

Weeding as a Sustainable Practice: Ethical Implications for Library Collection Management

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Abstract

Libraries continually refine their collections to ensure they remain relevant, reliable, and representative of their users' needs. However, the process of weeding raises pressing ethical and environmental concerns. This study reframes weeding as a practice of ethical stewardship and sustainable collection management rather than a routine technical procedure. It introduces the ethical-sustainability weeding framework (ESWF), a conceptual model integrating ethical responsibility, Institutional transparency, and ecological accountability. The ESWF encompasses five interrelated dimensions: policy development, sustainable disposal alternatives, ethical safeguards, and documentation and review. Together, these dimensions guide libraries towards systematic, transparent, and environmentally conscious deselection practices. By emphasizing recycling, donation, and digital preservation, the framework promotes circular use of resources and mitigates environmental impact. The study argues that embedding ethical and sustainable principles into weeding not only optimizes library resources but also reinforces libraries' social responsibility, ecological commitment, and long-term collection integrity.

Keywords: Weeding, deselection, sustainability, ethics, collection management, library collection management

INTRODUCTION

Libraries weed out damaged, outdated, or low-circulating materials to maintain high-quality collections [1–38]. This ensures that resources remain relevant and accessible, meeting users' needs [39]. However, weeding out library collections is a time-consuming [40] and challenging process [30], requiring careful decision-making to balance collection quality with ethical and sustainability considerations. Many libraries assume that physical books are only useful if actively read [8], which has intensified debates around sustainability and ethics in collection deselection.

Weeding practices often result in enormous resource waste, with discarded books and materials ending up in landfills, contributing to environmental degradation and inefficiency. This raises ethical concerns, as libraries are responsible not only for providing equitable access to knowledge but also for implementing environmentally responsible disposal plans for these materials. The shift to sustainable development methods in libraries requires an ethical framework that prioritizes transparency, stakeholder engagement, and responsible resource management. Sustainable weeding practices emphasize recycling, repurposing, and redistributing withdrawn materials rather than merely discarding them. Ethical principles ensure fairness, inclusivity, and accountability in decision-

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making processes, including deselection. Therefore, libraries must establish well-documented policies grounded in objective criteria that balance institutional priorities, user expectations, and broader societal values. By implementing ethical and sustainable weeding practices, libraries not only preserve the integrity of their collections but also reinforce their role as socially responsible institutions that are committed to environmental stewardship.

This study adopts a conceptual approach that synthesizes existing scholarship on library ethics and sustainability to propose a unified framework: the ethical-sustainability weeding framework (ESWF). The ESWF aims to guide libraries towards ethical decision-making, environmental responsibility, and sustainable collection management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Weeding is the process of deselecting or removing library collections that no longer serve their intended purpose, thereby ensuring that collections remain relevant and useful [13]. It serves as an evaluative tool, helping librarians identify outdated, redundant, or low-circulating materials [19], and complements acquisition by ensuring a balanced and functional collection [5]. As libraries adapt to special and technological changes, systematic weeding becomes essential for optimizing space and enhancing access [7, 28]; however, weeding is not always a routine practice in many libraries [5], primarily due to the lack of formal policies [17, 35].

Weeding as a Sustainable Practice

Weeding is integral to sustainable collection management, enabling libraries to remain adaptable by removing outdated or underused materials [23]. However, sustainability in weeding is often hindered by institutional resistance, a lack of policies, and concerns over losing valuable resources [17]. A well-structured, scheduled weeding routine, rather than sporadic efforts, can enhance efficiency and reduce burnout among library staff [5]. Sustainable library management encompasses environmentally conscious practices such as controlled disposal, effective pest management, and responsible handling and disposal of obsolete materials [31]. Passive weeding strategies, such as minimizing reliance on large-scale storage and preservation systems, can effectively reduce resource consumption and environmental impact in libraries [1]. Moreover, reusing or redistributing deselected materials through donations, digital preservation, or recycling reinforces libraries' role in promoting circular economy practices [5]. A discipline-specific approach is crucial for weeding, particularly in fields like the humanities, where older materials may hold historical and research significance [27]. Ethical stewardship requires libraries to ensure diversity in their preserved materials, engage the community in decision-making processes, and maintain transparency [23, 39]. A well-documented and transparent weeding policy builds institutional support and reduces opposition from staff and users [13]. Sustainability extends to digital collections, where licensing restrictions and access agreements complicate equitable access to information [39]. Prioritizing resource sharing, responsible management, and environmental awareness reflects the principle of sustainable librarianship, ensuring that collection management remains socially equitable, environmentally responsible, and economically viable for both present and future needs [15, 26].

Ethical Considerations in Weeding

The ethical dimensions of weeding involve understanding the librarian's responsibility to act with honesty, objectivity, and loyalty to the user community [2, 36]. A transparent weeding process fosters understanding and acceptance among stakeholders [13]. Simultaneously, ethical tensions arise when deselection results in the loss of historical or unique materials that may still hold cultural or scholarly significance [17]. Overreliance on circulation statistics or superficial assessments risks undermining the intellectual and cultural diversity libraries are mandated to preserve [29]. Ethical weeding requires a nuanced balance between removing obsolete materials and safeguarding historical and scholarly integrity [23]. These principles extend to digital resources, where ownership, licensing, and perpetual access shape long-term collection management decisions [39].

Objective of the Study

The study aims to:

- examine the ethical and sustainable dimensions of weeding practices in libraries
- assess the challenges and policy gaps affecting responsible deselection
- propose the ESWF to promote responsible and transparent collection management.

Why Become Obsolete?

Obsolescence in library collections is an inevitable phenomenon shaped by the evolving dynamics of scholarship, pedagogy, technology, and cultural change. Once considered authoritative, resources gradually lose their relevance when they fail to meet the needs of contemporary academics or users. These causes can be understood across several dimensions.

- *Advancement of knowledge:* The obsolescence of library materials is strongly influenced by the rapid advancement of knowledge, particularly in fields where research progresses rapidly. Dorta-González and Gómez-Déniz (2022) [9] demonstrated that the aging of research literature varies significantly across disciplines, with scientific fields exhibiting faster rates of obsolescence owing to a continuous stream of new discoveries. Even authoritative materials can quickly lose relevance as emerging studies reshape the knowledge landscape, reflecting the dynamic nature of scholarly information.
- *Change in curriculum or research trends:* Library collections reflect institutional priorities. When academic programs are revised, or research interests shift, resources tied to outdated courses or discontinued areas become less useful [37]. Obsolescence reflects a misalignment between static collections and dynamic educational agendas.
- *Superseded editions:* Updated editions embody contemporary standards, methodologies, and data. Earlier versions, while historically valuable, lose credibility for current teaching and research. As Faber et al. (2023) [10] noted, retaining obsolete editions without clear justification risks distorting the dissemination of knowledge.
- *Cultural and social irrelevance:* Beyond academic trends, collections become obsolete when they no longer reflect the prevailing cultural values or inclusive perspectives. Neglecting contemporary topics or inclusive viewpoints can disconnect collections from users' realities and their community needs. To maintain relevance, libraries must regularly update their materials to mirror evolving social values and academic priorities [3, 16, 25].
- *Lack of use or demand:* Patterns of circulation and access provide measurable indicators of obsolescence in literature. Materials that remain unused over extended periods signal declining relevance to the user. Evidence-based deselection, grounded in usage statistics, supports efficient and user-centered collection management [13, 24].
- *Physical deterioration:* Wear, mold, stains, and damage undermine the readability, presentation, and longevity of the materials. While rare or archival works may merit preservation, most deteriorated items become unsuitable for active collections without costly conservation [14, 34].
- *Availability of better alternatives:* The proliferation of digital resources has transformed information access. Superior alternatives that are more comprehensive, accessible, and user-friendly accelerate the obsolescence of older print materials [12]. This rapid expansion of digital content intensifies challenges related to collection relevance and spatial constraints, compelling libraries to implement systematic weeding strategies that strategically integrate traditional holdings with digital formats [13, 33].
- *Shifts in language and terminology:* Changes in subject vocabularies and terminology reduce the accessibility of older texts. As Buckland (2012) [4] and Line and Sandison (1974) [24] noted, literature can become obsolete not only through outdated content but also through outdated descriptors, which limit discoverability and use.

Obsolescence arises not from a single cause but from the interaction of intellectual, curricular, cultural, technological, and physical factors. Recognizing these drivers equips libraries to manage deselection more strategically, thereby sustaining collections that are both current and contextually relevant.

ETHICAL-SUSTAINABILITY WEEDING FRAMEWORK

Drawing on existing scholarship, this study proposes the ESWF as a structured model to guide library practices. The framework emphasizes ethical responsibility, institutional accountability, and sustainable practices across five interrelated dimensions.

- *Policy development:* A written and transparent weeding policy is essential to ensure systematic and consistent deselection aligned with institutional goals. Such policies provide objective criteria, reduce bias, and foster stakeholder trust by clarifying why and how materials are removed [13]. In contrast, the absence of a policy often results in ad hoc, inconsistent practices driven by space constraints or individual judgment [5]. Studies have revealed that 61% of university libraries in Pakistan do not engage in systematic weeding due to a lack of formal policies [17]. The American Library Association (ALA) recommends that every library adopt comprehensive policies that incorporate selection, deselection, and reconsideration, with models like continuous review, evaluation, and weeding (CREW) and the misleading, ugly, superseded, trivial, irrelevant, or elsewhere (MUSTIE) criteria offering practical guidelines [18].
- *Sustainable disposal alternative:* Deselected materials must be managed in an environmentally responsible manner to avoid reputational and ecological risks. Preferred strategies include donations, resale, recycling, and digital archiving, which extend the resource lifecycle while fostering community engagement [13, 36]. Creative approaches, such as upcycling, further transform outdated items into functional or artistic products, strengthening sustainability and perception [6].
- *Ethical safeguards:* Libraries must evaluate the historical, cultural, and academic value of materials before disposal. Discarding culturally or historically significant items risks ending collective memory and scholarly heritage [21]. As Bazirjian (2022) [2] noted, ethical weeding requires careful consideration of scholarly worth, particularly in academic institutions entrusted with preserving diverse knowledge traditions.
- *Documentation and review:* Recording weeding decisions and conducting periodic reviews ensure accountability, transparency, and alignment with institutional goals. Documentation helps justify decisions, guide further weeding, and balance present needs with long-term preservation [11, 32]. Case studies, such as the selective weeding of specialized collections [22], demonstrate the importance of integrating traditional weeding with innovative review models to maintain academic and historical integrity.

In summary, the ESWF provides a comprehensive framework that situates weeding not merely as a technical task but as an ethical and sustainable responsibility. By embedding clear policies, engaging stakeholders, adopting environmentally friendly disposal strategies, safeguarding heritage, and documenting best practices, libraries can align their collection management with institutional goals and global sustainability.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the evolving discourse that positions weeding as a dynamic and context-dependent component of library collection management. While earlier scholarship primarily emphasized systematic deselection and space optimization [5, 13], this study extends this perspective by integrating ethical and sustainability dimensions through the ESWF. The framework bridges operational efficiency with moral accountability, aligning with Jackson's (2022) [15] assertion that sustainable librarianship must incorporate both environmental and social responsibilities. Unlike studies that evaluate weeding through functional or quantitative parameters [20, 30], the ESWF emphasizes qualitative judgment, ethical considerations, and stakeholder engagement as essential components of responsible deselection. This orientation supports [23, 31], who advocate reducing ecological footprints through recycling, reuse, and transparent governance. Furthermore, the framework reinforces the preservation of culturally and historically significant materials during deselection.

The ESWF also strengthens earlier calls by Francis (2012) [11] and Reed-Scott (1985) [32] for accountability and procedural consistency through its emphasis on documentation and periodic review. Its inclusion of sustainable disposal alternatives is a response to contemporary demands for environmentally conscious librarianship. Collectively, this framework advances an integrative model that reconciles institutional imperatives with ethical and ecological stewardship and offers a holistic approach to sustainable collection management.

CONCLUSION

Weeding, guided by ethical and sustainable principles, extends beyond routine maintenance to embody libraries' moral and ecological responsibilities. ESWF provides a structured model that integrates transparency, accountability, and sustainable disposal practices, thereby addressing both the operational and moral dimensions of collection management. By aligning with ethical standards and sustainability principles, the ESWF provides libraries with a roadmap for transparent, inclusive, and ecologically responsible deselection practices. Its adoption can enhance institutional accountability, reduce environmental impact, and preserve cultural integrity.

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