

Urban-proximate nature as a resource for events and festivals: a SWOT analysis

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Events and festivals are a key sector of the leisure industry and throughout history have interacted in a close relationship with the natural environment. Urban-proximate nature is utilised considerably, particularly for outdoor events. If there is to be a successful global transition to a green economy, a more strategic approach to using natural capital must be developed. A traditional business approach is to undertake a 'SWOT' analysis and this strategy is adopted here as a first step. In this conceptual study, desk research using secondary data from academic, industry and environmental sources was undertaken to produce an analysis of the events and festival sector in relation to urban-proximate nature.

A 'SWOT' analysis, i.e. the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which are likely to impact on strategic development of an organisation (Johnson et al. 2011) is used to diagnose its strategic capabilities. The strengths and weaknesses of an organisation arise from its internal environment and the opportunities and threats derive from the external environment. Here I adopt the same approach in relation to the natural environment as a resource for events and festivals. For simplicity, the internal environment is that of the natural world, which is differentiated from the external environment of the social world which impacts upon it. The social world has two principal components, the socio-cultural environment and the socio-technical environment. However, the contested notion of '*external nature*' (Phillips and Mighall 2000) is acknowledged and hence both perspectives of environmental determinism and cultural determinism are adopted. Similarly, a 'dialectical' conception of society when applied to society-nature relations is appropriate as it stresses both social and individual agency.

I contend that the 'Strength' of natural capital as a resource for events and festivals, is its sheer *abundance* and *variety*; its 'Weakness', is its *unpredictability*, the 'Opportunities' arise from *cultural and technological agency* and its *vulnerability* is a 'Threat' to it.

Urban-proximate nature is *abundant* throughout the world and is available in many forms, both aquatic and land-based. Venues for outdoor events include coastal waters, rivers, lakes and canals. Land-based sites can be located on agricultural land, beaches, parks, woodlands, hills and mountains. These provide a variety of surfaces for event participants; grass, but also, sand, snow, ice, even mud. The sky above is also used for air shows and balloon festivals amongst others. The natural world also affords resources for events held both indoors and out. It provides the food and drink consumed at events, not only for nourishment but also as part of the offer – for example, the drinks consumed at wine, tea and rosewater festivals. Flora and fauna may be nurtured for events, such as flower festivals and animals are reared for entertainment and sport, such as horse racing.

The paper that is written on and the material for the bags that are carried and the T-shirts that are worn are all produced in urban-proximate lands.

The principal 'Weakness' of the natural world as a resource for events and festivals arises from the *unpredictability* of nature, particularly, of course, the weather in many countries. Every year, numerous outdoor events have their programme changed or have to be postponed or even cancelled, because of inclement weather. Other diverse natural phenomena may have an erratic impact such as the size and form of waves in coastal waters for sporting events; animals may not perform as desired and volcanic ash clouds have recently impeded travel to international events.

Culture, however, creates numerous 'Opportunities' for the natural world. There is a long tradition of events and festivals which revere nature, such as the Harvest Festival. Events such as conferences have always been at the heart of the environmental movement, for example, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change adopted in Rio in 1992 and this year, its successor, Rio +20. Arts based festivals often depend on the natural world for their inspiration, thus stimulating its conservation. Socio-natural developments such as the breeding of domesticated animals and new plant varieties have been encouraged through agricultural and horticultural shows. Socio-natural places have been created as part of an event legacy, for example, the Sydney Olympic Park. Protection of the natural world has come about through societal expectations creating Standards for environmental protection, first specifically for the events industry, e.g. BS8901 in the UK and then generally e.g. ISO 14001. Cultural norms encouraging environmentally sensitive behaviour amongst visitors to events such as the recycling of materials may lead to behavioural change in other areas of their lives. The use of natural places for outdoor events can ensure their legal protection from development or exploitation in more damaging ways. Also technological solutions being developed, for example, modern media, allow a much larger audience to enjoy the experience of an event rather than limiting it to those who could physically attend, with the resultant environmental damage.

Finally, the principal 'Threats' from events and festivals are those of human activity in general, for example, carbon emissions contributing to climate change, the utilisation of natural resources, the creation of waste, damage to ecosystems and loss of biodiversity etc. Urban-proximate areas are of course, the most *vulnerable* to environmental exploitation and degradation and can ultimately be wholly lost through urban expansion, for indoor event venues, such as conference facilities.

SWOT analysis has two inherent dangers. It can be used to generate long lists of apparent strengths, weaknesses etc.,

without any prioritisation of issues. Secondly, it can lack specificity and can be based on preconceived or often inherited ideas (Johnson et al. 2011). However, it can help to focus attention on strategic choices through the development of a TOWS matrix, which uses the same information but through a different combination of factors, enabling four types of strategic options to be identified. The events and festival industry urgently needs to conduct further research in this area if it is to continue to have the natural resources available upon which it depends so heavily.

To conclude, a green economy requires not only that events and festivals are environmentally sustainable in their own right, but also that there is recognition of the continuing role of the industry in entertaining, inspiring and educating participants in and about the natural world.