

# Climate Change Considerations in Public Library Collection Development

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## To Cite:

Trotter, M. & Komarnytska, O. (2023). Climate Change Considerations in Public Library Collection Development. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 4(1), 209-215  
<http://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder72>

## Abstract

Climate change is one of the biggest threats to our continued existence. While resources and research about climate change are readily available, what do public libraries need to be doing, as one of the last free public spaces, to bridge the gap between complex information and community action? This extended abstract, based on a larger research paper, explores the various ways public libraries can be active members of their communities and promote conversations about climate change with the specific actions of their collection development. Through an in-depth literature search, several challenges are identified that act as barriers to creating cohesive, inclusive, and informative climate change-oriented collections. These barriers include eco-anxiety, particularly among children and young adults, environmental literacy, and climate change denial materials. Considering these challenges, recommendations are provided to overcome these obstacles. As the need for understanding and action becomes more dire, library policies and collection development strategies need to reflect those needs.

*Keywords:* climate change, eco-anxiety, collections, public libraries, and environmental literacy

The markings of a planet affected by climate change exist everywhere we look and change is not occurring quickly or consistently enough to protect future generations. As the signs and effects of climate change begin to disrupt the everyday lives of more and more people around the world, public libraries are located in a critical position to be educational leaders in their communities. Climate change impacts all members of society, regardless of age, and it is of critical importance for libraries to make a greater effort to include children in discussions surrounding climate change as

several recent studies bring to light the increasing eco-anxiety children are experiencing about the perilous future of the planet (Martin et al, 2021; Hickman, 2020). Libraries need to take initiative to provide accurate, accessible, and up-to-date information that does not alienate people and offers useful methods about incorporating greener practices into their everyday lives. While libraries occupy a unique position in connecting the general public with climate change resources, this role does not come without challenges. Library collections must remain accessible and comprehensible while battling climate change denial, provide curated resources to help deal with eco-anxiety, support environmental literacy, engage in sustainable collection development practices, and do it all on a tight budget.

In this paper, we took an exploratory look at how public libraries can be active members of their communities and promote conversations about climate change with the specific actions of their collection development. We will examine several challenges that impede climate change conversation and engagement in our communities and society at large, and draw on current literature to propose a variety of suggestions for libraries navigating these challenges.

### **Climate Change and Library Collections**

The nature of climate change research is that this complex and multi-disciplinary topic is constantly being updated with new findings and contributions to scholarly knowledge. Libraries play an integral role in balancing the often overtly academic literature that results from these studies by presenting their communities with materials that can be consumed by the general public broad age ranges, educational backgrounds and social demographic categories. The training and job experience of public librarians places them perfectly in a position of encouraging reading and literacy, skills that can be easily applied to include a focus on supporting environmental literacy (Miller, 2010).

As for scholarly work regarding the environmental impact of libraries, publication about green libraries “is irregular and not of an exponential or linear nature” (Fedorowicz-Kruszewska, 2022, p. 916), which is concerning given the increasing anxiety surrounding climate change. Libraries need to conduct further research in order to understand ways they can adapt their library spaces and collections to facilitate

conversations about climate change and there needs to be an increased effort in finding appropriate climate change title selections for collections.

### **Challenges and Responses**

There are multiple barriers to overcome in the fight against climate change, not all of which are changes to emissions outputs and general pollution. There is a mentality shift that needs to occur if there is any hope of saving the planet, and this shift begins with education, increased awareness, and active engagement which public libraries have the opportunity to promote. These initiatives, however, are difficult to accomplish when there are many, internal and external, challenges faced by libraries and their collections.

### **Climate Change Denial Materials**

In a time when acceptance of our reality is needed more than ever, the stubborn denial of climate change poses a challenge to libraries. Collectively, we encounter a major challenge in providing comprehensive collections to the public when we look at the issues posed by the presence of climate change denial (CCD) materials in collections. On the one hand, if our libraries are to abide by the Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries of the Canadian Federation of Library Associations then they should aim to have well-balanced collections which supply information from both sides of the climate change discussion and thus support the “access to the full range of knowledge, imagination, ideas, and opinion” that all persons in Canada are promised (2019, para. 3). On the other hand, these materials can be harmful as they are often full of misrepresentative pseudo-scientific information on this topic.

To add to this, not including CCD materials in collections altogether, even if it is done to practice social responsibility, could be read as an act of censorship. If libraries are to support the ideals of intellectual freedom and accessibility, where is the line when it comes to CCD materials? Libraries must establish for themselves where they stand on this issue, what actions align best with their prioritised institutional values and the interests of their communities, and finally, ensure that their collection development policies clearly reflect that stance.

### **Eco-Anxiety and the Need for Environmental Literacy**

On the other side of the scale from climate change denial, a topic that has arisen with growing urgency over the past decade is the concept of eco-anxiety. In general terms, it is “anxiety about the ecological disasters and threats to the environment such as pollution and climate change” (Goldman, 2022, p. 18) or, more succinctly, having a persistent fear of environmental doom (Clayton et al., 2017 as cited in Hickman, 2020). There are many ways that eco-anxiety can manifest and affect how someone interacts with climate change, but the most common responses are either avoiding the subject, feeling frozen, depressed, and hopeless about the situation, or moving to action (Goldman, 2022). Libraries have the opportunity to be the bridge between difficult, data-heavy information and information that allows people to feel moved to action without frightening them into a state of passiveness. Being a facilitator for these conversations is also incredibly important when it comes to children and young adults because it is a common sentiment among these age groups that they do not know how to have those discussions and often they feel their concerns are belittled or dismissed by adults (Hickman, 2020). The challenge that rising eco-anxiety presents for today’s generation of children and youth highlights the necessity for libraries to actively facilitate conversations about climate change and to aid in the nurturing of environmental literacy skills.

An area of collections that is equally as important as having materials that combat eco-anxiety is having materials that promote what many scholars have termed environmental literacy, green literacy, or climate change literacy (Aytac, 2022; Henk, 2014; Miller, 2010). Climate change literacy is the ability to “find, understand, and use information and services to make decisions about the environment” (Aytac, 2022, p. 2). Having a collection that promotes climate change literacy encourages people to learn how to properly evaluate their sources to be active and productive members of society in combating climate change (Aytac, 2022). This is a significant undertaking for libraries, but “by embracing their role as an educator for the community, libraries can also play a part in transitioning their communities to more positive societal outcomes” (Antonelli, 2012, p. 242).

So how do libraries begin difficult conversations about how to approach the educational opportunities of climate change collections and what can collection

managers do to ensure the proper materials are available to aid those conversations? Some other ways to combat eco-anxiety through collection materials and improve engagement with the subject of climate change are having materials that focus on and encourage sustainability (Mathur, 2022). A collection should also have a curated mix of fiction and non-fiction titles that discuss climate change and take into account the different reading needs of a community. It is important to find “creative, playful, caring, kind and clear ways to have these conversations” (Hickman, 2020, p. 422), especially with children and young people (Hickman, 2020).

### **Collection Practices and Operational Challenges**

If libraries are going to advocate for the fight against climate change, or at least encourage awareness of this topic, then one area to consider is how their collections represent their commitment to sustainable practices. Materials that help create conversations about climate change are important, but other collection-related factors should also be considered such as paper type, green materials, collection waste, delivery and packaging methods, and online resource carbon footprints. A sustainable collection is about more than choosing more eco-friendly suppliers and methods of acquisition. Sustainability is “the notion that those currently living have an obligation to themselves and to future people to ensure everyone has equal opportunities in life” (Henk, 2014, p. 15). When developing a collection that reflects a sustainability mindset, collection managers need to look beyond the green stamp approving something as good for the environment. Sales tactics such as the upselling of green products, or greenwashing, where vendors attempt to capitalize on the need for more environmentally friendly products, are popular methods among vendors that are not necessarily sustainable so it is important to evaluate them carefully (Henk, 2014). There are many ways libraries can develop collections that practice the sustainability that they should preach. Libraries can ask their vendors to use environmental packaging when delivering materials, or purchase books which are printed on recycled paper (Miller, 2010). When collections need to be weeded, deselected materials can be recycled or repurposed by being sold to used-book companies who then resell them (Miller, 2010). Instead of throwing out electronic waste and materials that are more difficult to recycle

such as lead, batteries, monitors, displays, and plastics, have a policy that incorporates proper disposal methods provided by the city (Miller, 2010). The development and integration of specific sustainability goals into the collection development policy can ensure that they are not missed and become a regular part of re-assessment practices at the individual libraries.

## Conclusion

During our research we came across several examples of libraries across Canada that are pushing for active engagement with climate change through their collections. The Thunder Bay Public Library, in particular, orchestrated a successful community-led initiative to include more climate change materials in their collections (TBnewsWatch.com Staff, 2022).

While it is uplifting to read stories like this, there is still not enough scholarship being published on the subject overall and not enough initiatives that push for a climate change focus in collection development. There are numerous challenges facing libraries when it comes to building a collection that is well-rounded and addresses all aspects of climate change literacy, engagement, activism, and mental health concerns like eco-anxiety. As the need for understanding and action becomes more dire, library policies and collection development strategies need to reflect those needs. Very little else matters if we continue to drive our ecosystems into the ground and threaten the stability of future generations. Libraries, their collections and collection practices need to look to the future because the opportunity remains to make meaningful and significant impacts on their communities through education, leadership, and environmental stewardship (Gupta, 2020).

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