

Libraries and Climate Change:

Pathways to Respond and Engage Communities

by Kara Reiman

ABSTRACT

As keystone community institutions, libraries are keenly aware of the increased interest in and heightened concerns about the impacts of climate change in their communities. This article examines how libraries are responding to these concerns, providing pathways for their patrons to engage in climate work, and stepping up to lead by example. The article focuses on work underway through a collaboration with the Gulf of Maine Research Institute and initiatives by libraries to make their footprint more sustainable. The article will provide stakeholders with insights into how to leverage and partner with the library community to address local, regional, and state climate priorities.

their footprint more sustainable, and work underway through a collaboration between the Maine State Library and the Gulf of Maine Research Institute and other partners.

STATE AND NATIONAL EFFORTS SET THE STAGE FOR LOCAL ACTION

The national organization that supports libraries, the American Library Association (ALA), has been providing resources and professional

development opportunities for libraries since its inception in 1876. ALA structures its efforts under the core principles of librarianship.¹ This work includes leading the way on pressing issues and current events by establishing best practices and tools for local libraries as well as delivering programming on these issues.

ALA first discussed climate work in 1990 with a policy on environmental issues² that urges libraries and library boards to provide information concerning the condition of our planet. The topic of climate rose in priority for ALA in 2015, when President Obama elevated the issue of climate change in response to the continuous increase in major weather disasters across the country and advocated for the Paris Climate Accord (Mooney and Mufson 2015). The 2015 Council (the policymaking body of ALA) passed the Resolution on Sustainability in Libraries. This resolution “enthusiastically encourages activities by itself, its membership, library schools and state associations to be proactive in their application of sustainable thinking in the areas of their facilities, operations, policy, technology, programming, partnerships and library school curricula” (ALA 2015).

Then, in 2018, ALA created a taskforce on sustainability to make recommendations on how “to increase the adoption and implementation of sustainable practices by the Association, the profession, libraries and the communities they serve.”³ The taskforce recommended that ALA

While the change in our local climate has been on the minds of residents for some time, it’s not until recent years that the need to address it has become paramount. In the winter of 2023/2024 alone, Maine suffered three damaging storms that caused at least \$70.3 million of damage (Office of the Governor 2024). Communities have struggled with flooding, both coastal and inland, destructive winds, road and bridge collapse, and loss of other infrastructure. Libraries have suffered along with their municipalities, but more than that, they also want to take care of their patrons. Libraries have long been touchstones for their communities, serving as a safe place to go, a trusted resource to answer questions and find information, and a community gathering spot. These services are in addition to all the incredible resources, from books to fishing poles, that libraries lend. As state and federal organizations begin focusing more on sustainability, resiliency, and climate change, libraries need to be included in these conversations and kept in mind as recipients for funding these initiatives.

This article examines how libraries are already responding to concerns about climate change impacts, providing pathways for their patrons to engage in climate work, and stepping up to lead by example. While there are many paths within climate work, this article focuses on example strategies libraries can take to help communities become more resilient, initiatives by libraries to make

add sustainability to its core values of librarianship, the profession's universally agreed upon foundational principles. Following that, in 2022, the newly established Council Committee on Sustainability published a briefing titled *Sustainability in Libraries: A Call to Action* (ALA 2022). The call recommends libraries join the Sustainable Libraries Initiative (SLI). The article by Smith Aldrich, this issue, provides more information about this initiative.

In Maine, Governor Janet Mills released *Maine Won't Wait*, the state's four-year climate plan in 2020 (Maine Climate Council 2020). Three of the eight strategies directly connect to work libraries do in their communities: Strategy B to "Modernize Maine's Buildings," Strategy F "Build Healthy and Resilient Communities," and Strategy H "Engage with Maine People and Communities about Climate Impacts and Program Opportunities." Libraries are working under those strategy areas through programming, partnering on community efforts, sharing information and education, and leading by example.

LIBRARIES IN ACTION

Creating Partnerships

Partnerships between libraries and community organizations are a rich source of inspiration and collaboration. Some of the more obvious organizations for partnerships around climate include garden clubs, local and state climate committees, 4-H, and local land trusts. However, libraries are also finding great partners in less obvious places: food banks, historical societies, health and wellness organizations, adult education, schools, and town recreation departments to name a few.

Some Maine libraries have become heavily involved in their community's planning around resilience and climate. In 2020, Belfast Free Library received an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant of over \$47,000 to facilitate conversations across the broad spectrum of their coastal community that they called All of Belfast: Climate Dialogues (ABCD).⁴ The project was set to launch in the fall of 2020 with intimate in-person conversations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic altered those plans, requiring the library to pivot. Instead of in-person events, they facilitated various ways for the community to become involved, including a webpage of resources, a digital space where community members could share thoughts and feelings about climate change, and a series of educational programs. They hosted over 40

programs from 2020 to 2023 with attendance numbers over 1,600 people, which is 23 percent of Belfast's total population. Those are incredible numbers for library programs, which demonstrates both the thirst for knowledge from their patrons as well as the importance of libraries in local or regional climate initiatives. The library recorded and archived these programs, so they remain available for viewing. Through this project, the library supported the city's Climate Crisis Committee on its development of a community action plan by hosting community members for discussions. The library also hosted an event when the committee was ready to present its final plan and it continues to work with the committee and town.

The Scarborough Public Library is a leader in the city's Sustainable Scarborough Day, which gives its citizens the chance to learn from experts and local organizations, to test out items such as electric vehicles, and to have fun. Library staff also work with the Scarborough Conservation Committee and the Climate Change Action Committee. In York, the library has taken the lead in holding community conversations. It hosted a three-part workshop series entitled "Who Do We Want to Be in a Climate Changed World?: Building Neighborhood, Making Meaning, and Collective Visioning Towards a More Resilient York." Participants discussed ideas for moving forward, not only in being resilient, but in how they work with and treat each other.

At the state level, the Maine State Library (MSL) has recognized that climate change and community resilience are issues of increasing importance and relevance to libraries across the state. As a state agency, MSL seeks to contribute to the state's climate action plan through its own actions as well as through its work with local libraries. MSL is working with the Maine Climate Council, under the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future, to further its reach. MSL's focus is twofold: (1) raising awareness that libraries are critical partners that should be included in state, regional, and local climate efforts and (2) ensuring libraries have the information and resources necessary to provide programming and services that support their local communities.

The library ecosystem in Maine can connect state-level climate initiatives and opportunities with local communities. For example, the Climate Council's youth climate engagement fellow, who focuses on engaging young people in Maine's climate work, has held information gathering sessions at libraries, and libraries have shared the council's survey to gather public input as the

state updates its climate action plan, which is due to the legislature in December 2024. In addition to the Climate Council, Efficiency Maine works directly with libraries to share their resources, such as electricity monitors (which many libraries have in their collections to lend out) as well as resources for homeowners and businesses interested reducing energy consumption. The Maine Department of Transportation partnered with the Bicycle Coalition of Maine to pilot an e-bike lending program through libraries so the Mainers could test e-bikes as an option for travel. Demonstration programs like this are another way libraries can assist with state efforts. MSL continues to explore ways to collaborate with the Climate Council and other state agencies or organizations to ensure libraries are seen as key partners in achieving current and future goals of Maine's climate action plan. MSL also continues to raise awareness of the needs and limitations of libraries that might be addressed through state-level initiatives such as the Community Resiliency Partnerships program, which gives grants to municipalities. About half of Maine public libraries are municipal departments and are therefore eligible for this funding.

Many youth services departments also tackle the topic during their story times for their youngest patrons and their families.

One project that particularly illustrates how MSL strives to add capacity for libraries is through a collaborative project with the Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI). In 2020, MSL joined the Learning Ecosystems Northeast (LENE), a NASA-funded project, as a project partner. The LENE project has greatly increased the opportunities and ease of connecting with new partners. The main tenet of the project is to provide youth with many different pathways to learn and talk about climate change, both in and out of school. In addition to MSL, lead partners include science centers, teachers, and 4-H. Connecting with these organizations has enabled MSL to share new opportunities with libraries across the state. As a part of this project, MSL is increasing the breadth and depth of its relationship-brokering activities to help

libraries expand their offerings without needing extra budget or staff. This project gets information directly to libraries, which they can then share with their patrons. Patrons can choose to partake in learning groups involving educators of all kinds, they can make use of resources that have come out of the project such as free programming kits, they can attend trainings, and more.

Under the LENE project, MSL has also increased its own capacity in the climate and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) areas. Staff has adapted curriculum created for teachers so that it can be easily used by informal educators in libraries. The STEM librarian has held trainings across the state for librarians to help them both understand their local climate change and learn how to talk about it with their patrons. Fall of 2024 featured a series of trainings titled "Community Resilience in the Face of a Changing Climate" that took place at five locations around the state and focused on climate effects that are of most concern in those areas. In 2023, MSL created STEM in Libraries Month (held every October); the theme for 2024 is resiliency and conservation. Trainings were available for librarians and free resources were created for use with patrons and programs.

Offering Programs

Libraries have always offered various kinds of programming, from the tried-and-true book and discussion groups to hands-on STEM programming, and everything in between. Libraries now offer a range of climate-specific programs as well. Topics of discussion or book groups include resilience-building, future planning, sea-level rise, and the importance of native plants, among others.

In 2023, Readfield Public Library received a grant from the Maine Public Library Fund (which uses tax checkoff donations to add capacity to libraries and support innovative ideas) to host a series of environmental and sustainability-based programs, such as Vanessa Berry from the Natural Resources Council of Maine discussing Maine's waste policies and pathways to a low-waste future, someone from Food Rescue Maine giving tips on reducing food waste at home, and author Claire Ackroyd discussing her book *Murder in the Maple Woods* and Maine's organic maple syrup industry.

Many youth services departments also tackle the topic during their story times for their youngest patrons and their families. The quantity and quality of picture books on climate-related topics have increased greatly over the last few years, giving librarians many options for approaching

the subject. Picture books on climate typically explain what's happening to the environment and how kids can step up and help if they want to. During Earth Day, the Norridgewock Public Library's story time read *Happy Earth Day* by Deborah Hopkinson and then had an Earth Day Freeze Dance and a craft. During the story, the librarian specifically discussed with the kids how they help their families at home to take care of the Earth.

Scarborough Public Library has been a leader in climate programming with youth, holding programs for both preschool and school-aged children. Youth librarian Deanna McNamara has run story times and programs about recycling, water systems, importance of native plants, and more. She also hosts many hands-on programs such as planting raised gardens for the summer and a pollinator club where they read books and do projects together. McNamara also embeds climate conversation in other activities as the opportunities arise.

Some libraries have done outside-the-box climate-change programming for their communities. The Searsmont Town Library, for example, partnered with the Halcyon String Quartet, whose website states that their "performances combine imagery, art, data, and music to cultivate environmental stewardship and raise awareness of the impacts climate change is having on Midcoast Maine."⁵ Their first collaboration involved a combination of live music, slides, and lecture pieces by a local ecologist. The second collaboration was a program titled "Gather," in which the library both hosted the event and collected audio testimonials from community members that were then combined with Halcyon's joyful live music. The program's aim was to remind people of the power of a collective community.

Community (or citizen) science is a local way to investigate climate change and such projects encourage all people to participate in science in their own localities. Some Maine-related community science projects are bird and tick counts, tracking sea-level rise, and tracking the quality and appearance of vernal pools. Libraries commonly support this work by providing kits or backpacks that have all the information and supplies needed for one of these projects. For example, Northern Maine Community College hosts community science kits that encourage local exploration of vernal pools and weather observation. GMRI and partners of LENE have created kits for different community science topics including vernal pools and forest health that they have given to 31 libraries. GMRI also offers specific community science programs

that are open to schools and public libraries alike.⁶ Topics include tick forecasting, invasive knotweed, and coastal flooding, among others.

Leading by Example

Libraries are taking steps to update their own buildings and practices to become examples in their communities and to the statewide library ecosystem. Specifically, libraries have installed new roofs, windows, and insulation; installed heat pumps and solar panels; switched all their lightbulbs to LED; installed EV-charging stations; planted native plant gardens and started composting; and done energy audits. These kinds of building updates can be costly, and 19 percent of Maine's 257 public libraries have budgets under \$20,000, while 33 percent have only a single staff member or are run by volunteers only. For these libraries, this means putting precious staff time into looking for other sources of funding, such as grants from state or federal agencies.

Staff at the Jesup Memorial Library in Bar Harbor are working on a large building expansion that will double its current footprint. They are using this opportunity to include environmentally friendly construction in their plans and have received grant funding to use cross-laminated timber, a sustainable product sourced from New England. Use of this material will help reduce the library's carbon footprint and also highlight what could become a great economic opportunity for Maine's forestry industry (Schreiber 2024).

One Maine library has taken a major step and become a certified sustainable library from the Sustainable Libraries Initiative (see article by Smith Aldrich, this issue). In 2023, the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick became the first library outside New York to be certified in the country. The Alice L. Pendleton Library in Islesboro and the York Public Library have also both started the process. In addition, the Maine Library Association now sponsors a free year of membership in the initiative, as well as a discount on becoming certified.

CONCLUSION

This article highlights a number of ways that Maine libraries are working on climate change mitigation and preparedness. From offering educational programs and research help to leading by example and helping increase community resiliency, libraries stand out as important touchstones in their communities. As Maine's

climate-related events happen more frequently and become more severe, libraries are going to be there for their communities. To do so, state and local initiatives must be structured to include libraries as eligible partner organizations to ensure they have adequate funding and other resources. If they are, libraries can continue to be just what their communities need.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>
- 2 <https://alair.ala.org/items/0ee7ca28-7151-4f33-bdd4-847556cc212f>
- 3 <https://www.ala.org/sustainrt/Special-ALA-Task-Force-on-Sustainability-Formed>
- 4 <https://belfastlibrary.org/all-of-belfast-climate-dialogues/about/>
- 5 <https://www.halcyonstringquartet.org/performances.html>
- 6 <https://investigate.gmri.org/project?forGroups=true&forIndividuals=true&search=>

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