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Book Review: Rebekkah Smith Aldrich's Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World

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Keywords

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About Author

Samantha Hamilton (she/her) is a San José State University alumna who graduated with her master's in library and information science (MLIS) in May 2021. She is currently a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, where she is studying environmental sciences and policy to further her aspirations of becoming an environmental librarian/archivist. Her research interests include sustainable professional practices in information settings as well as the history of sustainable library initiatives like tool lending. Outside of the classroom, Samantha enjoys engaging in species conservation efforts and birdwatching in her hometown of Las Vegas.

Aldrich, R. S. (2018) *Sustainable thinking: Ensuring your library's future in an uncertain world*. ALA Editions.

Libraries are not like they used to be. The popularity they once enjoyed has precipitously dropped in recent years as fewer people are visiting them and using their services. A report conducted by Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and American Library Association (ALA) (2018) found that survey respondents made an average of 8.6 library visits annually, down from 13.2 in 2008. Coinciding with this 35% decline in visitation is the rise of Amazon, Starbucks, and Netflix, which are supplanting many of the functions libraries serve. All these factors considered, it is easy to believe that the extinction of libraries is inevitable and near. However, Rebekkah Smith Aldrich's *Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World* argues that we should not yet quit on libraries.

To give these institutions a fighting chance, Aldrich—a co-chair of the New York Library Association's (NYLA) Sustainability Initiative and founding member of the ALA's Sustainability Round Table—has outlined a novel strategy in her book. The strategy, which mainly draws from her two decades of experience as the Mid-Hudson Library System's sustainability coordinator, calls for libraries to go back to the basics and reassess their foundational values in order to pave a new way forward. Sure, libraries are already doing a commendable job supporting free speech, equitable access, and the right to privacy, but Aldrich strongly recommends adding sustainability to the mix. According to the author, librarians have a unique role as educators, information providers, and community leaders in fighting climate change; to neglect this duty would spell tragedy not only for libraries but also for the planet as a whole. Since the survival of libraries is nested in the survival of our communities, Aldrich believes it is imperative that libraries align their organizational goals with the lofty but necessary aim of saving Earth.

Sustainable Thinking is broken down into four major sections that collectively build a case for libraries to take up sustainability and integrate it into all they do. In the first section entitled "Situation Report," Aldrich sketches where libraries currently stand. No matter how much library professionals want to downplay the numbers, it cannot be denied that the public is using these institutions less and less. Widespread uncertainty about libraries' place in modern society is also contributing to their downward slide. To make matters worse, amplified disruption on countless fronts—"political, economic, technological, environmental, and societal"—are pulling professionals in too many directions, dividing their attention and resources (Aldrich, 2018, p. 10). But, libraries are not helpless. Aldrich concludes the section by noting that climate change has carved out an unlikely space for libraries to survive and even thrive in the twenty-first century. Libraries, by harnessing their unique power to connect people and cultivate empathy, can raise the resilience of their communities. As we head into a future shaped by the unpredictable forces of climate change, libraries must draw on their strengths to ensure communities can weather the stress of natural and manmade disasters.

The second section, referred to as "The Strategy," presents a plan intended to reveal libraries' value to users and non-users through the lens of sustainability. First, Aldrich encourages libraries to craft clear messages that speak to *why* they

are embracing sustainability so as to increase public buy-in and inspire loyalty. Libraries can do this by editing their core organizational values and tweaking their mission statements to reflect the recent integration of sustainability into their DNA. The next step toward sustainability involves libraries turning outward and further integrating themselves into the social fabric of their communities. Rather than acting alone in their fight against climate change, libraries are advised to partner with local businesses that understand and prioritize the local environment. Working alongside neighbors to reach a shared goal will not only strengthen the resilience of a community but also demonstrate that libraries are willing to act on their eco-ethic.

Aldrich devotes the third section, “The Tactics,” to getting all library workers within an organization on board. From library supervisors to the page, all should be guided by sustainable thinking if an organization is to be seen as a convincing leader on the topic. To accomplish this, the author recommends heightening staff members’ ecological intelligence by encouraging them to educate themselves using online guides and manuals. Although Aldrich’s idea of converting the hearts and minds of all library personnel is admittedly starry-eyed, one can see the benefits of having an organizational culture founded on shared principles. If all or even most workers adopt a mindset shift and devote themselves to the cause, there is no telling how much progress could be made in the way of sustainability.

The book concludes with a fourth section dedicated to resources. These include resolutions compiled by the ALA and NYLA on the importance of sustainable libraries as well as a climate commitment from the American College and University Presidents. Rounding out these pages is a case study of a New York-based public library that successfully translated their vision into action. Lighting changes, weather strip installations, and ditching the elevator were some of the measures taken to improve energy efficiency (Aldrich, 2018, p. 172). Having accomplished much of what they laid out in their “climate smart” pledge, Kingston Library is living proof that libraries can go green without compromising on their programs or services.

Throughout these sections, Aldrich includes worksheets that prompt library professionals to apply what they have read to their own institutions. These exercises ensure readers are not passively absorbing Aldrich’s ideas but actively repositioning their work toward today’s climate crisis. Though the discussion questions and checklists are overly vague, they do help readers plot where their library sits on the sustainability spectrum. After all, librarians will more likely heed Aldrich’s advice and think sustainably if they first reflect on how eco-friendly their own institutions are.

In general, *Sustainable Thinking* is a quick and inspiring read that can readily be put into practice. For too long, libraries have both failed to sufficiently look into climate change and been noticeably behind in their sustainability efforts. Aldrich’s words are the wake-up call librarians need in order to realize that they, too, are responsible for helping to solve the defining problem of our generation. Infusing sustainability into libraries may seem like a tall order, but the existence of our planet—and perhaps even our libraries—depends on librarians’ ability to start

thinking sustainably. If anything, the ideas presented in the book should spur hard but much needed conversations about sustainability in the profession.

It is evident that Aldrich understands what hangs in the balance during this moment in history, but to double-down on libraries' role as community connectors is to miss their need to be agents of change. With millions of species on the brink of extinction, it is no longer enough for libraries to "conven[e] the table" and serve as "platforms for others to make good things happen" (Aldrich, 2018, p. 59, 40). Library workers of all stripes must be eager to lead and take a seat at the table if they are to make a meaningful contribution to the environmental crisis. To do this, they can begin by carefully inspecting their own professional practices—something that Aldrich fails to spend adequate time on. Digitization of printed works and collection weeding are just some of the sustainable library practices that flew under the author's radar but should have been mentioned.

Also of concern is Aldrich's underestimation of the difficulty climate change deniers might pose to a library's sustainability efforts. The author sees deniers as surmountable obstacles whose buy-in can be secured by "talk[ing] about [sustainability] in a way that results in action" (Aldrich, 2018, p. 26). While reframing the dialogue to exclude controversial terms like climate change might work in conversations with some deniers, the general efficacy of Aldrich's solution is seriously in question. It incorrectly assumes that climate skeptics can neither read between the lines nor see these library initiatives for what they really are: a deliberate move to be more sustainable. The author should be applauded for pitching some solution to this tough problem, but changing deniers' minds will take more than just carefully crafted conversations.

In spite of some shortcomings, *Sustainable Thinking* is a rare gem in the crowded library literature. The compelling case to marry libraries with sustainability is sure to win over any library professional, whether or not they are die-hard environmentalists. Aldrich's work should be a welcomed addition to any academic or public library's bookshelf and is recommended for anyone interested in keeping libraries—as well as ecosystems—alive and thriving.

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