

The environmental impacts of sport: the case of football

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Introduction

Sport is a unique and powerful cultural phenomenon. As well as having significant social and economic impacts, sport has many environmental impacts. Sport's ecological footprint is considerable, but the environmental impacts of sport have received relatively little attention. Many sporting organisations are now beginning to address the fact that sport is demanding on the physical environment, particularly with the emphasis on sustainability of the London 2012 Olympics. Detailed research into the specific environmental impacts of sport and the efforts of sporting organisations to address them is limited.

This case study is based on research into the environmental protection efforts of UK Premiership football clubs. It describes which key environmental impacts football needs to address, how clubs are attempting to do so and what challenges they face. In the UK, football is the highest profile and most popular sport. The Premier League is the most-watched football league in the world. Extra funding in modern football allows clubs to address issues relating to environmental sustainability. Given the passion and interest that football generates, clubs may have considerable power to promote and influence environmentally sustainable behaviour. Semi-structured interviews with key managers with a responsibility for environmental management were conducted with UK Premier League Clubs¹, primary data was combined with the analysis of extensive secondary data, such as websites and company

reports and policies.

Findings

What are football's key environmental impacts?

Football grounds, with their massive water use and high energy floodlights, are the site of many of the main environmental impacts of most football clubs. The thousands of fans who travel to matches generate huge amounts of waste and carbon emissions travelling to and sustaining their big day out. There are also environmental impacts associated with the supply chains of football clubs' catering and merchandising outlets. Measuring the ecological footprint of one FA cup final football game held at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium showed that a total of 59 tonnes of waste was generated by supporters and food and drink businesses in Cardiff. It is estimated that it takes 20,000 litres of water per day to maintain a football pitch in the English Premier League², enough to fill a small swimming pool.

Who is responsible for tackling these issues?

It is generally the responsibility of the stadium or facilities manager to initiate environmental protection measures. Few Premiership football clubs have introduced formal environmental policies or management systems. Environmental issues tend to be addressed in an informal rather than planned fashion.



What environmental protection measures do football clubs undertake?

UK Premiership football clubs have taken a variety of steps to lessen their environmental impact- they view the main environmental impacts of football in three- ways, the inputs, the processes that take place and the outputs. Key areas that are addressed are waste, energy, transport and supply chains. For example one club saved 42% in energy costs on one site by installing more efficient lighting. Several clubs are investigating new sources of energy supply such as the installation of onsite Biomass Energy System plants and wind turbines. One top flight Premier League club takes waste issues very seriously. For example 90% of its office building is built from materials sourced from within a 4 mile radius of the club, 80% are made from recycled materials, and this actually cost 25% less than the traditional route. The club has used its influence to work with a major drinks supplier to ensure that they only supply plastics that can be recycled, which shows the potential power that football has to change behaviour. Other issues that are addressed to a lesser degree are water use, environmental education, biodiversity and climate change.

- **Waste:** Recycling initiatives such as the recycling of fan waste on all concourses and points around the stadium, bailing and recycling of plastics and cardboard. Turning waste into profit e.g. turning grass cuttings into compost, turning paper waste into insulation, turning glass waste into footpaths.
- **Energy:** Awarding of Carbon Trust Standard for reductions in carbon and improvements in energy efficiency. Investigating possibility of installing a wind turbine.
- **Transport:** Working with the City Council and the Community Foundation on a new transport plan- promoting walking and cycling to the Stadium (both fans and staff).
- **Supply Chain:** Purchase as much as possible from within one mile of their stadium and ask as many as possible of their suppliers to do the same.

Conclusions

- Football clubs recognise that the business of sport has negative environmental impacts that must be addressed. There are a number of examples of innovative practices in football clubs.
- Addressing environmental sustainability in football is an evolving process; some clubs are further ahead in the process than others.
- Football clubs typically face a number of challenges when trying to implement environmental sustainability: resource constraints (lack of time and money); waste management issues (lack of flexibility from waste management companies); conflicts between the commercial objectives of the club and the imperative to protect the environment, and lack of support and guidance.
- Football is in a strong position to be able to affect and influence people's lives. It is clear that football clubs do feel that they have a strong role in the community, and part of that role is environmental protection, but stadium managers do not know how they can translate their efforts to supporters and influence their environmental behaviour.

References

¹ 23 Clubs were included in this study, the 20 Premier League clubs for the 2011/2012 season including the 3 newly promoted clubs, and the 3 clubs relegated at the end of the 2010/11 season. Promoted and relegated clubs were included to investigate how much difference the gain/loss of Premiership revenue affected a Club's ability to implement environmental sustainability measures.

² From Ethical Consumer Magazine 'guide to Football', 2008.