

Book Review: A Green New Deal for Archives

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***A Green New Deal for Archives*, By Eira Tansey. Published by Council on Library and Information Resources, July 2023. 50 pages / e-book. Free access [HERE](#)**

Reviewed by Micaella Gonzales

A Green New Deal for Archives is a timely publication that raises awareness on two critical concerns universally affecting archives – climate change and inadequate staffing. While the author notes that the book is not a manual for reducing the carbon footprint within archives, it reasonably highlights archives as central to the preservation of history, environmental

documentation and the continued functioning of a society. The data and research presented in this publication are based in the United States, but the author also remarks that observations and recommendations may be relevant to other geographic and cultural settings.

The first section, “Dual Threats to Archives,” presents a composite sketch of the aftermath of a natural disaster, wherein vital documents in residences and public institutions were either damaged or lost. It shows that as communities grappled with efforts to recover and rebuild from various forms of loss, even key public services in the community were rendered non-functional by the natural disaster due to years of budget cuts, insufficient staff and lack of preparation for such events.

As similar versions of this composite sketch have transpired across the globe, the author provides readers with a relatable picture of the uncomfortable truth we are faced with; the effects of climate change have become increasingly evident and deleterious, and decades of underfunding and understaffing have made archives highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Climate change, resulting in an increased global temperature, is evidenced in this book through reference to 30+ years of international research by climate scientists, serving as a warning that climate change’s immediate and long-term effects are deemed to worsen if carbon emissions are not reduced and international net-zero pledges are not implemented. The author also notes how climate change has been reshaping the world and altering residency patterns as some coastal areas have become uninhabitable due to intensifying and more frequent precipitation events that lead to the rise in sea levels. This poses alarming questions on the future of archives in these locations and the need to plan for the possible relocation of high-risk archives.

One salient point made by the author brings attention to the financial implications of climate change on archives. High housing standards continuously encumber many archives’ capacity to maintain suitable environmental conditions, thereby placing greater demands on temperature and humidity control systems, subsequently contributing to the archives’ increased carbon footprint unless renewable (and currently still quite expensive) sources of energy are considered. As the financial capacity of many archives is constantly challenged, these institutions become unable to support suitable staffing needs which gravely affects the institution’s ability to fulfil their mandate. Case in point, during the COVID-19 pandemic, insufficient staffing at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) affected veterans’ benefits and burial claims as NARA was unable to support the high volume of requests for veterans’ documentation while the request backlog continued to mount. Staff recruitment in archives over the decades has either dwindled or remained stagnant while collections continue to grow resulting in staff burnout, deterioration of services, persistent backlogs and brain drain.

The second section, “Historical Precedents for Public Support,” provides insight into three major archival and documentary efforts implemented in the United States during tumultuous times in history. This section highlights the inception, achievements and shortcomings of these historical efforts.

The Historical Records Survey (HRS) was part of the many programmes established under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression to provide work to

unemployed Americans. The author effectively contextualises the development of HRS in the history of the professionalisation of archiving in the United States by emphasising the concurrent efforts that arose from growing interests in archives during the 1930s. In fact, this was also the decade when NARA and the Society of American Archivists were established. HRS is considered to have greatly influenced the American archiving profession by having completed a comprehensive survey of county, federal, municipal and church records across the United States, as well as employing a remarkable number of archive workers throughout its operation.

Despite the incredible impact that HRS made, the author was mindful to note that the survey had challenges of its own such as the gap between the staffing of field workers and higher-level officers, which limited the report-publishing capacity of the programme. Towards the end of its run, HRS was faced with two pivotal obstacles which eventually led to the termination of the programme; its federal funding was cut, and World War II unfolded.

The 1930s were also the time when the catastrophic dust storm swept across the Great Plains of the US, causing massive agricultural destruction and farmer displacement. One of the government's responses included the creation of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography project, which documented geographic and cultural landscapes in rural America. Amazingly, FSA produced over 270,000 images over the course of the project and is known to have captured some of the most iconic images in American photography.

Drawing inspiration from the success of the FSA, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched the DOCUMERICA project in the 1970s in response to the air and water pollution crisis. It produced more than 20,000 images that documented serious environmental concerns in the country, but it ended sooner than its intended duration due to budget cuts, an inefficient staffing model and weak government support.

The last section of the book, "Public Policy Platform", brings to the fore a proposed "green new deal for archives" that aims to bolster American archives and the archiving profession, making it resilient to climate change. It is founded on three key priorities:

1. Increased permanent staffing for archives that steward vital public records
2. Creation of a nationwide plan for collection continuity and emergency response
3. Development of climate change documentation projects

Some key policy concepts that I found interesting as an archivist are the study of staffing ratios, tools for collection management cost projection and how backlog management can actually lower the risk of collection damage from natural disasters.

A Green New Deal for Archives is a massive undertaking, and the author emphasises it should gestate as part of a long-term political project, as it requires sustained interest, support, a budgetary approach, proactive planning and national coordination. Here is where I find the challenge of the policy lies. The political climate in the US (and many parts of the world) is fairly unstable, which brings uncertainty to the future of the policy. Much like the original New Deal programmes during the Great Depression, the success of this policy is tied to commitment from the government. It is only hoped that through this policy, a collective sense of advocacy for

archives—and a shared understanding of their significant role in the community—will be developed and passed on to future generations.

Micaella Gonzales has been senior manager of library & archives at National Gallery Singapore for nine years. As an advocate of conservation, archiving and librarianship, she has helped develop and preserve Southeast Asian modern art archives and built community libraries. She graduated with a master's degree in cultural materials conservation from the University of Melbourne.

(Read the book review and see all the archival images in the December-January 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 99, p. 52-55)