

# Greening Bonnaroo: Exploring the rhetoric and the reality of a sustainable festival through micro-ethnographic methods

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## Abstract

This research revealed that the greening policies of the Bonnaroo Festival are translated into sustainable event practice through: educational activities for volunteers and festival-goers, the creation of spaces of hyper-sustainability within the event and the embedding of green issues into the core values of the event. By using micro-ethnographic methods within a qualitative case study to compare the rhetoric of the festival with the practices occurring within it, the researchers have been able to make a number of recommendations for continuing and deepening the greening policies of this event, including a need to increase the scope and influence of the spaces of hyper-sustainability within the festival so as to broaden their localised impact and increasing direct engagement with festival goers on environmental issues.

**Keywords:** Festivals, sustainability, ethnography, volunteers, greening

## Introduction

Bonnaroo is one of the largest music festivals in the US, taking place over 4 days each year in rural Tennessee, 60 miles outside of Nashville, and regularly attracting more than 70,000 attendees. This event has attracted significant attention for its greening policies, becoming one of only two US winners of the Greener Festival Award in 2008 and 2009 and marketing itself with messages of environmental responsibility and sustainability. The event is highly regarded within the American music industry, described by Rolling Stone Magazine as “The American music festival to end all festivals” (cited in Arik & Penn 2005: 5).

“Bonnaroo is committed to investing the extensive time and resources necessary to be a leader in creating a sustainable festival. From our inception, the festival has strived to make the most sustainable choices while maintaining the ultimate experience for the fan, setting the standard in sustainability and greening practices for North American festivals.

The Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival is committed to partnering with the fans, other festivals, musicians, and artists to affect change. To take our sustainability practices to the next level the festival is a proponent of behaviour changes, long-term investments, and the ripple effect of education.

Bonnaroo’s overarching sustainability principle is: local is sustainable. We will use this principle to guide our decisions for 2009 and beyond.”

(Bonnaroo, 2009: home)

We can consider the Bonnaroo to be one of an increasing number of intentionally ‘green events’, defined by Laing & Frost (2010: 262) as a kind of event that “has a sustainability policy or incorporates sustainable practices into its management and operations.”

Anderton (2009) highlights a tension in the study of festivals between ideas of the carnivalesque on the one hand and a cultural economy approach to researching the management and impacts of events on the other. By researching the visitor experience, it may be possible to link these concepts. The Bonnaroo festival, through its rhetorical emphasis on green issues, aims to attract individuals who embrace the carnivalesque and celebratory elements of the festival, but are also capable of relating this to an engaged environmentalism.

The experiences to be had at festivals are under-researched when compared to socio-cultural and economic impacts, or visitor motivations (Morgan 2006). This festival provides an interesting prism through which to further our knowledge of the event experience, due to the fact that the attendee experience and their practices whilst within the festival space are conceived by the festival managers as intrinsic to the impacts of the festival, culturally and environmentally. In this sense, the role of attendees at Bonnaroo can be seen as one of co-creatorship, or co-makership, a hallmark of recent innovations in creative tourism (Richards and Wilson 2007), where the co-creation of an experience is seen as constitutive of a more fulfilling experience.

Through the ethnographic research used in this study and its emphasis on the behaviours of specific cultural groups within the Bonnaroo culture, this method provided the ideal framework for the comparison of rhetoric and reality when looking at this festival’s ‘greening’ and sustainability policies. Ethnography allows for the authentic presentation of event attendee experiences (Brewer 2000) and the use of micro-ethnographic methods in this study has also added to developments in an emerging area of research within the events management field.

### **Ethnographic methods in events research**

Getz (2007) mentions ethnography as a methodological approach in his *Events Studies* text, noting that it is normally associated with cultural anthropology as a research tradition. Getz remarks that there is a rich literature on festivals associated with this research tradition, although it should also be noted that the use of this methodology in that context is usually associated with studies of ‘othered’ cultural groups, primarily those based outside of the global north institutional framework of the events management discipline. More generally within anthropology, the methodologies of participant observation associated with classic ethnographic studies in the developing world have increasingly been turned inwards to examine the rituals and cultural practices of developed economies.

“Ethnography is an eclectic methodological choice which privileges an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research... With respect to method, it entails the situational combination of field techniques (note taking, audio -/ visual recording, interviews, examination of indigenous literature, observation and such) rooted in the ideal of participant observation...” (Falzon 2009: 1)

Brewer defines participant observation as involving “data gathering by means of participation in the daily life of informants in their natural setting: watching, observing and talking to them in order to discover their interpretations, social meanings and activities.” (2000: 59). This

definition is commonly used in anthropology, where long-term participation within a social group is part of the established methodological framework for the discipline.

Although there are some foundational uses of ethnographic methods in the events management literature (e.g. Seaton 1997, O’Neill et al 1999), ethnography is still not seen as a mainstream choice for events management research, which is still dominated by positivist paradigms and quantitative methods (Holloway et al 2010). Carlsen (2003) includes participant and non-participant observation as methodological options when evaluating festivals and events. In particular, Carlsen states the value of using observation as a method for evaluating the visitor experience. This area of events research has been the most frequent field in which ethnographic methods have been used. For example, Anderson (2008) recently carried out participant observation in studying the V-Festival in the UK as part of a qualitative methodology, in order to access the attendee experience. Increasingly, netnographic methods are being developed that apply ethnographic principles to the study of the event experience, making use of the resource offered by online communities of event attendees, volunteers and fans (e.g. Laws & Bevan 2007 & Morgan 2008). This research aims to add to this growing body of methodological literature and to provide a case study of how these methods can be applied in practice using micro-ethnography as a research technique.

**Methods**

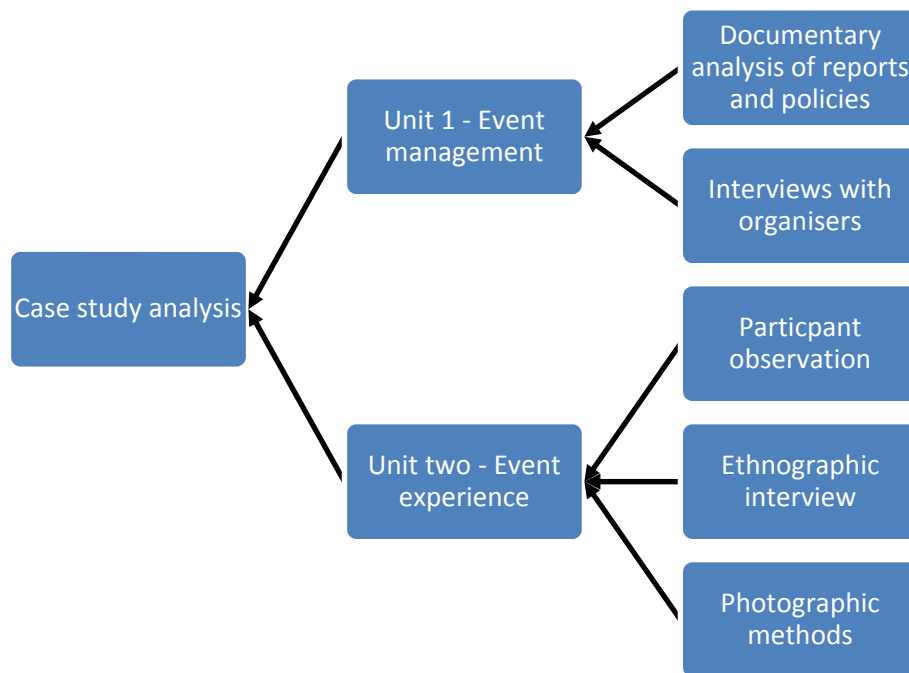
This paper is based on case-study research. Creswell (2007: 74) claims that a case study approach is appropriate when the “inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or comparison of several cases”. Yin (2003: 1) also indicates that a case study methodology is appropriate when exploratory questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is one a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.” In the following table, the components of Yin’s (2003: pp.13-14) technical definition are isolated and aligned with the objectives of this research design as they have been explored in the conceptual framework for this study.

**Table 1 - Case study definition**

<b>Yin’s technical definitional terms for case study research</b>	<b>Context of this research design</b>
Investigation of a contemporary phenomenon, within its real-life context	This research investigated a growing contemporary segment of the events market, during the event itself.
Boundaries between phenomenon and context not clearly evident	The behaviours of volunteers and attendees are seen as integral to the sustainability of the event.
Research object involves more variables of interest than data points	The study of the event experience can proceed from multiple perspectives, organisationally and individually.
Relies on multiple sources of data, which are convergent in analysis	The analysis of a range of attendee and volunteer contexts and behaviours suggests multiple sources of data

The multiple sources of data within this study were aligned with two units of analysis in a multiple-embedded case study design (Yin 2003).

**Figure 1 - case study design**



The data produced through this process was analysed using a system of inductive and deductive codes. This coding was used to identify themes in each set of data, which were then analysed comparatively using a data matrix.

The main methodological focus of this research was ethnographic in nature, which is also the area of concentration for this paper. While ethnographic research encompasses a broad range of culture, Smith (1978 as cited in Stokrocki, 1997, p.35) also recognises the use of micro-ethnography, which is defined as “the study of a smaller experience or a slice of everyday reality.” Micro-ethnography is thus a sub-set of ethnographic methods more generally which seek to “provide an in-depth study of a culture” (Holloway et al 2010: 76). This style of research, with its observation and submergence into the social and cultural behaviours of a focused group, in this case the Bonnaroo culture, was an appropriate means of research in order to compare the rhetoric and reality of the festivals’ ‘greening’ and sustainability policies, taking into account the short duration of the event, and of similar events to which the methods could be transferred. The ethnographic techniques used in this study were participant observation, ethnographic interview, photo-elicitation, researcher photography and auto-photography. These methods were used to engage with the event experience itself and to move beyond diagnostic assessments of event activities.

The researcher had complete access to all areas of the festival while interning for the Planet Roo Coordinator at the 2009 Bonnaroo Festival. While working as an intern, the researcher’s job involved aiding the coordinator in all operational efforts of the eco-village, including vendor management for environmental organisations, stage production, and artist transportation. The researcher also took part in working alongside the ‘Planet Roo Ambassador’ volunteers in various aspects of their role in greening efforts and the promotion of these to event attendees. This privileged level of access is fundamental to ethnographic methods, due to the opportunities it provides for immersion in, and contact with, the groups under study (Holloway et al 2010).

## **Findings**

The analysis of this data revealed that the greening policies of the festival were translated into sustainable event practice through: educational activities for volunteers and festival-goers, the creation of spaces of hyper-sustainability and embedding green issues into the core values of the event.

Over the course of this four-day festival, the success or failure of Bonnaroo's environmental programme is dependent on the behaviour of both the volunteers and festival attendees. The volunteers and staff set the pace for all 'greening' activities and promotion of these programmes within the festival.

#### *Educational activities at Bonnaroo*

The Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival states education, outreach, and activism as their primary greening policies and in an effort to better maintain and improve their dedication to sustainability, they seek to educate all parties involved in the festival. They begin by providing all Bonnaroo staff members and volunteers with a 'greening handbook' distributed via email, which includes a list of festival purchasing policies and greening tips. With this they hope to encourage Bonnaroo workers to "make the most sustainable choices from their travel to the festival, to what they purchase while in Manchester, to how they treat the actual site." Other ways through which they hope to further the ripple effect of education through policy practice through their vendors, partners, and sponsors is by including the Bonnaroo environmental mission statement in all agreements and contracts; partnering with the Carbon Shredders organisation to provide outreach to festival goers by setting up a pledge programme to reduce their carbon footprint by 10% within the year; the expansion of sustainability signage throughout the festival grounds with a goal of better educating patrons about the resources they are consuming (i.e. signs about water at each watering station); improve compost collection by increasing the number of manned recycling stations, as well as engaging a large number of volunteers to provide better education to festival attendees' on the proper disposal of materials.

Figure 2 - sustainability signage



Brooks (2007) and Laing & Frost (2010) have noted the importance of properly engaging event stakeholders in order for an event to succeed in its sustainable efforts. From the research gathered in this study, the impacts of all volunteers on Bonnaroo's 'greening' policies are significant in certain areas (i.e. waste diversion) but the inconsistencies between the policies and practices that Bonnaroo promote and the actual behavior and knowledge of volunteers and attendees lead to legitimate questions about the success of their sustainability efforts. The analysis of data collected in this research shows room for improvement by incorporating more 'greening' knowledge into the volunteer training process, to give them the tools to better educate and inspire festival goers, which will ultimately increase the overall success of their 'greening' practices. With upwards of 70-80,000 people in attendance to a festival like Bonnaroo, the chances of a negative environmental impact are significant without proper training and 'greening' promotion. Through the ethnographic data collected, the researcher discovered that waste diversion was the only 'greening' programme that the large majority of festival goers were aware of and actively participated in. When asked about their knowledge of greening activity on site, the following responses were typical:

“Not that much. I know that they hire a company called Clean Vibes to sort out trash and recyclables.”

“I know that everything sold within Centeroo is biodegradable, which ROCKS!! I also know they had many tents set up giving people as much information on different aspects of "greening" they are associated with.”

“I know that they work hard to make sure that everything is recycled accordingly.”

However, despite the festival goers lack of ‘greening’ knowledge, they responded positively to learning about Bonnaroo’s other sustainability initiatives when interviewed.

### *Hyper-sustainability*

Baudriallard (1994) identifies the hyper-real as that which comes to stand for the real and is taken for it, in a way that masks an underlying reality. This concept helps us to understand the very public spaces and activities of a hyper-sustainability at this festival. This manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, the ‘Planet Roo’ spaces of the event and, secondly, the team of Green Ambassadors.

Planet Roo is an eco-village placed centrally within the festival grounds and acts as a promotional hub to educate festival goers on both the festival’s greening programme, as well as current broader environmental and social issues. Various organisations have booths set up within Planet Roo to connect and inform festival patrons about their issue of choice, while the village also acts as the home to the Planet Roo Ambassadors. The organisations, ambassadors, and festival play host to events such as panel discussions, how-to sessions, and a documentary film tent in order to get the festival goers interested and involved in environmental activities and education.

Figure 3 - Planet Roo information booth



Through the use of micro-ethnographic research methods the researchers discovered that the general volunteers were aware of the basics of the environmental outreach and promoted it within the festival but the key to ‘green’ promotion and success relied more heavily on the Planet Roo Ambassadors. These specialist volunteers, who had an environmental NGO or higher education backgrounds, worked both within the Planet Roo village and throughout the festival spreading both the message of the festivals ‘greening’ efforts and how they could contribute to the success of a more sustainable Bonnaroo while also educating event attendees on various environmental issues. The Planet Roo Ambassadors engaged with



festival goers about various subjects ranging from teaching them about Bonnaroo's composting facility and various other 'greening' efforts, to educating them on different environmental issues (i.e. global warming, renewable energy sources) and providing them with information about the programmes (i.e. documentary tent, social change panel discussions) and non-profit/environmental organisations located in Planet Roo. The researcher observed that overall, festival attendees' were intrigued and generally quite happy to hear what the ambassadors had to say and when asked about their knowledge of Bonnaroo's 'greening' and sustainability efforts, the extent of the mass majority of their knowledge involved recycling, composting, or mentions of the Trash Talkers: volunteers stationed at each recycling centre on-site to provide festival goers with information on how to dispose of their compost, recycling, and waste properly. The researcher also noted that while some patrons had heard of Planet Roo, they had not yet visited the eco-village but showed interest in visiting after listening to the ambassadors. Following up on this, the researcher discovered that the sole purpose of the "Trash Talker" was to educate festival goers on the proper disposal of recycling, compost, and landfill. These volunteers seemed to possess the basic knowledge of sorting waste but through conversations with them, the researcher discovered that many of the "Trash Talkers" were not sure what happened with the compost or the general waste when it left the site.

Figure 4 - Planet Roo Ambassador 'tree hugging' a festival attendee



We can consider these spaces and activities to be a manifestation of the hyperreal because they stand in place of less sustainable aspects of the festival, whose meaning is masked by the high-profile greening activities that take place on site. For example, in 2005 research found that attendees travelled from all 50 states of the USA and from 24 countries (Arik & Penn 2005). Our research found that the majority of attendees asked came using air and / or private cars as transport, agreeing with the 2005 study which found that 92% of attendees



came using private transport. Robins et al (2007: 304) highlight that ‘congestion, noise, visual intrusion and the deterioration of local air quality are all important externalities generated by high car shares’, and to this list we can add the general contribution made to global warming through this, an issue which Bonnaroo seeks explicitly to address.

We also observed that while Bonnaroo requires all vendors use compostable materials, many of the vendors ran out and began using paper and plastic products on the day before the festival ended. By the end of the festival, many of the vendors weren’t sorting their compostables at all and were trashing them along with landfill waste. In other waste observations, the researcher noticed that the festival-grounds, particularly near the main stages were completely destroyed each morning with trash spread out as far as the eye could see. The researcher also noted repeated occurrences where trash littered the grounds near recycling centres. This was a point recognised by one of the event organisers:

“Yeah, I’d like to see more going on outside the concert areas and um, definitely more organisation around more um, a community sense out there with...with focus on...I mean, I don’t if you were there when everyone leaves, the place is destroyed and it’s just Trashed and while Clean Vibes does an amazing job of cleaning up after everyone...people should clean up after themselves.”

**Figure 5 - Litter and environmental damage in the main festival areas**



In addition, after having many conversations with the festival attendee population, the researcher discovered that while many of them know the obvious ‘greening’ activities taking place on-site (i.e. recycling et.), they are unaware about the extent to which Bonnaroo goes to carry out its ‘greening’ policies and maintain a sustainable festival, despite considering it to be a green or sustainable festival, showing the power of these hyperreal spaces and activities to dominate perceptions of the event.

#### *Green values and event values*

Data collected during the ethnography and also from discussions with event managers suggested that Bonnaroo could start taking a more active role in promoting these ‘greening’ programmes through the main stages and also incorporating them into the mainstream

framework of the festival. Potential modifications that were discussed and received positively, included a carbon offset and incentive programme with ticket purchases in order to help reduce the carbon footprint of the festival, which is currently their largest negative environmental impact.

Discussions with managers of the festival revealed that the reasons for Bonnaroo's subtle ways of approaching 'greening' promotion, and lack of these kinds of direct environmental incentives for attendees, ultimately comes back to the festivals' desire to maintain a sustainable event without making it their sole purpose or focus. However, many other large-scale festivals (i.e. Glastonbury, Coachella) have managed to work various forms of these programmes into their events to create more socially responsible, sustainable mega events without compromising the message of their ultimate purpose.

## **Conclusions**

Using micro-ethnographic techniques enabled the researchers to interrogate the practices of the event and the event experience, moving beyond the rhetoric of the festival marketing to develop a critique of the sustainability of the event. While the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival continues to grow and lead the sustainable movement within the U.S. festival industry, they need to fully integrate their greening policies and programmes into the core message of the festival and ultimately into the minds of its audience in order to match the behaviours at the event to the goals set out in the festival's sustainability policies.

This research has identified good practice in terms of education work at the festival and the use of specialist volunteers to promote the event's greening principles. However, the limitations of the spaces of hyper-sustainability that were manifested in more 'general' behaviours at the festival, suggest the need to increase the scope and influence of these spaces within the festival so as to broaden their localised impacts. Working on this integration would help to move the event from this state from hyper-sustainability, to an authentically sustainable event. Although these hyper-sustainable activities are not in themselves a bad thing, and should be distinguished from the idea of 'green-washing' by virtue of the resources and profile accorded to them by the organisers, the opportunity exists for Bonnaroo to develop this much further.

The sustainability co-ordinator for Bonnaroo summed this aspiration up in an interview:

"I'd like to see, almost that we work towards a goal that we don't even need a Planet Roo anymore because it's soooo well known, people know so much about what we do, that it's integrated so that every decision we make for the festival, that they just, all they need to do is know that they're showing up and it's integrated into every decision that we make instead of it being relegated into an eco-village area."

What previous research in this area has failed to recognise is how heavily the success of policies like those included in Bonnaroo's greening programme depend on the behaviours of attendees. This research suggests that true sustainable success cannot be determined until a measurement of this behaviour can be considered in addition to traditional quantitative research.

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