

# Sustainability in Libraries: *A Call to Action*



**Sustainability Briefing**  
Council Committee on Sustainability

---

**Spring 2022**

# Working Towards Meaningful Changes

**Climate change is the single greatest threat to global health<sup>1</sup>, a “code red for humanity<sup>2</sup>,” and is this generation’s grandest challenge.**

Increasingly severe weather, food scarcity caused by droughts and lack of biodiversity, intense heat, record-setting wildfires, and sunny-day flooding are all acute indicators that climate change is here and is already a deadly and costly aspect of modern life. As we seek solutions to slow the effects and manage the immediate impacts of climate change, we find the answers entwined with some of the thorniest issues of our time: economics and inequities in society.

Our ability to pull together as neighbors, adapt in the face of what is already happening while lessening the severity of the impacts for future generations will require us to think differently,

to adopt a new mindset, and to consider decisions – large and small – through the lens of sustainability. Libraries of all types are perfectly positioned to help with this work and to lead in this work. We must step up in this moment and find ways to lead by example and inspire those we serve with and for to do the same.

This briefing aims to unpack the concept of sustainability, providing insights and examples for meaningful change that can provide guidance and hope for library leaders, regardless of your role at the library.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.npr.org/2021/09/07/1034670549/climate-change-is-the-greatest-threat-to-public-health-top-medical-journals-warn](https://www.npr.org/2021/09/07/1034670549/climate-change-is-the-greatest-threat-to-public-health-top-medical-journals-warn)

<sup>2</sup> [www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-generals-statement-the-ipcc-working-group-1-report-the-physical-science-basis-of-the-sixth-assessment](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-generals-statement-the-ipcc-working-group-1-report-the-physical-science-basis-of-the-sixth-assessment)



# Sustainability as a Core Value

**We all live on this planet. We all need clean air, clean water, clean food and a safe place to call home. Climate change threatens all basic building blocks of life.**

While it may look a bit different from region-to-region of the world, there is no doubt that few will escape the impacts of climate change. To live in this world and participate as citizens we all must take responsibility for what happens next as not only do our lives depend on it, but our children's lives do as well.

Everyone has a role to play. You may feel overwhelmed, paralyzed even, by the enormity of this issue but doing nothing is not an option. We can all take some small action, it does not have to be monumental, it does not have to match what your neighbor may do, but we do need to act now.

As a profession, we define ourselves by our ethics, our outcomes, and our ability to improve the lives we touch through our work. If we are not working to make the world a better place, what else is there? Will communities continue to support institutions that do not take climate change seriously? To achieve the scale of radical change necessary to mitigate the impacts of climate change we truly must adopt the idea that *every job is a climate job*<sup>3</sup>, we must do what we can from our sphere of influence in our workplace as well as our personal lives.

As an association striving to respond to the needs of its membership, the American Library Association named sustainability as a core value of the profession in recognition of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finding that the immediate consequences of climate change were far more dire than originally predicted<sup>4</sup>. The IPCC was calling for a transformation of the world economy at a speed and scale that has "no documented historic precedent." This coincided with the Fourth

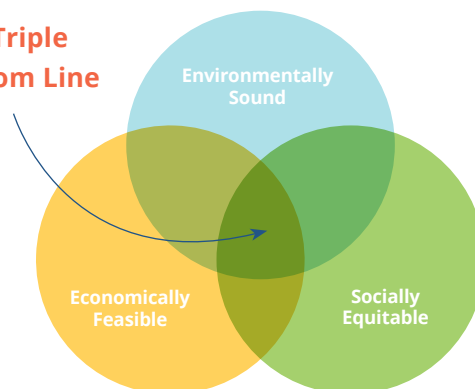
**"To be truly sustainable organizations or communities must embody practices that are environmentally sound *and* economically feasible *and* socially equitable."**

**Resolution for the Adoption  
of Sustainability as a Core Value  
of Librarianship, ALA, 2019**

National Climate Assessment finding that due to lack of action by society, climate change induced damage to the economy, environment and human health had become unavoidable<sup>5</sup>.

This pivotal moment was calling for simultaneous change to both slow the effects of climate change through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions while also building community resilience to adapt in the face of the impacts climate change is already causing. The challenge when talking about these two massive undertakings is that it feels like everything needs to be addressed, all at once. To better mobilize the library community, and to help folks feel less intimidated so they could act in meaningful ways ALA adopted the "triple bottom line" conceptual framework to define what was meant by a core value of "sustainability."

## The Triple Bottom Line



<sup>3</sup> [www.drawdown.org/publications/climate-solutions-at-work](http://www.drawdown.org/publications/climate-solutions-at-work)

<sup>4</sup> [www.ipcc.ch/sr15/](http://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/)

<sup>5</sup> <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>

For many years “sustainability” was equated with “green.” “Green” is associated with environmentalism and therefore we would diligently work on increasing folks’ eco-literacy, “saving the earth,” and focus on cleaning up the natural world. Love of the natural world is certainly a key ingredient of the work, but without a holistic understanding that everything is connected we can find ourselves working in an echo chamber.

The triple bottom line framework of sustainability (TBL) helps us see the intersections of why the United Nations is talking about the dire need for an economic shift away from rampant consumerism and mindless growth; why equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts in society are directly related to climate justice; and why environmental

stewardship cannot be the only focus when mitigating the effects of climate change.

At the heart of TBL is the idea of balance: Balancing the realities of ecological limits with humans’ right to exist in a fair and just world that is economically feasible for all.

Striving for this balance found at the heart of the Venn Diagram shown above can be used when making decisions large and small for your life, your work, your institution’s impact on the community. From what office supplies to purchase, personnel policies, to designing services, programs and partnerships, a library can be a catalyst by modeling good decision making using this framework, inspiring colleagues, community leaders, and our neighbors to make better decisions as well and to work together to combat climate change in targeted and meaningful ways.

## Taking the Lead on Climate Adaptation

**Facing the realities of climate change and acting with purpose is the responsibility of all library stakeholders, in our personal lives and at work. From the inside out, our libraries should reflect a commitment to sustainability as a core value.**

As we first look at our own workplace practices we need to act with authenticity, taking stock of our own policies, procedures and practices and measuring them against the triple bottom line of sustainability. As we turn outward, our work

must be responsive to the aspirations of our neighbors to thrive in an economy and society that values equity, diversity and inclusion while respecting the Earth as an equal stakeholder.

Taking the lead on this topic will require focus and attention in two categories to achieve the collective impact needed:

“Climate adaptation/justice work is equity, diversity, and inclusion work.”

### Climate Mitigation

We must prioritize decarbonization. Decarbonization means evolving away from energy systems that produce carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and other



greenhouse gas emissions. To decarbonize libraries and our communities we must focus on:

- Energy efficient facilities
- Switching to renewable energy sources
- Electric vehicles
- Ethical Carbon Offsets

### Climate Adaptation / Climate Justice

We must strengthen community resilience and the livability of our neighborhoods. Community resilience is the sustained capacity for communities to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity and disruption. The concept is associated with increasing social support networks and social cohesion and minimizing

risks, miscommunication, and trauma<sup>6</sup>. Key to this concept is the ability of community members to work together to achieve positive outcomes – not just for themselves, but for individuals, families, and the community as a whole despite the challenges they may face as a community from a variety of causes.

Climate adaptation/justice work is equity, diversity, and inclusion work. NAACP describes four areas of focus for climate justice work<sup>7</sup>:

- Advance Food Justice
- Advocate for Transportation Equity
- Uphold Civil and Human Rights in Emergency Management
- Facilitate Participatory Democracy.

## In the Field

**Many in our profession are already answering the call to leadership on the topic of sustainability and serve as a model for us all.**

### Public Libraries

From Staten Island (NY) to Chrisney (IN) to San Diego (CA) we find libraries that went the extra mile to decarbonize their facilities, building net-zero energy branches. A Net Zero Energy (NZ) strategy means producing, from renewable resources, as much energy on site as is used over the course of the year<sup>8</sup>.

Libraries across the country are hosting repair events to empower folks to fix items rather than toss them away, keeping items out of the waste stream while learning from their neighbors who are willing to share their expertise. BLDG 61, the makerspace at the Boulder Public Library (CO) was featured in *American Libraries* for hosting the “U-Fix-It Clinic” a perfect program to offer in their free community workshop dedicated to hands-on learning and the cultivation of purposeful experiences through making.

Ten public libraries in New York State have used the Sustainable Libraries Initiative’s



**The Westerville Public Library** was recognized by the ALA Sustainability Round Table’s Wellness in the Workplace Citation for their commitment to pay equity. The library board approved a new pay range scale to ensure that even the lowest pay range in the organization provided a living minimum wage in their county.

Sustainable Library Certification Program to put the triple bottom line into practice to re-think policies, practices, programs, and partnerships. Their stories reflect what it looks like to mobilize an organizational culture shift towards sustainable thinking, a practice that aligns a library’s core values and resources with the local and global community’s right to endure, bounce back from disruption and to thrive. You can read the stories

<sup>6</sup> Sonny S. Patel, M. Brooke Rogers, Richard Amlôt, and G. James Rubin, “What Do We Mean by ‘Community Resilience’? A Systematic Literature Review of How It Is Defined in the Literature,” 2017, [currents.plos.org/disasters/index.html%3Fp=28783.html](http://currents.plos.org/disasters/index.html%3Fp=28783.html)

<sup>7</sup> <https://naacp.org/know-issues/environmental-climate-justice.org/know-issues/environmental-climate-justice>

<sup>8</sup> [www.epa.gov/water-research/net-zero-resources](http://www.epa.gov/water-research/net-zero-resources)

of all ten libraries on the SLI website:  
[www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/](http://www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/)

### School Libraries

The Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District's Go Green Challenge is a district-wide program that encourages sustainable behavior and increases participation in environmental programs. The ultimate goal is to provide measurable actions for classrooms and office spaces to take. Resources are provided to ensure all actions can be taken. Their "Think Green, Act Green: Classroom Lessons and Teach Resources for Sustainability" page is a wealth of inspiration: [www.smmusd.org/Page/5636](http://www.smmusd.org/Page/5636)



**Rowena Verdin**, a librarian at Milby High School in the Houston Independent School District (TX) directs the Peace Club, a student run organization that revitalized a struggling garden in their neighborhood. The students focus on maintaining the garden, recycling, and composting. The garden is now part of Urban Harvest Community Garden Program and a partners site for Visiting Garden Educator Services.

### Academic Libraries

Academic libraries have been creative with sustainability. Colorado College's Charles L. Tutt Library is one example that achieved its sustainability goals when the library was renovated by being carbon neutral and net-zero energy.

The University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library created a "Green Committee" to employ the green initiatives outlined in the library's Green Task Force Report. The Committee established sustainable design elements in their facility such as low-flush toilets, low gas emission furniture, and a rooftop garden.

UC San Diego's Library Sustainability Committee created a list of 50 sustainability actions they introduced to celebrate the Geisel Library building's 50th anniversary. Examples from the list include reusing office supplies, conserving energy by shutting down one of the elevators during the summer, practicing responsible waste disposal, and using reusable book straps for interlibrary loan books.

Additional methods that academic libraries have practiced sustainability include collaborating with campus stakeholders on a sustainability speaker series, hosting a clothing swap, and using reusable supplies for DIY events. These events include collaborating with campus partners, such as student organizations focused on sustainability, faculty members, and campus sustainability offices.

## Leading from the Front: ALA

**ALA leadership, staff, and volunteers are not just talking the talk but walking the walk.**

ALA Council has created a Council Committee on Sustainability to help operationalize the recommendations from the Final Report of the Special Task Force on Sustainability<sup>9</sup> and have passed several resolutions recently including the Resolution to Achieve Carbon Neutrality for ALA Conferences by 2025. The Sustainability Round Table is one of the fastest growing Round Tables in the Association. The ALA staff have formed a Green Team and are

analyzing everything from office operations to carbon offsets for travel. ALA Editions has published an impressive number of books on the topic of sustainability and climate change including the recent book, "Libraries and Sustainability: Programs and Practices for Community Impact," which features the work of a variety of ALA members.

<sup>9</sup> <https://bit.ly/3yljhE4>





# What You Can Do Next

**NOW IS THE TIME!** Whether it be personal professional development to increase your eco-literacy and your understanding of key concepts around sustainability or joining a group of colleagues in your workplace or our association to start strategically addressing climate work – we need all hands on deck.

## Four easy ways to get started

- 1 Join the Sustainability Round Table of the American Library Association. Check out their fabulous Zotero Library filled with resources on sustainability: [www.ala.org/rt/sustainrt](http://www.ala.org/rt/sustainrt)
- 2 Download the free Road Map to Sustainability app from the Sustainable Libraries Initiative (and sign up for their free enewsletter too!) [www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/](http://www.sustainablelibrariesinitiative.org/)
- 3 Check out the growing list of environmental sustainability themed program ideas available at [www.ProgrammingLibrarian.org](http://www.ProgrammingLibrarian.org)
- 4 Borrow or buy some of these great titles from the ALA Editions:
  - Libraries and Sustainability: Programs and Practices for Community Impact
  - The Disaster Planning Handbook for Libraries
  - 25 Projects for Eco Explorers
  - Resilience (Library Futures Series, Book 2)
  - The Sustainable Library's Cookbook
  - Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World
  - Ecology, Economy, Equity: The Path to a Carbon-Neutral Library
  - Exploring Environmental Science with Children and Teens
  - The Greening of America's Libraries: LEEDing the Way
  - Public Libraries and Resilient Cities

## Council Committee on Sustainability

Spring 2022

**Rebekkah Smith Aldrich**  
*Committee Chair &  
Executive Director,  
Mid-Hudson Library System*

**Jensen Adams**  
*Energy and Sustainability Officer  
Kansas City Public Library*

**Matthew Bollerman**  
*CEO  
Hauppauge Public Library*

**Tina Chan**  
*Reference Services Program  
Manager and Humanities Librarian,  
MIT Libraries*

**Sara Dallas**  
*Director  
Southern Adirondack Library System*

**Uta Hussong-Christian**  
*Science Librarian & Associate Professor  
Oregon State University Libraries*

**Elizabeth Philippi**  
*School Program Coordinator  
Texas State Library and Archives  
Commission*

**Jamie Santoro**  
*Senior Acquisitions Editor  
American Library Association*

**Craig Seasholes**  
*Teacher-Librarian (retired)  
Seattle Public Schools*

**Sereen Suleiman**  
*Student  
San Jose State University  
School of Library & Information Science*

**Melanie Welch**  
*Director  
Public Programs Office,  
American Library Association*



225 N Michigan Ave, Suite 1300 Chicago, IL 60601 | [ala.org](http://ala.org)