than one might think. For the carbon footprint it makes a great difference whether a product is imported from the other side of the world – but it may be as important how we, customers, travel to the shop to buy it. Hence, it has a great effect on the carbon footprint of a banana whether we ride a bicycle or a car when we go shopping, although the fruit itself has sailed across the Atlantic. Consequently, one can claim that every little step helps.

3 Recycling, energy efficiency and acquisitions

The easiest way to be green is to recycle, save energy and make acquisitions environmentally friendly. This holds for all, households as well as offices and institutions, and is surely the most familiar meaning of “being green”. *The Sustainable Development in Libraries Project* seems to indicate in its survey that libraries are very well aware of environmental issues in this respect. A lot of this kind of environmental work is carried out in Finnish libraries.

However, recycling, energy efficiency and acquisitions can be problematic for libraries. The general point here is, of course, that people tend to save energy if they have to pay the bill themselves. At work, one does not usually even see the bill, or have any indication of how much one is wasting or saving energy, or paper. In a similar manner, one may choose fair-trade fruits and ecological wine when shopping for the weekend but one does not usually make the same requirements for paper and pencils in the office. Usually it is somebody else’s duty to do that.

⁷ Comments like these pop up frequently. This was seen also in the survey for public libraries compiled by The Sustainable Development in Libraries Project.



Fig. 20.1: Environmental sustainability: natural light, shared space and long-lasting design in Vallila Public Library, Helsinki, Finland. © A. Elomaa.

We are often misled and do not consider the real impacts of our actions. Only a few years ago we used to think that computers would make offices more environmentally sustainable. The amount of paper used, however, has not decreased. I myself have to admit far too often that, instead of a brief email, I have ended up printing three pages of trivial chatting. At the same time, we have realized how

much waste and scrap are generated by computers. The lifespan of technology is short, and equipment gets replaced frequently.

Computers also use up lots of electricity. We did a calculation in Vallila Library and, according to it, the biggest energy savings could be achieved by switching off all computers at night. This was not allowed since software updates are carried out at night. The situation was this: the city required that all libraries save energy and we knew how to do it – but the city IT department forbade the actions. The situation was solved only recently, partly due to environmental considerations. Now all the computers should switch off automatically for the night.

This brings us to our first important observation in Vallila Library: we are dependent on other operators in several respects and have to follow the general guidelines of the city. We cannot make independent decisions. Some simple solutions are excluded from us. It may well be, that sometimes the only thing we can do is to inform other municipal offices or decision makers about our greener aspirations.

This observation was repeated several times during our eco-project. Vallila Library is located in the same property as a day-care nursery and owned by the city, which organizes refuse collection, among other things. With the exception of paper our waste amounts are minimal and it would be easy to introduce some new arrangements. However, when planning any changes, we have to consider the joint needs of the library and the day-care nursery. The situation is more complicated: libraries and day-care nurseries produce different kinds of waste. The same applies to purchases. Purchases are made through suppliers selected by the city and based on existing agreements. The agreements and pricing of the city control our operations; we cannot set many criteria of our own when making acquisition decisions.

Consequently, it may seem that a library is quite powerless. In spite of all this, we should always remember to keep in mind that one of the acquisition criteria should be environmental sustainability. This may mean in practice that one just has to say: we would appreciate it if these purchases were “a little bit greener”. This is not much but if one remains silent – will there be any change?

A survey carried out during *The Sustainable Development in Libraries Project* clearly demonstrated that the same problem occurs nationwide. Libraries operate in a given environment, property or municipality, where things are done in a certain way, and that way is not always the most environmentally friendly one. So what else can we do but shrug our shoulders and wait for someone else to bring about the change? Well, customs never change if no one demands a change. Libraries could begin by asking for environmentally friendly energy or giving preference to products that reduce the impact on nature. The first wish may not open everyone's eyes; you may need to shout out for longer, but sometimes someone will listen.

On the other hand, we should be careful about what is measured when we talk about saving energy in libraries. Indeed, this was our second observation: there is no consensus on what makes a library “green” and what one should measure to show that a library is really environmentally friendly. It seems that no one has thought systematically about what kind of special features environmental sustainability in libraries might have. It is not clear that the same criteria hold for libraries as for households or other offices.

Based on a simple formula, we should reduce the consumption of energy used for activities and heating. This is the basic premise in all environmental programmes. The target is continuous reduction, and it may even seem that that is all that matters. We can, of course, ask whether continuous reduction is even possible year by year and whether it is possible to reduce heating costs in a country that can be gripped by freezing weather for several months. We will reach a “natural limit” at some point, and reduction will no longer be possible or reasonable. Before that, however, it is worth going around the property and finding out where the draughts are coming from.

After we have ensured that the building is energy efficient, we should turn to the activities. Here, the paradoxical claim applies to libraries: more is less. The simplest way to save energy would be to reduce the opening hours, keep the library closed, switch off the lights and take away the computers. Doing this, the consumption in the property would go down. Helsinki City Library has taken another direction. We are trying to keep the library open as long as possible and provide a shared space for reading, working, getting together or just spending time. The green core in this is that we have the lights on so that elsewhere they may be off – or, we have many shared computers so that everyone does not need to buy a computer of his own.

Consequently, one may argue that sharing space and equipment are ecologically friendly activities, although they increase the consumption in the building. And for this reason, we should not measure only the energy efficiency of the building. One could go on and claim that a property where people enjoy spending time is more environmentally friendly than sitting alone at home, everyone in their own living room. The idea of the library as a mutual living room is thus an ecological concept – and there are visionaries who claim that in the future people will live in smaller flats, and small entrepreneurs will not necessarily need their own premises, because the local library will provide a shared space. The green library is a living room and office, a communal working place.⁸

8 In fact, this kind of development can be seen already, for example, in Vallila district. Young families have begun to prefer smaller flats near the city centre and work with their laptops in

The consequence of these developments is that an increase in electricity consumption in the library can reduce the total electricity consumption in the area.⁹ Equally, succeeding in increasing the use of shared space will also increase the amount of waste in the customer areas. This is a challenge for measuring the environmental sustainability of libraries. It is clear that the calculations on the energy consumption and amount of waste cannot offer criteria of environmental sustainability as such. In Vallila Library, we acknowledged this point when measuring our carbon footprint: if we keep the energy consumption at the same level while increasing the use, we can claim to have reduced our carbon footprint.

These examples underline how important it would be to consider such criteria and standards of environmental sustainability applicable to libraries. In fact, one should find criteria and standards which could be applied in libraries and which pay attention to the special features of libraries. At the moment, there are none.

4 First step: showing the greener way

Our environmental work in Vallila Library was in difficulties, or at least, it had turned out to be more challenging than expected. Basic renovations were out of the question and it was not clear how we could claim that we saved energy and recycled efficiently. We had made improvements here but measuring them was difficult. Furthermore, there was the question: is a library truly green, if the building is green and staff recycle waste? What about acting green, or green librarianship? Is a librarian green, if he or she recycles waste like everybody should do?

We concluded that the best way to make our “greenness” visible could be increasing environmental awareness and showing the greener way. “Showing the greener way” means that we demonstrate our commitment to environmental issues to our customers, lead by example and encourage others to follow that lead. At first, we actually thought that our role might be to relay our experiences to other branch libraries in Helsinki. However, the situation changed and a national project, *Sustainable Development in Libraries*, was launched. At the same time, our results turned out also to be internationally interesting.¹⁰

cafés and libraries. In Kohtaamispaikka Lasipalatsi, Helsinki City Library offers also an Urban Office, i.e., room and devices to work.

⁹ However, it may be difficult to measure this in any reasonable, or exact, manner. One cannot ensure that people turn down the heating at home when they come to the library.

¹⁰ I had presented a paper on the issue in IFLA 2011, Puerto Rico, which is now published as Sahavirta (2012a). At the same conference, the green library was represented by a poster. In IFLA

Acquiring the eco-label and counting our carbon footprint were essential parts of this agenda. These efforts explain our values and show that we have done something because of our commitment to green values.¹¹ The advantage of an eco-label and measuring the carbon footprint is that they form very effective tools to inform the public about the issue. One does not need to make a list of the green actions carried out recently; it is enough to show the eco-label.

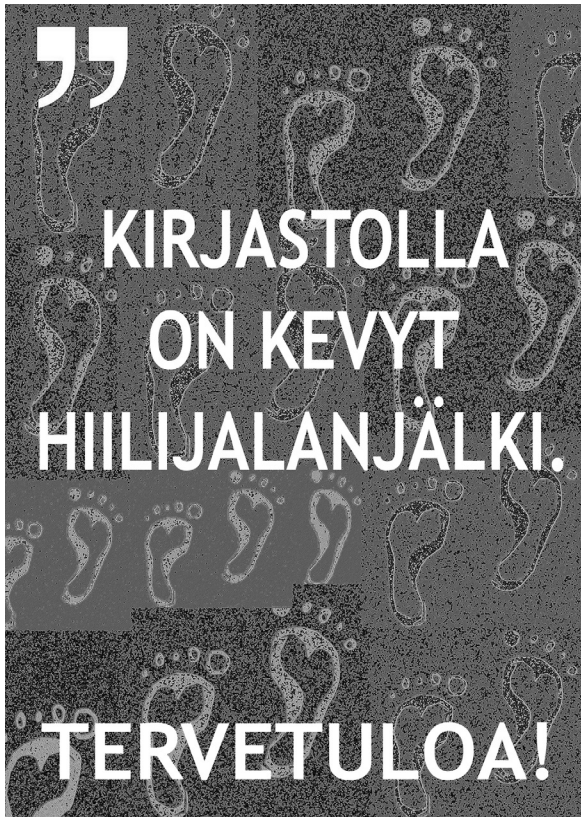


Fig. 20.2: A sign on the door saying “A visit to the library reduces your carbon footprint”.

2012, Helsinki, Leila Sonkkanen had a paper on the national project which was also displayed as a poster.

11 Here are two points: Nowadays every institution defines “our values” but it is often questionable if the institutions act in accordance with them. And even if the institution acts in accordance with its values, how can others recognize that they do? Values are often visible in strategies but invisible in activities.

This is also our response to the tricky question: “What good will it do if I switch off the lights when millions of others do not do the same?” We all know that these small acts will not save the world (until they are brought together) – but if we do not do these small deeds ourselves, we cannot set an encouraging example for others. And if we carry on doing these small deeds, they may spread from the workplace to the home, from the clerk to the customer and from the municipal residents to the decision-makers.

Our first step in the search for the way (which we would like to show others) was that we communicate to our customers our commitment to environmental issues. We have added information about our environmental programme on our website, among other things. Why? Because it is very unlikely that we could influence our customers’ attitudes, if we do not tell them about ours.

And indeed, something has already happened. Our customers’ association, The Friends of Vallila Library, has taken up the challenge and, whenever they arrange an event in the library, environmental sustainability is taken into account: no more paper cups but recycled crockery and only fair-trade coffee. Again, the action may be small, but it makes the values visible. Moreover, in this way it is our customers who help to make the library greener.¹²

However, this was only the first step towards a greener library. In addition, in Vallila Library, we have taken three further steps.

5 Second step: easy access to reliable environmental information

In Vallila Library, we attempt to provide easy access to environmental information. As the volume of information in libraries grows, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to find the relevant information. The classification systems of libraries are not necessarily helpful here; they were devised for an ancient body of knowledge and represent outdated classifications. Traditional classification systems do not recognize eco-knowledge as a class of its own: a book about eco-architecture is classified as a book about architecture. Hence, information about waste recycling, climate change and energy efficient construction is spread over different areas of the collection. This does not answer the present day needs.

¹² In an ideal case, the library does not only inform customers about its green values but customers take part in the work for an environmentally friendlier library. This is often difficult but associations like The Friends of Library are one way to offer customers a way to engage.

Therefore, we gathered environmental literature together and arranged it on its own shelf. Our collection is modest, but the customers have discovered it. The shelf is half-empty all the time. Setting up an eco-collection had also an unexpected consequence: the fact that we have a shelf for environmental information has influenced the choice of material almost by itself. New material is acquired for the eco-shelf, simply because it is there.¹³

Unfortunately, it is difficult to say how popular our eco-collection actually is, as the statistics are based on the subject matter. We can measure how much we lend out material from different classes – like architecture or biology – but measuring the circulation of a selection which is composed of materials from different classes is much more complicated.

Another point concerning the eco-collection is that it is quality that counts, not quantity. When we were coming up with measurable criteria for the eco-label, it was suggested that one criterion should be the amount of environmental material. In other words, the claim was that we should increase the volume of environmental literature. We did not agree, since the easiest way to expand the collection would be not to remove outdated information. It is better for us to have a small but up-to-date collection of environmental literature. A criterion for a green library should be that it offers easy access to reliable environmental information.

It is noteworthy that easy access to environmental information is not enough, if it merely refers to a comprehensive special collection that meets the needs of expert environmental knowledge. A good library collection should have depth and information even to those familiar with the subject but do not need to make the access particularly easy for the enthusiasts; they will dig as deep as they need to find the information they want. The real challenge is to raise interest in customers who have never thought about the environment before. If we could attract new people to realize the importance of environmental awareness, we would have done a true environmental deed.

What can we do to achieve this? Perhaps we should not just provide environmental information rather offer it in a form that is easy to understand and remember. In Vallila Library, we began testing this idea almost by accident. An environmental operator called *ClimateInfo*¹⁴ brought us four little wooden sticks to put on display. The sticks were different sizes and represented the carbon foot-

¹³ It is interesting to note that the classification system may have an impact on librarians' decisions concerning which books are acquired. It is as though librarians think that a book has to fit the collection, or belong to some definite class. The arranging of a special thematic shelf has – possibly – even greater impact. However, this is something I have only realized in practice and I don't know if anyone has carried out any research on it.

¹⁴ www.climateinfo.org/. Accessed 20 February 2013.



Fig. 20.3: Environmental literature arranged it on its own shelf. The collection is modest, but the customers have discovered it. © A. Elomaa.

print of different foodstuffs. The customers' task was to guess which stick represented which foodstuff. Simple, illustrative and fun. Quite a few stopped at the table to wonder. And we realized that if we could first get people to stop and become aware this way, more challenging environmental information could begin to interest them later.

As far as I can see, here is the core of the green library. All the buildings should be energy efficient and everybody should recycle, but it is libraries and librarians who should make reliable environmental information easily accessible. This is the thing we should be able to do better than anyone else. And even more, we should display the information and make it interesting, thereby awakening interest in environmental issues.

One way to do this is to organize environment-themed events. In Vallila Library, we have introduced environmental topics in our discussion events: in spring 2010 it was the climate change, in spring 2011 the role of water as an environmental factor and in spring 2012 we organized an entire series of discussions entitled “How to live sustainably”. Leading experts in the field have been happy to come to the library and share their knowledge.

6 Third step: New ideas

So far I have attempted to illustrate the concept of the “green library” by describing our struggle in Vallila Library. It has turned out that a library is green if the building is energy efficient, some common green procedures are in use and environmental information is acquired and displayed efficiently. Moreover, a library should clearly take a stand: a library needs to have visible green values and a green image.

But the development must not stop here. We will also need new ideas and ways to act. Helsinki City Library has taken up this challenge and is experimenting with several new ideas. Libraries in Helsinki do not just loan traditional library materials, but many libraries also have, for example, electricity meters and sports equipment for loan. Some of these items are owned by other city agencies, some have been acquired by the library. In both cases, the problem is that someone has to pay for the goods and the library has to keep them on a continuing basis, which restricts its operations.

We tested a slightly different way to loan things in Vallila Library. The library cooperates with the *Kuinoma*¹⁵ borrowing service. *Kuinoma* is an NGO people use

¹⁵ www.kuinoma.fi/. [In Finnish.] Accessed on 20 February 2013.

to lend their goods to others. The owner of the item and the borrower agree on the terms of the loan, after which the item is brought to the library for collection by the borrower. The advantage of this operation to the library is that it does not need to acquire the goods it provides. Although, we do need a bunch of motivated people who want to loan their own goods to strangers.

The goal of this activity is to moderate consumption. When you move house and need a drill to fix a couple of shelves, you can check their site and see if someone has a suitable drill for loan. Not everything needs to be bought.

There has been some discussion about the task of public libraries in Finland. Some people would like to see libraries as quiet reading places where only books are on display. The common living room and, especially, the new materials have raised criticism. However, critics may not have realized that these new experiments emphasize the responsible role library has in the society. Offering shared space and new kinds of items to be borrowed follows from the fact that libraries take environmental sustainability seriously – and wish to find new ways to act in a greener way.

Moreover, cooperation with Kuinoma has been a new stage in the environmental work done in libraries. We do not only act in a greener way in accordance with the municipal regulations, but we let our customers take part in building a greener library and, finally, we have opened the door for non-governmental organizations to join the mission.

7 Shout it out loud!

Environmental awareness works very well with the public library agenda. In fact, I would even claim that every library should attempt to offer easy access to reliable information concerning human rights, the rights of minorities, health and medicine – and environmental sustainability, just to mention some subjects. This is a duty for libraries; it's our job. I have never met a librarian who denies this. On the other hand, I have met many librarians who have remained silent – as a librarian it is difficult to take a stand and it seems that librarians have traditionally trusted that their stance does not need to be advertised.

Yes, we are discussing the marketing of libraries. To take a clear stand and to create a visible green image for the library is an important part of the environmental work. And one should bear in mind that new ideas and ideals cannot be disseminated if one remains silent. So, libraries should take a clear stand and shout it out to make an impact. At the same time, one should realize that silence

does not promote the status and survival of libraries in a world which changes quickly.

Libraries should pay attention to their image. If we want to get resources from the city, for example, we must make sure the political decision-makers and the media become aware of our existence and that we support important issues. The same applies to the customers and local residents.

Sustainability and new, environmentally friendly services are ways to create a good image and thus to market libraries to decision-makers and customers. In this way we will be writing a story about responsible libraries amongst other thing and ones that care for our shared future and the state of the environment.

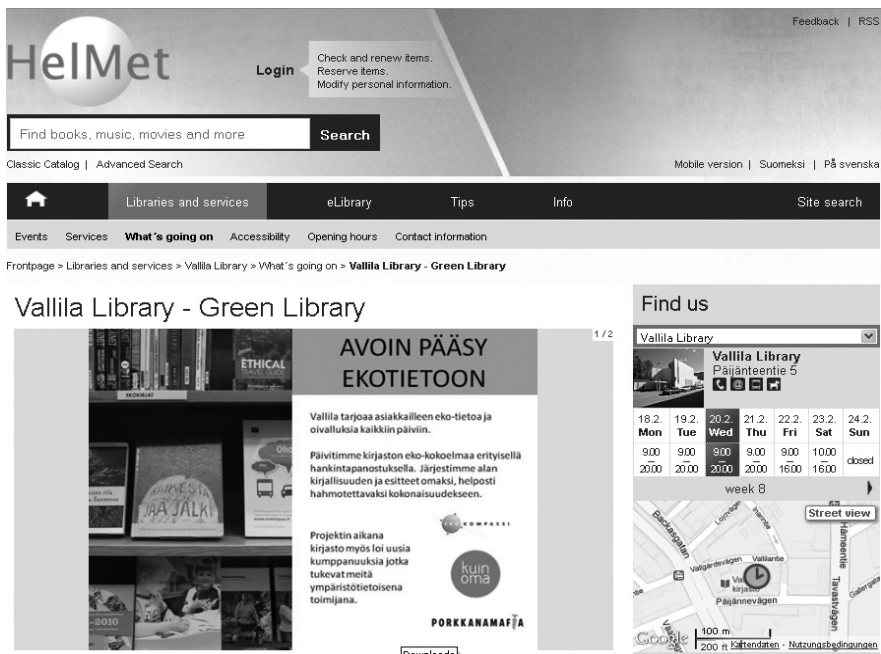


Fig. 20.4: “Shout it out loud!” Vallila Library communicates the commitment to environmental issues to customers (not only) through the website.

Everyone should realize that, in libraries, we work for a better future.¹⁶ However, it seems to be a characteristic of librarians that they remain silent – and hope that others will realize the point themselves.

Thus, libraries are truly green without telling anybody about it. What would happen if we did? Well, we quickly realized in Vallila Library that our customers appreciated our environmental awareness. As one customer said: “I’m proud that my own library is such a responsible operator in these matters”. This was encouraging and made me wonder why libraries are almost the only institution that has failed to notice the significance of environmental sustainability in this respect. While even airlines invite us to fly with their green wings, libraries remain mute. Not all libraries have a sign on their door saying “A visit to the library reduces your carbon footprint”. Why not? Vallila Library has one!

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¹⁶ This does not apply to only environmental work but also, for example, to our efforts on open access to knowledge and education.