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Sustainability in Collection Development:
Seeing the Forest and the Trees

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One of the things that makes academic publishing such a pleasure is that we create new ways for people to get information from the world’s experts, and new ways for those experts to reach a wider audience. I myself became an expert on environmental living, and a “green” author with books published in many languages, because as a young mother in London I asked so many questions about my baby’s food, water, air, and future.

Today, I continue to ask questions and have the privilege of working with hundreds of experts on all aspects of environmental sustainability. I’m dazzled by the range of analysis that’s being done. When it comes to sustainability, however, we haven’t come far enough. There’s far more knowledge of specific issues than there was 20 years ago but not much more awareness of the impact of our everyday choices, however, we haven’t come far enough. We see the trees, but still are not seeing the forest.

That expression has a concrete application when it comes to libraries and publishers. The “Building Sustainable Libraries Survey” we ran recently (see preliminary details on p.16) shows much emphasis on reducing paper use but little awareness of the impact of digital technologies. We seem still to be, quite literally, seeing only the trees. I wrote about this issue in Against the Grain last January, as well as in the UKSG Serials journal, and now present a group of articles in this “Sustainability” issue that will help readers see the forest — the bigger picture.

Our focus here is environmental sustainability, which means using resources and interacting with the natural world in ways that will not reduce what is available to future generations. Merilyn Burke, University of South Florida, provides a fine overview of collection development challenges, while Tony Horava, University of Ottawa, digs into how sustainability affects collection management. In “Getting There from Here,” environmental historian Michael Smith, Ithaca College, also looks at travel and professional conferences in terms of social welfare, an aspect of sustainable development.

Maria Jankowska, UCLA, well-known for her work in the library community, contributes an overview on “Practicing Sustainable Environmental Solutions.”

A useful case study of how sustainability issues are being incorporated into many programs and disciplines has been contributed by Roxanne Spencer of Western Kentucky University, and we include a summary of results from the survey that was circulated to all contributors and contacts for Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability, to Berkshire’s library contacts, and via Against the Grain’s e-newsletter. Statistician Justin Miller, a doc...
Karen Christensen is a publisher and writer who specializes in sustainability, social networking, and China. She is the owner and CEO of Berkshire Publishing Group, which she cofounded in 1998. She was senior academic editor of the award-winning Encyclopedia of Community (Sage 2004) and is the author of popular environmental books translated into French, German, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Thai. She began her career in London, working at Blackwell Science and for Faber & Faber and the T.S. Eliot Estate. This range — from science to literature — characterizes her activities today. She is the author of Home Ecology, Eco Living, The Green Home, and The Armchair Environmentalist, about which Lester Brown wrote, “Filled with wisdom...[there is] more environmental advice in this crisp, tightly written volume than in anything I’ve seen to date.” She divides her time between the Berkshires and New York City and is writing a book about the search for community entitled A Smaller Circle (www.asmallercircle.com). Equipment will be designed for remanufacture and to last longer. A three-year life cycle for a piece of equipment that contains toxic heavy metals is not going to be good enough — not to mention the fact that a smart phone is estimated to use the equivalent of 600 gallons of gasoline (this includes its manufacture, use, and disposal — its “life cycle”). And we will have to find better ways to manage our own data. In the old days, a single copy of a document would simply be filed. An important document might merit a carbon copy or two. Today, we let digital copies multiply in part because we feel nervous about ever retrieving anything because there is just so much data around. In spite of the environmental cost of this proliferation, there is a Stanford open-source backup project called LOCKSS: Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe. But when hosting a mere 10MB of data takes a gallon equivalent of gasoline per annum (producing 2-1/2 kilos of carbon dioxide), we should be keeping copies to a minimum. Here’s what my email signature says: “Please consider the environmental impact of printing, forwarding, & storing emails. Going paperless isn’t necessarily green!”

Building Sustainable Libraries Preliminary Survey Results by Justin Miller, M.P.A. (Doctoral Student, Adult, Higher & Community Education, Green Funding Specialist, Council on the Environment; Phone: 765-285-5085) <jmmiller5@bsu.edu>

Over 1/4 (26.9%) of respondents have a sustainability-related degree or research center.

On average, over 1/2 (56.1%) have taken steps to green computer equipment purchasing and services, with the most popular being sharing printers (95.8%), recycling of equipment (87%), and examining cloud computing (71.4%).

As an area for improvement, on average, only 1/4 (23.7%) of institutions chose books based on sustainability criteria, and no institutions report asking suppliers about books sourcing or supply chain.

While over half (56%) of respondents favor electronic resources, fewer (40%) have data on the printing of these resources, and no institutions have inquired on the vendor holding an Environmental Product Declaration.

With the exception of scientific and economics/business journals, the majority of respondents feel that available resources on environmental sustainability are “satisfactory.”

On average, almost 1/3 (30.8%) of respondents have implemented some sustainably positive physical changes, with natural lighting, LCD monitors, computer shut downs, and low-water landscaping being the most popular.

On average, almost 3/4 (72.6%) of respondents have implemented sustainably positive changes in terms of supplies, with paper recycling bins (100%), recycle-content paper supplies (96.2%) and the encouragement to reduce office supplies and paper (96.2%) being the most popular.

Over half of respondents belong to AASHE and/or are signatories of the ACUPCC. None of the respondents thought their institution had signed the Talloires Declaration (see pages 18 and 30).