Libraries Can Go Green

I began my professional library career in 1991. At the time, public awareness of environmental issues was on the downswing. Interest peaked in the early 1970s, with the first Earth Day and the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency. Events like the Cuyahoga River fire in 1969 and the Love Canal disaster in 1979 led to the passage of a slew of environmental laws including the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act, otherwise known as Superfund. Consumers also became interested in energy conservation and smaller cars in the late 1970s as gas prices topped $1.00 per gallon.

But by the early 1990s, memories of these events had faded. Most people equated industrial pollution with environmental problems and thought that the laws passed in the 1970s and 1980s solved that. By the late 1980s, many people increasingly believed that personal responsibility for the environment was the bailiwick of liberal weirdos. Atmospheric scientists discussed and debated climate change, but it was of little interest to the general public. Cars and houses got bigger. Big box stores like Wal-Mart and Best Buy sold consumer goods from overseas more and more cheaply. Few people thought about where these products were made or what effect they had on the environment.

Fast forward to the present. Al Gore, once considered a political has-been, is now an environmental superhero. People worry about the plastics in their kids' toys and where their food comes from. Climate change makes headlines in daily newspapers and every company from Wal-Mart to Clorox is clamoring to show consumers how green they are. I knew environmentalism had really hit the mainstream when I saw *Sustainable Living for Dummies* in my local bookstore as part of a huge display of green lifestyle books.

So where do libraries fit into this new green culture? The good news is that the library's core services are already eco-friendly because they encourage people to borrow rather than buy materials. That's an excellent place to start. Beyond that, there are two major areas where libraries can be greener.

The first is in building operations and maintenance. Some small things with fairly quick payback time include:

- Printing fewer copies. Use digital files instead and collaborate in work-sharing documents. When you can't avoid it, print on both sides of the page, reuse paper that's only been printed on one side, and look into the free (Windows-compatible) software from GreenPrint (http://www.printgreener.com/) that helps you avoid printing blank or unwanted pages.
- Turning off lights in unused rooms.
- Shutting off computers, copiers, and other energy hogs at night.
- Purchasing programmable thermostats, then using them properly so you're not heating or cooling the building when people aren't in it.
- Replace incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents.
- Purchasing reusable coffee mugs, plates, utensils, and drink cups instead of disposables.
- Using tap water in pitchers rather than buying bottled water. If you provide drinks as a part of a library program, buy dry drink mix and make your own rather than buying the premixed version.

Some bigger projects include:

- Installing occupancy sensors to turn off lights when nobody is using a room.
- Starting a library-wide recycling program if you don't already have one. Don't forget that you can also recycle soda cans and plastic drink bottles, as well as paper. Some recycling programs also accept bound materials like books. Check with your hauler.
- Evaluating the office products and cleaning supplies you use and replacing them with greener alternatives.
- Replacing old computers, electronic equipment, and appliances with ones that are Energy Star certified.
- Landscaping with native flowers and plants around your building or planting a rain garden to help to absorb rainwater runoff from your parking lot. Consider working with a local environmental group to do these projects.
- Incorporating green building materials and design elements into your next remodeling or new building project.
- Running your bookmobile on biodiesel fuel. You might be able to partner with a local high school and use fuel made from cafeteria waste oil.

The second area where libraries can lead the way is by fostering environmental sustainability efforts within the community. Some ways to do this include:

- Collaborating with local environmental groups to be a community recycling drop-off site for batteries or used electronics.
- Establishing an environmental book club or considering books with an environmental theme for your next One Book community program. The ISTC Library's *Environmental Novels Reference Guide* (http://www.istc.illinois.edu/info/library_docs/other_pubs/Environmental-Novels.pdf) has some suggestions to get you started.
- Developing other programs with sustainability themes. Create a kid's program around the book *The Garbage Monster* and incorporate a craft that uses things that people usually throw away. Book a speaker on a green business or lifestyle issue. Have an environmental film festival.
- Developing displays that showcase your collection of sustainable living books and DVDs.
- Advertising your library's sustainability efforts. Libraries can and should establish themselves as community leaders in this area.

Is your library doing something great to be green? Send your library's name and a brief description of the project to lbarnes@istc.illinois.edu so I can incorporate it into a green libraries workshop I'm giving at the Lincoln Trail Libraries System in March 2009. I'd also like to take this workshop on the road. If you're interested, encourage your library system to contact me and I'll be happy to work them into my schedule.

Kermit was right. It isn't always easy being green. But with some thought and planning, it can be easier and will improve your library and your community.