The Green Game: Awareness and Expectations of Sustainability Efforts by Spectators

Jonathan Casper, North Carolina State University
Michael Pfahl, Ohio University

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An individual’s environmental awareness and knowledge are keys to determining environmental actions taken in a given context (Bamburg and Möser, 2007; Manstead, 2000; Spaargaren, 2003). For example, whereas awareness of a pollution problem reveals the nature of the problem, knowledge of it lies within the integrated understandings of causes and solutions to the problem. Actions (including inaction) stem from awareness and knowledge levels and can take a variety of forms (e.g., strategic planning processes) (Mascarhenas, 2009; Roome & Wijen, 2006).

Previous research examined how environmentally-related strategies and tactics are created, conducted, and reviewed within the broader strategic planning process of an organization including sport organizations (e.g., athletics department, professional team) (Author, 2011; Morrone, Mancl, & Carr, 2001; Nicolaides, 2006). Complicating this task is the extent to which various stakeholders are engaged with the environmental strategies of a sport organization. Little is known as to what these stakeholders believe or want, especially the largest stakeholder group: the fans. This exploratory study used a sustainability-themed intercollegiate sporting event to assess the awareness, knowledge, and expectations the fans had of the role of sustainability within intercollegiate contests, athletics departments, and university activities in general.

On April 29, 2011 a Division I baseball team held their first Green Game. Pre-game efforts included announcements on the University website and through the Office of Sustainability’s weekly e-newsletter. At the game, a sustainability information table was set-up at the main entrance and volunteers communicated the purpose of the game, distributed information on University-led and regional sustainability projects, and handed out green-themed merchandise (e.g., t-shirts). Composting and recycling bins were placed throughout the ballpark. During the 7th-inning stretch, a sustainability-themed promotional video was shown and the end of the game there was proactive recycling by volunteers. Surveys were distributed and collected beginning 45 minutes before and up until game time. A follow-up, web-based survey was then sent to respondents who indicated a willingness to complete an additional survey three days after the game.

The instrument included demographic items (e.g., gender, student status). Survey items asked respondents about their awareness of the sustainability-themed game and of environmental sustainability efforts initiated by Office of Sustainability and Athletics Department personnel. Questions were also asked about expectations of environmental efforts at the University and specific to athletic events (1 = no expectation to 4 = strong expectation). Lastly, respondents indicated environmental efforts they expect to see at athletic contests. Respondents voluntarily provided an e-mail address to receive a 7-item web-based follow-up survey. Questions included changes in awareness of university and athletic departments’ efforts based on attending the game, what environmental actives they are more aware of, and changes in personal perspectives about the environment. Data analysis was descriptive (e.g., means, standard deviation) and the student and non-student respondents were different stakeholders, the results were also compared using Chi-square and t-tests.

A total of 162 valid surveys were obtained on the game day. Based on the number of actual attendees at game time (approximately 350), the response rate was over 50%. There were more males (58%), the average age was 36 years old, and 51% were not current students at the University. A substantial majority of the attendees were not aware of the green game focus before the game, but non-students were significantly (p = .04, Chi-Square = 8.38, Eta = .228) more aware of the theme.

Key results of the study include those related to University-led sustainability projects. In this case, most students were more aware of the Earth Day initiative (Chi-Square = 20.87, p < .001, Eta = .359) and University transportation initiative (Chi-Square = 10.985, p = .001, Eta = .260), but a majority of students and non-students indicated they were not aware of other initiatives. The only athletic department-related effort that a majority of student and non-student
respondents were aware of was the football game-day recycling program. The respondents had expectations for University and Athletics Department efforts, but there were no significant differences between students and non-students. A majority (>50%) of the respondents expectations related to environmental elements at athletic events (e.g., recycling, alternative transportation options). Additional results will be provided in the presentation including additional data about respondent perspectives and expectations of environmental actions by Athletics Department and University personnel.

A total of 35 respondents completed the follow-up survey (47% response rate). Key findings in this area include awareness of game-related actions, where 57% of respondents visited the Sustainability information table, and 51% reporting viewing the video shown during the 5th inning. Based on these responses, about 86% stated the game changed their awareness of University environmental efforts and over 83% stated the game changed their awareness of Athletic department efforts. Additional data will be provided in the presentation focusing on the extent to which personal views were changed in relation to environmental issues and actions needed to address them.

The results of this study show future efforts by sport personnel need to focus on promoting the environmental theme before, during, and after green games to build awareness, to encourage participation in event activities, and to facilitate behavioral change in the long term. Further, the study demonstrates the need for coordinated environmental strategies between Athletics Department and University Sustainability personnel to reach various stakeholders (Author, 2011). The data showed athletic events can be effective ways to initiate behavior change efforts through coordinated strategies across different sports or events. Experiential events showcase environmental operations and encourage awareness, knowledge, and behavioral change among stakeholders (e.g., fans). The results of this study show spectators are receptive to green efforts and illustrate their strategic importance to an overall environmental strategic plan.