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Becoming a More Environmentally Sustainable Law Library: How Law Libraries can Reduce their Carbon Footprint to Help Combat Climate Change

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BECOMING A MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE LAW LIBRARY

How law libraries can reduce their carbon footprint to help combat climate change.

BY TODD MELNICK





Of the many problems currently demanding our attention, arguably the most pressing is climate change. In September 2021, Bill McKibben, one of the nation’s most respected and prolific Cassandras of the environmental catastrophe, called global warming “a time-bound emergency that must be tackled full on, right now.” Recent floods, fires, and violent storms are only the most obvious evidence that climate change is reaching a dangerous threshold.

In a 2018 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world’s pre-eminent organization of climate science experts, determined that a further average global temperature rise above 1.5 degree Celsius would have dire consequences, including, among other things, sea level rise causing flooding of low-lying regions, accelerated extinction of species and a decrease in global biodiversity, extreme weather events, increased likelihood of pandemic disease, drought, changes in ocean chemistry leading to loss of fisheries, crop failure, food scarcity, increased levels of heat-related illness and death, and increased likelihood of political upheaval. (View the report at bit.ly/MA22IPCC.)

The scientific consensus is that global warming over the past 70 years is anthropogenic (i.e., human made), and that the primary cause of anthropogenic climate change is the release of greenhouse gases, primarily carbon dioxide, into the atmosphere because of the burning of fossil fuels. The IPCC has estimated that to keep the average global temperature from rising more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, the world would need to cut carbon emissions by about half by the year 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2050.

How Libraries Can Help

Public librarians have taken the lead in thinking about how to make libraries more environmentally sustainable. Beginning in the 1990s, the Green Library Movement has grown up around the concept of public libraries as community centers of environmental consciousness, both by adopting environmentally sound practices and procedures and by making sources of information and programing that would motivate better stewardship of the planet available. The movement continues to this day generating many articles, books, and blogs. (Learn more at bit.ly/MA22green.) In 2015, the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) adopted a resolution on sustainability in law libraries calling on law librarians to “be proactive in applying sustainable thinking in the areas of their facilities, operations, policy, technology, programming and partnerships.” (Learn more at bit.ly/AALLsustainability.) In 2019, the American Library Association (ALA) adopted sustainability as a professional core value.

While meeting the climate goals that will allow the planet to avoid disaster will be impossible if not vigorously pursued by national governments, individuals and institutions can do their part by significantly decreasing their carbon footprint (i.e., the total amount of greenhouse gases they are responsible for emitting). As a profession, law librarians should be doing whatever they can to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero at their law libraries and/or institutions.

Libraries usually make their largest contributions to environmental sustainability when they are constructed or under extensive renovation. Surely, new construction should strive for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification at the highest level. However, already

existing buildings can do a great deal to decrease their contribution to climate change. For example, the National Indian Law Library and Native American Rights Fund began its sustainability efforts with an energy audit. Armed with the results of the audit, they added building insulation, retrofitted toilets and irrigation systems, installed more energy-efficient lighting, changed purchasing practices, enabled duplex printing to conserve paper, and even purchased carbon offsets for travel to conferences.

Leading the Charge

Below are several suggestions for lowering your library's carbon footprint and other green practices your library should adopt. (See the call-out box for suggestions for further reading and action.)

- Lowering Your Library's Carbon Footprint—The primary contributors to a library's carbon footprint are its electricity use and the transportation patterns of its staff and patrons.
 - » Schedule an energy audit to determine how much electricity your library is using and suggest ways to conserve it. Many local utilities will perform an energy audit free of charge.
 - » Be sure your library is using the highest efficiency lighting available. Timers and motion sensors make sure lights are off when not needed.
 - » Staff should make sure that power management settings on their desktop computers are

activated, or that computers are turned off before leaving at the end of the workday.

- » Be sure filters on heating and cooling systems are cleaned and changed on the recommended schedule. Is insulation maximized? Are windows in good repair?
- » Everything possible should be done to incentivize the use of public transportation by your staff. If public transportation is not reliable in your area, establish carpools. Bike racks and showers should be available to staff. Trains are a better option than airplanes for professional travel whenever possible. Patrons should be encouraged to use public transportation as well. A shuttle bus to a transportation hub is a better investment than a parking lot. We have all become experts at providing library service remotely due to the pandemic. Remote services decrease a library's carbon footprint.

■ Other Green Practices

- » Recycling Paper—Most libraries have recycling bins for paper and plastic, but is the material being recycled? Single-stream recycling bins are convenient for users but result in contamination that leads to a large quantity of otherwise recyclable material being incinerated or sent to landfills. Determine what is happening to your recyclables and consider mutistream bins to ensure

maximum recycling efficiency. Don't just toss weeded books in a dumpster; contact a book recycler.

- » Be sure that e-waste such as old computer hardware, batteries, and other electronics are being recycled or disposed of properly.
- » Install low-flow and automatic faucets and toilets.
- » Ensure that landscaping is optimized for climate. Use native plants and eschew lawns.
- » Buy green office supplies such as post-consumer recycled paper and cleaning supplies that are free of phosphates and petrochemicals.

Moving Forward

Some will say that the foregoing is too little too late, that climate change is here and nothing that one library does will reverse the damage humans have already done to the planet. It is true that large corporations and governments will have to act now to prevent the devastation that climate experts foresee. But law libraries can and should model the kind of environmental consciousness that political leaders are being called to demonstrate at this critical time. Further, we can contribute within our own communities to building the global ethos of environmental responsibility without which our planet is doomed. ■

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ADDITIONAL GREEN RESOURCES

- American Library Association Sustainability Roundtable bit.ly/MA22ALARoundtable
- American Library Association: Sustainability and Libraries: Green Libraries bit.ly/MA22ALAlibguide
- U.S. Green Building Council bit.ly/MA22usgbc



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