

Environmental Information Access Project in the United States

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Environmental activism is an information-intensive undertaking. Individuals and groups working to protect our public health and the natural world need access to a wide range of books, journals, technical reports, databases, and personal contacts if they are to have adequate information to succeed in their efforts. However, in many communities and for many individuals, it is not easy to find data relevant to their concerns. Difficulties associated with acquiring environmental information are especially acute in minority and working class communities. In an attempt to address some of these difficulties, Libraries for the Future (LFF), a new not-for-profit organization, has initiated the "Environmental Information Access Project" - a campaign to bring public librarians and environmentalists together around the issue of public access to critical environmental information.

In almost every neighborhood, the public library is the nearest source of environmental information. In communities where people do not have access to (or feel welcome or comfortable in) an academic library, it may be the only source. But in most libraries, environmental materials are not systematically or comprehensively collected and organized, nor are they being adequately used by citizens and environmental organizations. The surveys and interviews conducted with environmentalists and librarians for the Environmental Information Access Project reveal that many activists turn to college or university libraries as a first step in research since these libraries often have technical and reference works which are unavailable in their public counterparts. Unfortunately, when environmentalists pass over a local public library in favor of a college or university, public librarians do not perceive a demand for environmental materials and then do not purchase them for their collections, making public libraries even less attractive to environmentalists. It is important for both librarians and activists to break this cycle if the library's long-standing role as a public space serving the information needs of the community is to survive.

The first stage of the Environmental Information Access Project is the creation of *The Environmentalist's Guide to the Public Library*, a booklet which explores how environmentalists and the general public can work with the public library system to ensure that every citizen has access to information on community and global environmental issues. The *Guide*, which was released in April 1995 to coincide with both Earth Day and National Library Week, also aims to make environmentalists more aware of the importance of actively supporting and using public libraries. In addition to providing concrete suggestions, the *Guide* also suggests several strategies for making the library more responsive to environmentalists' information needs. Case studies of the Glendale, Arizona, Dupage, Illinois, and Cambridge, Massachusetts public libraries illustrate how community members and librarians have worked together to improve public access to important environmental information.

Subsequent phases of the Environmental Information Access Project will include a publication written for librarians who wish to respond more effectively to the needs of individual citizens and environmental groups. This phase may also include demonstration projects in public libraries and working sessions to foster dialogue among environmentalists and library leaders.

Libraries for the Future is a growing organization dedicated to supporting grassroots advocacy for the public libraries across the United States. In addition to the Environmental Information Access Project, LFF has published *Library Advocacy Power Tools*, a handbook which contains grassroots organizing strategies and examples of successful library advocacy projects from across the nation. LFF has also created the Advocate Network, which links those concerned for the future of public libraries as democratic, educational, and culturally vital institutions in our society. As an organization of library users, LFF represents the interests of the public to national legislators, policy makers, and public interest leaders. To learn more about LFF or to acquire a copy of *The Environmentalist's Guide to the Public Library* or *Library Advocacy Power Tools* call: 1-800-542-1918, or write: 521 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1612, New York NY 10175-1699.