To be “Green” or Not to be “Green”: The Perspectives of Sport Consumers on the Relationship Between Sport and the Environment

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It has been noted that effective management using Corporate Social Responsibility can be accomplished as long as “the practice of corporate social responsibility means responding to a variety of stakeholders with different interests and needs” (Vos, 2003, p. 151) and “formulating strategies to respond to those interests” (Slack, 2005, p. 163). In recent years, sport entities have begun to place the environment as a CSR priority in their strategies, as it has been noted with Olympic bid host cities, that “no-one can afford to shirk their responsibilities to the environment without risking condemnation” (Bisson & Sherlock, 2008, p. 64). In 2009, the NBA partnered with the Natural Resources Defense Council in an effort to generate awareness and funds to protect the environment and in 2010, the Winter Olympics created a ‘green roof’ on the Olympic village that was designed to manage storm water drainage and reduce heat island effect of urbanization, while strong messages to discourage use of toxic materials (e.g., polystyrene, plastic) were communicated at the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Increased corporate accountability has resulted from rising societal expectations for sport organizations to be economically, socially, and environmentally responsible in their business conduct (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006, 2009; Bradish & Cronin, 2009). This is further reinforced by the notion that sport business entities are seen to be in a unique position to impact society (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Godfrey, 2009), as noted by National Basketball Association (NBA) Commissioner David Stern, “All corporations have a social responsibility to contribute to the health, welfare and advancement of communities in which they operate, but professional sports leagues carry a special obligation [which] empowers them to affect change” (Wilner, 2008, p. 21). For these reasons, sport entities are engaging in corporate socially responsibility more strategically with environmentally prudent practices at the top of the agenda in hopes of affecting change in their sport community.

While sport entities are taking an active role in addressing environmental concerns, little is known about the perspectives of their stakeholders. For this reason, the present study will address the perspectives of their major stakeholder, consumers, within the stakeholder theory and management framework, whereby primary stakeholders’ attitudes and needs are assessed to more effectively manage long-lasting and positive relationships (e.g., Clarkson, 1995; Preble, 2005). Specifically, sport consumer perspectives will be examined related to three areas; the relationship between sport and the environment, responsibility of sport to the environment, and the sport consumer and ecologically conscious consumer behaviors as they relate to sport. More specifically, the following research questions were explored:

Research Question 1: Do sport consumers think there is a relationship between the environment and sport?
Research Question 2: Do sport consumers think that the environment is a responsibility of sport?
Research Question 3: Are sport consumers ecologically conscious in their sport consumption behaviors?

While there has been a recent interest in the sustainability of sport facilities (e.g., Fried, 2005), few researchers have explored the sport consumer perspective on environmental concerns and its impact on ecologically conscious consumer behavior (e.g., Ogle, Hyllegard, & Dunbar, 2006; Nguyen, 2010). As this is a relatively unexplored area, it is imperative that consumer perspectives are assessed. The researchers collected sport consumer perspectives via focus groups to acquire high quality data in a social context where individual views can be compared to the views of others (Patton, 1990). Purposive sampling of consumers of the two most popular Australian spectator sports, cricket and Australian rules football (ABS, 2007), were selected to represent Australian sport consumers. The two focus groups were composed of five (primarily cricket) consumers and six (primarily Australian rules football) consumers respectively. Using Somer and Somer’s (1991) advised procedure, the data was transcribed and content analysed, which is “the process of identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data” (Patton, 1990, p. 381).

Results indicated that there was a lack of apparent relationship between the sport industry and the environment. There were social issues (e.g., role modeling, women in sport) that were more strongly linked to sport, with the environment noted to be among the least connected to sport. Further, sport consumers believed that government should be most responsible for the environment through policies and legislation. While this was the general consensus, those sport consumers that acknowledged that sport has begun to address environmental concerns have noted that sport’s actions were seen to be “not genuine,” “illegitimate,” and the efforts made thus far are minimal. From the sport consumer perspective, the perceived lack of effort by sport entities to engage with environmental issues have had minimal impact on any real awareness of environmental issues as they relate to sport and therefore any other potential outcomes (e.g., impact on sport consumer attitudes and behaviors).
Further, there was discussion on ways in which sport could strengthen their efforts to “impact” society and consumers via usage of their inherent power of persuasion and relationships with other stakeholders (e.g., media, government, etc.). When reflecting on their personal attitudes and behaviors, consumers believed that consideration of individual impact on the environment was important and they were ecologically conscious in their general consumption of goods and services, but not with sport products (e.g., purchasing sport equipment made of recycled materials, etc.). Understanding the perspectives of sport consumers provides an insight that will lead to future research on indicators and outcomes of corporate social issues relevant to the environment and sport. More detailed results and sport management and marketing implications will be presented.