# Archivists Against the Climate Crisis

**Eira Tansey:** All of these people would come up to me and they'd be like, “Oh my God, you're the librarian.” You need to come back to the next hearing because you just read all these documents.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Hello, and welcome to Material Memory. I’m your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo. The voice you just heard was Eira Tansey, the Digital Archivist and Records Manager at the University of Cincinnati Libraries. In this episode, I’ll be speaking with Eira as well as with Ben Goldman, Archivist for Curatorial Services and Strategies at Penn State.

If you talk to librarians and archivists who work in the United States about what the field is doing about the climate crisis, there’s a good chance they’ll mention Eira and Ben. Last year, the Society of American Archivists passed a council resolution specifically to honor their work, which they described as “tireless” and “critical” to “address[ing] the current and future impact of climate change on archival repositories and the archival profession.”

In this episode, we’ll be talking about their research and what archivists can bring to climate activism.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** So, can you remember what inspired you to work on issues related to climate change and environmental justice and when it became central to your work?

**Eira Tansey:** I saw a call for papers a few years ago from a journal that was looking for articles about libraries and climate change. And this was an issue I was starting to take some personal interest in at the time and I was digging into the literature and I was really surprised to see that there was not much out there. And so in 2015 I wrote this article titled, “Archival Adaptation to Climate Change.” And that sort of became the foundation for a lot of my additional work on, on climate change and environmental justice and how recordkeeping and archives affects those issues.

**Ben Goldman:** Yeah, for me there were a lot of different moments. My previous job before Penn State was at the university of Wyoming, they had a lot of environmental collections and there were different activities around those collections that kind of spurred my interest. And then when it became central to my work, honestly, is when I met Eira. Reading that article, we met at a conference, we just kind of like immediately hit it off and started talking about these things and it's been a great partnership.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** And what year was that?

**Ben Goldman:** 2015 or 16. One of those two.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** This was wild to me that Ben and Eira had only been working on climate change together for 4 or 5 years, given how closely their names are associated with this work in the circles I travel in. I wanted to talk with them specifically about an article they co-authored in 2018, along with two of Ben’s colleagues at Penn State, titled “American Archives and Climate Change: Risks and Adaptations,” in the journal of *Climate Risk Management.* Since

reading it, it's probably the scholarly work I've referenced most often when talking about this topic.

**Eira Tansey:** This article we took OCLC's Archive Grid data set, which is 1200 repositories, mostly larger research libraries, and one of the things we found was that 98% of archives would be affected by at least one climate risk factor.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** 98%! And that's rounding down. According to their article, 98.8% of archives in the US will face a climate change risk factor by the year 2100.

**Eira Tansey:** The vast majority of those are not necessarily doomsday scenarios, one of the things that we found in that was that 17% had a risk of both combined storm surge, which happens in every hurricane, right, but it would also involve risks of sea level rise. And obviously this is, depending on what part of the coast you're on, it's a concern that in many places is already starting to become a reality.

**Ben Goldman:** We also looked at non-flooding type events too. So, 92 locations may experience 10 degree or greater annual temperature change by 2100, and 93 locations with an additional 10 inches of rain annually over current levels. So, like Eira said, it wasn't, there weren't major like sort of alarm bells going off, but it was almost to a T just about every single location we examined had at least one, you know, risk factor.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Yeah. Those numbers are staggering.

**Ben Goldman:** Yeah. And it's a small dataset.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** And also, if I'm remembering correctly, this article focused on temperature and water risks so there are still other risk factors like wildfires, for instance.

**Ben Goldman:** So I think we learned a lot about these kinds of climate modeling and, you know, analyses, but there's a lot you could extrapolate from a study like this, that we didn't, you know, the increase in temperature and the, I guess the likelihood of increased drought could impact things like wildfires, which would be maybe another area for research one day.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Like any good work of scholarship, it's important to have a well-defined scope, which they did. But it also means that by design, there are a lot of questions this article doesn't address, wildfire risk being just one of them. This study also is limited in geographic scope to the lower 48 US states. If 98.8% of archives in the US face at least one climate risk factor, what does that mean for archives in the rest of the world? Eira and Ben have identified this as an area where they'd like to see more research. In the meantime, they're focusing their efforts on filling in other gaps.

**Ben Goldman:** We noticed in our study one of the problems or one of the issues that arose is the limitations of the data, as Eira has mentioned, you know not really being representational of

all the repositories we knew that were out there. So that really inspired us to see if we could come up with a better dataset.

**Eira Tansey:** The story I like to tell about how I knew that the original data set from OCLC, wasn't quite what I would say would be representative of the entire universe of archives is that I used to work in New Orleans. New Orleans is just a city that really does care about its local history in a way many other places in the United States do not. And so over my time in New Orleans, I had gotten to know many of the archives that literally were not on the map when we were working with the archive grid data, because they were small archives, they were archives that maybe only had one person working there. It was a very volunteer community-driven effort. And so that really made me think if a city like New Orleans, which has so many archives, is not represented in these large institutional data sets of archives—like the OCLC Archive Grid data set—what are we missing when we try to analyze how climate change is going to impact archives?

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** So, what types of repositories were missing from this dataset?

**Eira Tansey:** We realized that there are many places that steward archival records that we do not necessarily consider traditional archives. So, they may be a public library that has a local history corner and has a box of archival records, or they may be, you know, small city government or local township offices. They might be a volunteer-run historical society. They might be a small religious society archive.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The result was the RepoData project, described on its website as project to identify and make publicly accessible United States archival repository location data." Eira and Ben received a grant from the Society of American Archivists Foundation to fund this work, and in 2017, with help from their research assistant, Whitney Ray, they began reaching out to archival associations across the US.

**Eira Tansey:** There's dozens and dozens of archival associations across the United States. So you have, you know, Chicago Area Archivists and then you have regional groups like the Midwestern Archivists. There's a number of specialist archivist groups. So, for example, there's Catholic Archivists, right, and there are Moving Image Archivists. So, we knew that if we started reaching out to those groups and getting whatever data they had, we could try to aggregate that into a larger data set. And that is what was the genesis for RepoData, and that was the basic foundation of how we created the RepoData dataset.

**Ben Goldman:** A lot of that data was out there. It just was in really difficult to work with formats and not a lot you could do with it, which is where a lot of our work went into and the work of the research assistant we had for the grant really massaging that data and getting it into a workable form.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** When you think of "climate work," assembling a dataset of archival locations in the US might not be the first thing that comes to mind. But Eira, Ben, and the fellow archivists they work with understand that we can't do the critical research needed on archives and climate change without this information.

The RepoData project, at least this phase of it, is complete, and they're now starting to put it to work….

**Eira Tansey:** One of the great things about some of our federal science agencies is how much open data they have online. So a great example of this is the National Hurricane Center, and you can make maps online where you take whatever datasets you have and superimpose the National Hurricane Center layers over on top of that. The way that we are using this data right now is very much as a public service. And we have had colleagues of ours like Fletcher Durant from Florida. When he heard that we were doing this when there was a previous hurricane in Florida, he tapped us for the Florida data because he was running a preservation response hotline in Florida and he wanted to make sure that they were trying to get in touch with as many Florida archives as possible.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The RepoData project is already helping archives adapt to climate change and will only become more useful as more people work with the dataset.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** I asked Eira and Ben what behaviors the library and cultural heritage fields might change to more effectively respond to the climate crisis.

**Ben Goldman:** Eira and I have talked a lot about, and we're not the only ones but you know, really our collections need to stop growing. We need to stop operating from a philosophical standpoint that our job is just to continue accumulating because we are in a period where we don't have the resources to do it, number one, and, the resources that we do have are all sort of built on the backs of the same challenges that have created the climate crisis.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Even digital collections have a carbon footprint. If you add up the energy consumption of the world's data centers it amounts to 2% of global emissions, about on par with the UK. And data centers are on track to account for 14% of the world's carbon footprint by 2040, about equivalent to that of the US.

Since we're on the topic of the carbon footprints, let's talk about travel in the library and information field.

**Eira Tansey:** I'm glad that conferences are finally taking seriously going online. There's a great website out there called flyingless.org, which is all about academics trying to lower their carbon footprint. And I was actually inspired by Ben because Ben at one point had told me like, you know, I just feel weird about how much I'm like traveling, so I'm just going to stay grounded. And I was like, I mean, for me that was a real light bulb moment for myself where I finally had to get honest with myself about my own footprint, right?

**Eira Tansey:** I really do miss seeing my colleagues in person and there is no substitute for that, but I am glad that we have sort of been forced to rethink the conference model in order to keep professional discourse going. And I do think that when we can meet again in-person, which who knows when that's going to be, I do think there are hybrid models out there that we can look at and we should, that combine kind of the best of both in-person conferencing and a distance model.

**Ben Goldman:** I think having a recently co-chaired the RBMS conference and, you know, been involved in the planning of that for her a year and a half.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** RBMS hosts a Rare Books and Manuscripts conference, which in 2019 was focused on special collections and climate change.

**Ben Goldman:** We were fortunate that the organization was willing to let us add a question to the registration form. Out of, I think the 520 attendees, we had 420 or so of them, they gave us their home departure point and their method of travel. I've been able to use that to sort of calculate the carbon footprint. So, for just those people who allowed us to do that, I think it was something like 86 metric tons to attend a very small, modest conference. I don't know, I think whether we can actually fully divest ourselves of in-person conferences or not, I think it's at least important for us to talk about these things. We should be thinking about in the words of Bill McKibben, how do we find the right size for ourselves and for our work so that we have a graceful landing wherever that is.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Responding to the climate crisis is also about more fundamental changes in how we do business.

**Eira Tansey:** I think anytime you're talking about work like this, it has to involve a really honest assessment of power. Like, what is it, what does it mean if we have library administrators who are only hiring three-year positions, you know, then you have a workforce of people that cannot literally put down roots in their community? They can't get to know their local environment. They can't get to know their neighbors. And what kind of archivists can you be trying to document your local community if you have not built relationships with the community and you have to keep moving every three years for a position?

**Eira Tansey:** It would be very easy to just be like, “Oh, we need to all, you know, install water-saving devices at our institutions” and we do, right? Like turn off your lights when you… whenever you go back to the office, yes, turn your lights off when you leave for a meeting. But that's a very easy answer and we have been doing easy answers for 30 years and we're not close to solving this. And I think it's because we need to talk about power and reckon with the fact that not dealing with climate change is the status quo because it benefits the powerful, right? And that's not an easy answer, but it's a true one.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** I also asked Ben and Eira about some of the ways they are responding to the climate crisis on a personal level.

**Ben Goldman:** I always sort of hesitate on this question because individual action feels so insufficient sometimes. I attended one event a fracking symposium at Penn State ...

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** That is to say, a symposium about concerns over fracking

**Ben Goldman:** ...attended by activists and academics. So, it was really trying to bring those two groups into conversation. And I distinctly remember the activists saying, you know, we

appreciate all that you do as academics, thank you for all your research, but you know what? Peer review ain't what we need. It's not enough. And if you really want to help us, why don't you come put yourself under oath and testify in our communities? I think in terms of the activism and how it relates to the work we do, I think there's a lot more we can do to really take that work and focus it where, in the communities where people need it most and in the ways they need it most.

**Eira Tansey:** So, I like the Bill McKibben quote about this, which is the most important thing an individual can do about climate change is to be less of an individual. And I will just co-sign any kind of getting involved with things that are already happening in your community. I think one of the biggest issues that we're seeing beyond just the dependence on fossil fuels is also the safety of our water systems in this country and water as a human right and a public commons. So, a story I have, and I think one of the things that archivists and librarians and information workers of all kinds should realize is that we have a lot of skills that we can bring to activist groups that actually are already on the ground and doing work. So, we don't necessarily need to reinvent the wheel, we just need to show up and contribute what we can.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** And Eira is doing this in her own life.

**Eira Tansey:** A couple of years I was involved with a regional body located in Cincinnati called the Ohio River Sanitation Commission. And they provide some guidelines for pollution control in the Ohio River, which is one of the most polluted rivers in the country and also where I get my drinking water from. And so, I would just show up to these meetings with lots of PDFs that I had found online. I had gone to the state library at some point and found some of the earliest reports from these commissions. And I would just read back into the record, because they were community hearings, so they had to transcribe everything. And I would just read back all of these things like, this is what your commission was saying in 1941, this was your mission, and now you're proposing to walk back from your mission. And all of these people would come up to me and they'd be like, “Oh my God, you're the librarian! Like, you need to come back to the next hearing because you just read all these documents,” and I think, I wasn't doing anything, you know, I wasn't reading in some tone of voice that someone else couldn't manage, but as a librarian and as an archivist, I kind of knew where to look to find that information.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** In other words, archivists have a unique skill set—a superpower if you will—that they can offer to climate and environmental movements…if they choose to.

**Eira Tansey:** Yeah. For me, one of the things that I think is really critical that I would like to see more archivists, as well as librarians and anyone who's really an information worker think about is how information that is not necessarily in our institutions, how that is really essential to these questions of environmental justice and transparency and accountability. So, one of the things I'm thinking about is that there are all sorts of deregulatory measures right now, in terms of the kind of, you know—environmental racism often manifests itself as disproportionate pollution or waste siting in neighborhoods of color or working class, poorer communities. And a lot of the records and the data on that are not anything that's going to end up in a prestige research library. And so I think archivists sometimes our vision of what our professional ethics and responsibilities are, oftentimes I don't think are broad enough because we should be the people who are filing Amicus briefs on any time there's a deregulatory effort to try to reduce the amount of data being collected on things because we're information workers, we should care about information wherever it exists, even if it's not within our institutions.

But I think so many archivists and librarians and information workers overly identify with the missions of our institutions that often means we abdicate our professional responsibilities. What good are archivists to society if we only think about our responsibility through our institutions, as opposed to where information exists elsewhere?

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Archives aren't neutral. Archivists and the institutions they represent have to make choices about what records to preserve, how to organize and describe them, what information becomes available and to whom. One of my takeaways from my conversation with Ben and Eira was that there is a role for activism in archival work, and a vital one. But that doesn't mean the work is easy.

**Eira Tansey:** And I think one of the realities of working against the status quo, however, you want to define that, is you lose more than you win. But you can't fight unless you try. And so just educating other people about, "hey, here's all this information out here"— I think sometimes just being the librarian or an archivist in the work that's already happening and bringing your information skills is one of the most valuable things that people can contribute to environmental movements that are already doing great work.

**Ben Goldman:** One thing I've learned from Eira and from some of my other friends who, I'm active in these issues with is that it's just so much better to do it together, to do it with other people because there are issues of grief and I struggle mentally myself on an almost daily basis with my own grief and worry over these issues, so it just always feels better. And I mean, I think, having Eira to work on a lot of these projects with has just like really kind of kept me going too. So, I guess that would be my advice is just, find people to do this work with you and work together.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Agreed. We have a lot of work to do, let's support each other along the way.

Thanks for joining us. To learn more about Eira's and Ben's work, including the RepoData project, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org.

In our next episode, we'll be talking with Crystal Felima, emergency manager at FEMA, about the importance of culture to resiliency and why it matters how we remember the stories of disasters.

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I'm your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo and this is Material Memory.