
Green Games or Empty Promises? Environmental Issues and Sydney 2000

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Introduction

Environmental issues, most specifically remediation and conservation on the Homebush Bay site of the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympic Games, have been the subject of extensive research and commentary since the early 1990s. While scientific reports often present contradictory findings and mystifying conclusions (to a lay reader, at least), it appears that, by 1997, Olympic organizers and environmentalists were in agreement on at least two key concerns: firstly, pollution control of soil, sediment and water; and, secondly, the protection of biodiversity, that is, the flora and fauna, and the people and their environment (Short, 1996).

The following discussion of environmental aspects of Sydney 2000 will focus on several key players: the Sydney Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (SOCOG), the Olympic Coordination Authority (OCA)¹, environmental groups and the mass media. In addressing the question "Green Games or Empty Promises?" I do not expect to find conclusive answers to the complex environmental questions surrounding the design of sport facilities and venues, energy conservation, air, water and soil quality, waste management, and conservation of natural and cultural resources, to name the major areas of concern for Sydney 2000. Rather, I will examine the social construction of environmental problems, the ways in which the various players define and operationalize the notion of "green" in relation to the Olympics, and negotiations between groups occupying different political positions on environmental issues. I will also include a discussion of the media role in the environmental debates (see also Lenskyj, 1997).

What Does Green Mean?

At this point, after more than 35 years of progress for environmentalism as a global social movement, "green" has become an imprecise term in environmental as well as industrial and commercial contexts. The notion of a continuum or spectrum has often been used as a theoretical framework for understanding social movements such as environmentalism, with a liberal/reform position at one end and a radical/transformational approach on the other. Liberals tend to work within the system, in partnerships with those in power, to try to bring about positive social change. Radicals, on the other hand, are interested in transforming existing social systems, which they see as flawed, by more abrupt confrontational means.

While a continuum is often used to examine various degrees of "greenness" from liberal to radical, I am persuaded by the argument that, in the case of environmentalism, the differences are too profound to situate all positions on the same line. University of Wollongong (Australia) environmental engineer Sharon

Beder, discussing the “light green” and “dark green” positions, argues convincingly that there is in fact a paradigm shift between the two groups, rather than a spectrum on which each can be situated. Material values, most specifically the goal of economic growth, characterise the (light green) dominant paradigm, with the environment valued as an economic resource. This position, in Sharon Beder’s assessment, involves “putting a price on the environment” in order to protect it, “unless degrading it is more profitable . . . businesses should base their decisions about polluting behaviour on economic considerations and the quest for profit” (Beder, 1994, 37). This has also been termed the *technocratic* position (O’Riordan, cited in Beder, 1991). In the alternative paradigm espoused by dark green or radical environmentalists, also known as the *ecocentric* position, the natural environment is seen as having intrinsic worth; existing political and economic systems should be challenged when they pose a threat to the environment.

In the case of Sydney 2000, the notion of a paradigm shift is helpful in understanding the positions of various stakeholders, many of whom do not seem to be speaking the same language. There are numerous examples to be found in the dialogue between technocrats and ecocentrists at the 1997 Green Games Conference at the University of New South Wales, the Proceedings of which I will draw upon in the subsequent discussion (Cashman & Hughes, 1998). Other sources will include reports from SOCOG/OCA, Greenpeace, Green Games Watch 2000, the New South Wales Government, newspaper coverage and radio transcripts.

There is relatively little scholarly research on the relationship between sport and the environment. David Chernushenko’s 1994 book *Greening our Games: Running Sports Events and Facilities That Won’t Cost the Earth* broke new ground in applying principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) to sport management, although it was clear that he occupied a light green position. Admitting that “green” is a “loosely” used term, he explained that it can be applied “when [the] level of environmental impact is at or close to the best current level available” (Chernushenko, 1994; 9). The term “best practice” is more commonly used in scientific environmental circles.

Chernushenko went on to state that “green” is “a state to which we aspire” and a step towards the “next higher level.” The notion of “the greening of our games” as a process rather than a “quick fix” is useful in the case of the Olympics, since one of the world’s largest sporting events is unlikely to change overnight. However, in the case of Sydney 2000, Sharon Beder labelled the current remediation process at the Olympic site “a cheap, dirty, quick and convenient option” (Cashman & Hughes, 1997; 108) rather than a model of “best practice,” and, although available data are sometimes contradictory and confusing, the situation is undoubtedly a cause for serious concern. At the time of the bidding for the 2000 Olympics, Lillehammer was probably the best model of a large international sporting event organized on environmentally friendly principles, although as a Winter Olympics its provisions did not cover all the areas and issues that arise in a Summer Games. The Sydney organizers acknowledged the leadership Lillehammer provided in its waste management practices, use of biodegradable plates and utensils, energy-saving techniques, environmental specifications for suppliers of goods and services, and environmental legacy to the local community (Otteson, 1998). Notably absent was any acknowledgement that Lillehammer organizers also pioneered a model of authentic community participation that future Olympic organizers would be well advised to follow (Chernushenko, 1994). However, in view of the minimal public consultation surrounding Sydney 2000 at any stage, this omission is hardly surprising (Lenskyj, 1996).

IOC Position on the Environment

In 1991, the IOC amended its Charter to include the requirement that the Olympics be held under conditions that demonstrate a responsible concern for environmental issues. Among other initiatives, it introduced an environmental requirement for bidding cities, issued an environmental policy, and created a Commission on Sport and the Environment. The environmental policy drew upon existing standards such as those set by the International Chamber of Commerce Business Charter for Sustainable Development, the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies and the Japanese Federation of Economic Organizations. This market-driven approach leaves no doubt about the IOC’s “light green” position.

Sydney 2000: Environmental Position and Promises

The original 1993 Environmental Principles developed by the Sydney Bid Committee stated commitment to the following goals:

- Energy conservation and use of renewable energy sources
- Water conservation
- Waste avoidance and minimization

- Protecting human health with appropriate standards of air, water and soil quality
- Protecting significant natural and cultural environments

It is important to note that these principles, like most definitions of ESD, encompass the human as well as the natural environment, and specifically identify the social impact and effects on human health as key considerations. While it remains to be seen whether these aspects will receive adequate attention in the case of Sydney 2000, events to date tend to suggest otherwise.

It is not surprising that international observers such as Canadian environmentalist David Chernushenko (1994) viewed the Sydney model as “exemplary” and “revolutionary” based on its 1993 Environmental Guidelines. Like all Bid materials, they made no mention of the fact that the proposed Olympic site at Homebush and the adjacent waterways at Homebush Bay were heavily contaminated with toxic waste, including high levels of dioxin. As recently as July 1997, OCA’s Executive Director for Environment Dr. Colin Grant erroneously claimed that no dioxin waste had been found on the site.

Dating back to the early 1900s, the land had been variously used for abattoirs, brickworks, an armaments depot, chemical plants, a chlorinated herbicide factory, and industrial and toxic waste dump. (Union Carbide, infamous for the environmental disaster in Bhopal, India, formerly occupied one of the factory sites.) It should be noted that until the 1950s, companies that dumped toxic waste in this area were not, in fact, breaking Australian environmental laws.

After Sydney had been awarded the Games, it came to light that at least four scientific studies with detailed recommendations for remediation had been commissioned by the NSW Government between 1990 and 1992, but that a decision had been made to take no action before the bid was submitted in 1993 in order not to “jeopardise” its success (Short, 1996). As of 1997, the “cocktail” of contaminants in the soil and waterways included: asbestos, dioxins, heavy metals, pesticides and phthalates (Background Briefing, 1997; Robinson, 1997). A NSW State of the Environment report called the remediation “one of the biggest land clean up projects ever conducted in Australia” and the cost has recently been estimated at AU\$137m. The NSW Government has committed \$21m towards the cost of removing 30,000 cubic metres of contaminated sediment from Homebush Bay, not only because of its proximity to the Olympic site, but also because property developers are planning multi-million dollar luxury apartment complexes on the shores.

Greenpeace Toxics and Olympic Campaigner, analytical chemist Darryl Luscombe, as well as a German chemist with extensive experience in dioxin testing, are among the many critics who claim that the government’s standard of dioxin toxicity falls short of international standards of “best practice” (Background Briefing, 1997). It is also disturbing to note that the 1997 NSW Contaminated Land Management Act requirement that the polluter pay for remediation will not be applied in the case of the Olympic site. According to the NSW Minister for Ports and Public Works, the government’s legal advice has been not to sue Union Carbide or its offshoot Lednez Industries, in part because they have (cleverly, it seems) changed their corporate structure and are virtually unassailable in terms of retrieving assets to apply to the cost of remediation (Background Briefing, 1997).

In 1993, Bid Committee media releases cited Bruce Baird, Minister responsible for the Bid, as saying: “No other event at the beginning of the 21st century will have a greater impact on protecting the environment than the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney” (Sydney 2000 - the Environmental Olympics, 1993), while Sydney 2000 chief executive Rod McGeoch claimed that “the Environment Guidelines would make Sydney’s Olympic Plan a prime example of ecologically sustainable development in the 21st century” (Sydney’s Plan for an Environmental Olympics in 2000, 1993). Speaking at the Green Games Conference in 1997, SOCOG environmental manager Peter Otteson also claimed that Sydney’s 25 page Environmental Guidelines “were the most comprehensive and ambitious . . . ever proposed by a bidding city, and went far beyond the standard that the IOC had set in the Bid Manual” (Otteson, 1998; 34).

Later in his presentation, Otteson defended the goal of “environmental excellence” in part on the grounds that, contrary to the popular perception of the extra expense involved, cost efficient resource use and improved design and choice of materials have been shown to produce “great increases in wealth and reduced operational costs” (Otteson, 1998; 38) - a classic example of the light green or technocratic position.

At least one critical voice at the conference, Professor Ian Lowe from Griffith University, drew attention to the fact that the economy is a subset of human society, which itself is “totally embodied within the natural ecology” (Lowe, 1998; 22). In other words, the economy is socially produced, not a fixed entity external to human activity, and therefore it is open to progressive social change.

Dr. Colin Grant, OCA Executive Director of Planning, Environment and Policy, quoted (with approval) a statement attributed to Maurice Strong, Chairman of the Earth Council: “We have to start managing our earth as much as we do a business” (Strong, quoted in Grant, 1998; 44). The reference did not go unnoticed; in his summary, Ian Lowe noted that Strong’s position did not go “far enough towards an ecocentric approach in which we recognise that we are part of nature rather than charged with managing it” (Lowe, 1998; 112).

Another concern emerging from the conference was SOCOG's rather dramatic retreat from the "Green Games" label. SOCOG media relations manager Richard Palfreyman blamed the media for what he called "that dreadful term" (green). He emphasized on at least two occasions that SOCOG preferred the tag "The Athletes' Games" and had never used the term "Green Games" even though they had no doubt that the Games would in fact be green, with a small 'g' (Palfreyman, 1998; 97) - this, despite the fact that both the Bid Committee and SOCOG/OCA have emphasized positive environmental aspects from the outset.

Interestingly, some other presenters affiliated with SOCOG/OCA did not object to the Green Games label. Lorraine Cairnes, for example, made the rather rash claim that "OCA has had to educate the public on the Green Games...encouraging some of Australia's largest design and construction and engineering firms to raise their environmental performance..." (Cairnes, 1998; 23). Cynically, one might say that SOCOG/OCA are willing to own the green label when it enhances their image, but less willing when it implies a "best practice" standard of environmental achievement against which Sydney 2000 will be measured and, quite possibly, found lacking. In any event, there is little doubt that the technocratic or light green position dominates in SOCOG/OCA.

Environmental Critics of Sydney 2000

Probably the most widely known international environmental group, Greenpeace, has had a mixed relationship with Sydney 2000 from the outset. In 1993, Greenpeace Australia prepared one of the five prize-winning designs for an environmentally sound Olympic Village, and then collaborated with the other firms to design the final version. Greenpeace Australia Cities and Coasts Campaigner Karla Bell was subsequently cited in Sydney 2000 publications as endorsing the Olympic Village (not too surprisingly, since Greenpeace worked on its design) with its incorporation of solar power, water recycling, environmentally friendly building materials, and protection of biodiversity (Sydney's Olympic Village plan..., 1993). By 1997, however, Bell, now an independent environment consultant, was one of the many experts to express concern over the organizers' cover-up of the toxic contamination and the current NSW Government's weakened environmental guidelines that permit a cost-cutting approach to remediation (Background Briefing, 1997).

In June 1997, Greenpeace activists cleaned up and contained fifty rusting barrels of dioxin found 2 km from the Olympic stadium, on a site adjacent to the former Union Carbide factory. In a classic Greenpeace direct action and educational campaign that attracted considerable media and public attention, activists trained in safe handling of hazardous waste repackaged and secured the barrels. However, Greenpeace reported that "the official response" from SOCOG/OCA was "to refute our research and paint us as 'unpatriotic' for criticising the 2000 Olympics" (Lethal stockpile near Olympic site, 1997). In September, 1997, Greenpeace campaigner Darryl Luscombe was asked by ABC Radio Sports Factor host Amanda Smith if Greenpeace had "snuggled up too close now [to Olympic organizers] to keep a critical watching brief" (The Sports Factor, 1997). Luscombe cited the direct action of June 1997 as an example of Greenpeace autonomy and radical agenda, with Olympic organizers' defensive response leaving no doubt that the "snuggling up" charge was not valid.

Ecocentric environmentalists, including many Greenpeace activists, have long argued that there is no such thing as a safe landfill, and cite "best practice" in the US and other countries, where on-site treatment, removal and off-site treatment, or incineration of toxic waste are the preferred methods. The Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia) also recommend on-site or off-site treatment. The "bank vault" system of containment and monitoring of untreated toxic waste, which allows the possibility of leachate leakages contaminating soil, groundwater and waterways - the system now in process at Homebush - is widely considered to be the least safe method (Background Briefing, 1997; Beder, 1993, 1996). It was therefore somewhat surprising to read, in March 1998, that a Greenpeace spokesperson praised the Government, reportedly for the first time, for its remediation program, specifically the containment of toxic waste under areas of the site slated for parkland and recreation, and not for buildings. Presumably, if toxic leakages occur, there are still health risks for recreational users of the land.

Sydney 2000's other major environmental critic is Green Games Watch 2000 Inc. (GGW2000), a coalition of environmental groups established in 1995 "to work with community groups and communities to achieve genuine community consultation about the Olympic Games in Australia" (Tohver & James, 1997). GGW2000 receives \$80,000 p.a. from the NSW Government and from Environment Australia, as well as a subsidy from OCA, and operates at arm's length from funders. While GGW2000 sees a major part of its role as shifting the OCA agenda, there are some who hold the more cynical view that GGW2000 merely make OCA look as if it is facilitating public participation. Interaction between OCA and GGW2000 takes place through the presence of representatives from community environmental groups

on the OCA Environmental Advisory Panel. Among GGW2000 projects has been the commissioning of research reports on various environment issues, including energy, transport, waste management, and air quality.

It is no doubt significant that, of the hundreds of environmental groups in Australia, the “light green” Earth Council (the group chaired by Maurice Strong) was chosen by OCA to conduct a series of performance reviews during construction and delivery of the facilities. Its first review, covering the period up to the end of 1996, gave OCA “strong commendation” and an 8 out of 10, although it did list a number of required changes and initiatives, most of which were quickly implemented (Environmental Protection Authority, 1996).

Media Treatment of Sydney 2000 Environmental Issues

In the early 1990s the Sydney Morning Herald, like most of the Australian media, was a consistent booster of Sydney’s bid, largely, no doubt, because of the NSW Premier’s heavy-handed intervention to ensure only positive media coverage. By the late 1990s, some changes were apparent in the Herald and elsewhere. Perhaps not surprisingly (given the newspaper axiom that bad stories are more newsworthy than good stories), internal conflict within and between the various Australian Olympic bodies (SOCOG, OCA and the Australian Olympic Committee) grabbed media attention (Lenskyj, 1997) as did criticism of Olympic preparations by environmentalists. Although many journalists still ridiculed Greenpeace and other environmental groups, it appears that media treatment of debates and controversy in the latter half of the decade may balance the uncritical media hoopla of the bid years (Lenskyj, 1996).

Although Glenda Korporaal, ghostwriter of Rod McGeoch’s book The Bid and shamelessly partisan journalist, has continued as the Herald’s Olympic business commentator, the Herald’s cast of Olympic reporters has expanded to include Murray Hogarth, who began work in 1996 as the Olympic environmental journalist, and hence, almost by definition, an Olympic critic. In his presentation to the Green Games conference, it was clear that Hogarth took his responsibility for critical coverage of environmental issues seriously. Herald articles have provided a much needed media voice for groups such as Green Games Watch 2000 and Greenpeace. However, Hogarth experienced what he called “extreme displeasure” from Games organizers resulting from his articles on the dioxin contamination at Homebush. One former ministerial adviser threatened lawsuits and discreditation, even calling Hogarth “the last toxic site on the list to be cleaned up” (cited in Hogarth, 1998; 102). Hogarth pointed out, however, that his concerns were validated when the NSW Environmental Protection Authority upgraded its environmental controls in September 1997. Hogarth’s experience justifies the claim made by Olympic researchers such as Stuart Russell, Colin Tatz and Donald Booth that public criticism of any aspect of the Games was labelled unpatriotic, un-Australian, and treasonous.

On environmental issues, SOCOG/OCA are prone to criticise the media for their preoccupation with “shock-horror” stories. While it may be true that there are more negative than positive environmental news stories, Palfreyman’s conference comments exemplified the defensive SOCOG/OCA response to criticism about environmental issues. Quibbling about the difference between “Homebush” and “Homebush Bay,” he criticised a Herald headline about dioxins in Homebush Bay on the grounds that there was no Olympic swimming in the actual bay, which was some distance from the main stadium and aquatic centre. For the record, it should be noted that the 1993 Environmental Guidelines did encompass rehabilitation of wetlands and maintenance of threatened ecosystems, and noted that low-wash ferries would be used on the river to protect the shoreline. The major waterway’s entrance at Haslams Creek, the focal point of the original Olympic design concept in 1993, was subsequently abandoned because any activity would disturb the Bay’s highly polluted sediment (Short, 1996). Therefore, Palfreyman’s artificial distinction between the water and the land is hardly justified, and certainly betrays the spirit if not the letter of the law regarding SOCOG/OCA’s environmental commitments.

Defensiveness also characterised many of the SOCOG/OCA responses to the environmentalists, particularly when the steady stream of research reports from groups such as GGW2000 and Greenpeace attracted considerable attention in the mass media during 1997-98. As Greenpeace activist Darryl Luscombe pointed out at the Conference, environmentalists were accused of being “unpatriotic” for keeping public attention on the contamination problem in the Homebush area. Unwisely buying in to the “patriotic vs unpatriotic” debate, however, Luscombe claimed that Greenpeace and other groups were scrutinizing the cleanup so that the “world media spotlight” would not fall on the deficiencies of the Sydney Games, as it did in Atlanta in 1996 (Luscombe, 1998; 15). In contrast, GGW2000 spokespeople, most notably its coordinator Peggy James, kept to the issues rather than falling into the trap of debating about patriotism or international image. James was openly critical of Sydney 2000’s public relations, which she called a “Green Wash” exercise, with “a lot of hype” about the achievements, and little about the negative environmental impact (Sports Factor, 1997). In fact, GGW2000 obtained a copy of the Government’s public relations strategy, parts of which were cited on the ABC radio program Background Briefing in 1997:

Convey a message of cooperation and openness as a means of diffusing the environmental lobby and a potentially aggressive media... bald announcement of [remediation] parameters could lead to them being rejected by key environmental stakeholders, whereas an appropriate message of open cooperation could lead to the same parameters being adopted (Background Briefing, 1997; 4).

While it may be heartening to see evidence that the government acknowledges the power of environmental stakeholders, its cynical “manufacture of consent” is both dishonest and insulting to the citizens whom it purports to serve.

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Conclusion

The preceding discussion reveals some of the complex social issues arising from the proposed Green Games. Speaking at the 1997 conference, GGW2000 coordinator Peggy James was justly critical of OCA’s and the Government’s handling of the toxic contamination issue: their failure to communicate the true extent of environmental problems and proposed solutions, she claimed, will undoubtedly “undermine the community’s confidence about the Green Games and the willingness of people to modify their own behaviour to protect the environment” (James, in Cashman & Hughes, 1998; 78-79). In contrast, Chernushenko cites Lillehammer as a good example of an Olympic organization’s openness and honesty about their environmental failures as well as their successes. Sydney would do well to follow this example.

Endnotes

1. OCA is generally considered responsible for building the “stage” while SOCOG puts on the “show” but in everyday operations the lines are often blurred. I have generally used the term SOCOG/OCA unless there are reasons to separate the two.

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