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1 Björn Langenbach (German Sport University Cologne)
2 Jörg Krieger (German Sport University Cologne)

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Emergence of the environment policy of the International Olympic Committee: A historical analysis

Björn Langenbach and Jörg Krieger
(German Sport University Cologne, Germany)

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Abstract

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has acted at the forefront of an environment and sustainability policy for international sport in the last years. Just recently, it published its UIC Sustainability Strategy in which it addresses the responsibility of all stakeholders involved in the Olympic Movement and outlines a global sustainability strategy. This paper traces the development of the IOC’s environment policy by analysing the IOC Session protocols. Thereby, it aims to link the aspect of environment to the Winter Olympic Games in Albertville in 1992 and in Lillehammer in 1994. It is argued the IOC approach the topic of concerning for the environment more actively due to the environmental disaster of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games. As a result, and with support from the Lillehammer Olympic Organising Committee (LOOC), it then established a global environment policy for the Olympic Movement.

Introduction

In recent years, the Olympic Movement and its leading organisation, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), have faced considerable criticism on various fronts. The failure to combat the problems of doping and corruption in international sport has led to a significant diminishment in its reputation and belief in the effectiveness of international sport organisations in general and the IOC in particular (Kihl, Skinner and Engelberg, 2017). Moreover, issues with bidding for and hosting Olympic Games due to little attention given to aspects of sustainability have caused the IOC to appear at a crossroads. In response to this criticism, IOC President Thomas Bach implemented the Olympic Agenda 2020 in 2015 (MacAloon, 2016). This reference document aims to reform the Olympic Movement and in particular regulate issues of sustainability and legacy. Therewith, it also addresses the need for host cities to consider environmental concerns, citing that the Olympic Charter encourages and supports a responsible concern for environmental issues (IOC, 2015:19).
Whilst consideration for the environment can be dated back to the Ancient Olympic Games (Aragon-Perez, 2017), it is important to note that it took the IOC (founded in 1994) almost a century to enact its first environmental policy. Before which, responsibility for the environment was left to the respective Organising Committees, without the existence of strict guidelines. This was especially challenging for the hosts of the Winter Olympic Games as most of its events are staged outdoors in the natural environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that two editions of the Winter Olympic Games, the 1992 Games in Albertville and the 1994 Games in Lillehammer, triggered the IOC to become actively involved in environmental policy.

This early phase of the IOC’s strategies for environmental protection are subject to analysis in this paper. Based on archival material, the research traces the development of the IOC’s environmental policy in the mid-1990s, beginning with the Winter Olympics in Albertville in 1992 and Lillehammer in 1994. In particular, it will be highlighted how the two respective Organising Committees dealt with environmental issues in contrasting ways. This investigation is followed by an analysis of subsequent IOC initiatives in order to evaluate concrete actions and programmes in subsequent years until the end of the 20th century.

The official protocols of the IOC Sessions, which were used for this research, were compiled from the IOC Archive based in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was necessary to focus on these documents as other files on the IOC’s role in ensuring sustainable Olympic Games, such as those of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission, are still under embargo. However, as the IOC’s highest decision-making body, whereby all IOC members are brought together on an annual basis (Ferrand, Seguin and Chappelet, 2012), the IOC Session constitutes the ground at which all key issues are discussed. Therefore, its recordings provide a good overview on the IOC’s policies, including those pertaining to the environment. In order to verify the IOC Session protocols concerning the main policies of the respective Olympic Games Organising Committees, this research also investigated the Official Reports from the 1992 and 1994 Winter Olympic Games.

**Historical context 1: Albertville 1992 – lack of activities**

The 16th edition of Winter Olympic Games in Albertville, held from 2nd to 23rd February 1992, followed the structure of the Winter Sport Weeks in Chamonix in 1924, which were labelled the first Winter Olympic Games retrospectively (Kluge 1999). The official reactions to the 1992 Winter Olympic Games in the Savoye Alps were initially very positive. This especially accounts for the IOC’s own evaluation of the event, whereby Michèle Verdier, the then IOC press officer, labelled the event as the ‘perfect Games without any flaws’ (Valérien, 1992:19).
Such positive perspective is repeated in the official protocol of the 99th IOC Session in Barcelona in June 1992. Therein, many IOC members voiced their enthusiastic opinions about the Olympic Games in Albertville, with IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch thanking the Organising Committee and highlighting ‘the very positive overall experience at the Games’ (IOC, 1992b:34). Adding to this, Samaranch expressed that ‘[a] great service had been rendered not only to the world of sport, but also to Savoie and to France’ (IOC, 1992b:35). Undoubtedly, this statement appears correct when considering the infrastructural developments in the region. For example, the staging of the Olympic Games contributed to a better connection of Albertville to the international traffic network. Perhaps the most significant development in this regard was that of the establishment of a new airport in Courchevel (IOC, 1992c).

Nevertheless, in order to form a view of the event in its entirety, it is necessary to also adopt a different, more critical, angle when analysing the staging of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games. Samaranch’s statement that the Olympic Games took place without any flaws when regarding the environment especially requires substantial investigation. Contrary to his statement, multiple environmental activists as well as press reports had highlighted already ahead of and during the event that there was a considerable lack of attention for ecological aspects (Aragon-Perez, 2017). In particular, the overblown building sites, the climatic impact through long paths between the sporting facilities and the extreme intrusion on the environment were heavily criticised. One such example encompassing this was that of the expansive clearing of woods to make way for the building of a ski jumping hill and the bobsleigh track (IOC 1992c). Chappelet (2008:1891) argues that the cultivation of the Savoye Alps were ‘the climax of developing tourist facilities’.

One should, however, evaluate this criticism of the Games’ environmental damage against those of the positive intentions of the local Organising Committee (COJO). In 1991, COJO head, Michel Barnier, suggested to make the implementation of an environmental impact study a compulsory aspect of Olympic Games preparation (IOC, 1992c). Hence, COJO assigned local experts to conduct such research and installed an environment commission for the Olympic Games (IOC, 1992c:122). Moreover, it appears that COJO itself was much more critical about its lack of environmental protection than that of the IOC. In its official report to the IOC Session, COJO critically assessed that it ‘had tried to be sensitive to the natural environment [but], he [Barnier] was sure that the Organising Committee of the Lillehammer Olympic Games would do this even better than COJO’ (IOC 1992b:33). To the authors’ best knowledge, no such critical statements were made by the IOC.

Significantly, the IOC did begin to broach the topic of the environment around the time of the Albertville Winter Olympic Games (Cantelon and Letters, 2000;
Karamichas, 2014). Addressing their intentions, an apparent link can be drawn between such action and that of the continually rising environmental awareness of society. This greater concern for the environment was both true for around the world in general and concerning the Albertville Winter Olympic Games in particular. The global developments reach back to the beginning of the 1980s when the United Nations (UN) realized a heavy detiriation of the human environment and natural resources. As a consequence, it installed the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland. In 1987 the Commission published its final report, therein defining the concept of sustainable development and urging to stage an international conference on environment and sustainability (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In 1992, this conference, labelled the Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro at which the IOC was also represented. Even though neither the IOC President nor the IOC Executive Board participated at the Conference, the organisation’s representatives delivered a presentation outlining, for the first time, the IOC’s new environmental criteria for potential host cities (Aragon-Perez, 2017). The representatives outlined that the IOC would make the topic of the environment a central theme of its upcoming Olympic Congress in Paris in 1994. Samaranch reiterated this position also at the 1992 IOC Session:

Also, I have asked the planners of the 1994 Olympic Congress in Paris to be sure to give the important issue of the environment a place in the agenda. The Olympic Movement has a very clear position on the subject; we are very deeply attached to nature. Our entire culture is rooted in it. It is and has always been in nature that sport can thrive most happily. This is especially true of snow and ice sports (IOC, 1992a:194).

Despite such early instigations of policy formation, one has to criticize that the IOC did not become more active as a response to the environmental disaster of the Albertville Winter Olympic Games. In fact, the research shows that even though the environment had been prioritised prior to the Albertville Games, for two years following the event little discussion on the environment took place at the respective IOC Sessions. This has led to further criticism from the academic world: ‘If the IOC had in place a carefully considered policy for environmental protection, much of the excessive damage could have been avoided. The IOC did not’ (Cantelon and Letters 2000:301).

Rather than discussing pragmatic changes, the IOC devoted an entire edition of its Olympic Message to the topic of the environment. Therein, the rising awareness for the environment in the IOC was presented to the public (Aragon-Perez, 2017). Whilst this action could be viewed as disregarding the severity of the issue, it should be understood that Samaranch had wanted to discuss the topic of the environment not only with IOC members but also with external stakeholders. Accordingly, it could be
argued that Samaranch was waiting to surface the issue in a more meaningful manner at the IOC Congress. Contrasting the IOC Session, the Olympic Congress allows for the inclusion of various constituents of the Olympic Family such as media representatives, academics and sports and non-sports organisations.

**Historical context 2: Lillehammer 1994 - LOOC sets new standards**

Due to unique circumstances, another edition of the Winter Olympic Games was staged in 1994, months prior to the 1994 Olympic Congress. These circumstances relate to that in 1986 the IOC decided to separate the Summer and Winter Olympic Games, which had previously been held in the same year ever since the Winter Olympics’ establishment (IOC 1986). This decision was made in light of the forecast of a potential for increased television income and the need to offer international sponsors more lucrative platforms. Thus, the IOC arranged for the Winter Olympic Games to be held quadrennially in alternating even-numbered years. The first host to take up the mantle of staging a sole Winter Olympic Games was that of the Norwegian winter sport town of Lillehammer in 1994.

Following the criticism of how the environment was treated in Albertville, both the public and the IOC had high hopes for the Organising Committee of the Lillehammer 1994 Winter Olympic Games (LOOC). Acknowledging the public’s wishes, the LOOC promised an event of short ways and environmental protection. That said, the LOOC’s consideration of the public’s attitude towards the environment may not have constituted the sole factor in this decision. The Norwegian government must also be praised for the pressure it placed on the organising committee to commit to hosting environmentally-friendly Games. Specifically, this occurred through the government withholding its commitment to Lillehammer’s bid unless the organisers set an example of how the environment should be considered at a mega-event. This was, to a great extent, the result of Brundtland, who played a key role in the UN’s environment policy formation as outlined above (Pentifallo and VanWynsberghe, 2012). In this way, Brundtland and the Organising Committee can be seen as having adopted a strong position on environmental aspects of the Olympic Games. It is important to note that, in terms of creating an impact, these actions and the position of the Norwegian Government caught the attention of the IOC: ‘In 1989, when the Norwegian parliament discussed the government grant application for Lillehammer ’94, it was made clear that they wished that the Winter Games would be an environmental showcase’ (IOC 1994c: 70).

Already at the IOC Sessions in 1991 (Birmingham) and in Courchevel in 1992, LOOC President Jens Gerhard Heiberg, highlighted the intention to focus on ecologically compatible Olympic Games: ‘Planning for construction was on schedule and installations would be designed in harmony with the environment’ (IOC, 1991:34). However, the aspirations of the LOOC were beyond that of merely the 1994
Winter Olympic Games. Looking onwards, the committee wished to be involved in the IOC’s future environmental policy: ‘LOOC hoped to be a valuable partner for the IOC in forging the Olympic Movement’s environmental dimension for the future’ (IOC, 1992a:23). It is apparent from the analysis of this statement that the LOOC was aware of its pioneering efforts for the Olympic Movement. The Official Reports of the Lillehammer Olympic Games also provide further evidence for such assumption (see IOC 1994c-g).

Multiple researchers have demonstrated that the high expectations placed on the Lillehammer Olympic Games were met on account of the event having taken place in harmony with the environment (Ivan and Pandev, 2010; Puijk, 1997). The ways in which the LOOC accomplished this included their development of an own environmental project labelled EURECA, undertaking of far less intensive intervention in the environment to build sporting facilities, usage of predominantly natural materials and integration of the sporting facilities into the overall appearance of the landscape (Hietzig, 1995:50; also see IOC 1994c-g). Even though tree fellings and installations to cool the bobsleigh track were needed, these were constructed in close cooperation with experts and following the conduction of detailed studies (IOC 1994e, S.73). As a result, the Lillehammer Olympic Games received a much more positive reception in public. The negative image that had been created through the Albertville Games was – at least for the present time – outshined by the Lillehammer event.

The IOC, as in the case of Albertville, considered the Lillehammer Olympic Games to be a great success (IOC, 1994b:27). In particular, IOC officials emphasized that the LOOC had demonstrated that ‘green Olympic Games’ were possible and that the two poles, the ‘environment’ and the ‘Olympic Games’, could be combined in a positive manner (IOC, 1994g:94). Although, while the IOC expressed such approval, one should note that this positive outcome was the result of the LOOC’s efforts rather than that of IOC guidelines at the time. Cantelon and Letters (2000:305) argue for this reason that the IOC later adopted this ‘Norwegian way’, ‘…the specifics of the Norwegian way were incorporated into the transnational rhetoric of the IOC’.

**Transition Period: Developments at the 1994 IOC Session in Paris and the XII Olympic Congress**

As neither the 1992 nor the 1994 Winter Olympic Games led to a concrete IOC environmental policy, this section will focus on the 1994 IOC Session in Paris. The two key topics of the IOC Session were ‘[...] the question of the election of the IOC members and the need to preserve unity [...]’ (IOC, 1994b:1). Thus, one can deduce that concern for the environment was not high on the IOC’s agenda due to that the issue only surfaced in the form of debate during the LOOC’s final presentation about the 1994 Winter Olympic Games (IOC, 1994b:26f.).
Within the LOOC’s presentation, Heiberg stressed once again the significance that the environment had played in the staging of the Olympic Games and highlighted that the LOOC had received a special award by the UN for these efforts. In addition, he also called on the IOC to follow LOOC’s pathway in the staging of future Olympic Games: ‘They [LOOC] had started a process that they hoped the IOC would continue’ (IOC, 1994b:26f.). The establishment of an additional dimension, the ‘environment’, for the Olympic Movement, had clearly been envisaged by LOOC: ‘through these main goals [environmental objectives], Lillehammer ‘94 wanted to give the Olympic Movement a third dimension – environment – in addition to sport and culture’ (IOC, 1994c:70). Such statements are repeated in the LOOC’s official report on the Games in which the significance of working closely with environmental protection organisations are stressed:

One desired to work closely with national and municipal authorities in the environmental sector. The close cooperation with the environmental organisations […] was significant (IOC, 1994c:70).

LOOC had given high priority to environmental protection, and this posed additional challenges. At all outdoor venues, we had to consider carefully whether or not it was absolutely necessary to cut trees. Only a minimum of visible cable was allowed, and it took very detailed planning and coordination to have all parties included when decisions were made for culvert and cable ditches (IOC, 1994e:73).

Significantly, the only actual comment we could find in the IOC Session protocol on LOOC’s report was IOC President Samaranch’s comment that ‘the process of raising environmental awareness that had begun in Albertville had made a very important second step in Lillehammer’ (IOC 1994b:27).

Even though it appears that the IOC did not address the topic of the environment at the IOC Session, it is significant that the XII Olympic Congress, held in the days prior to the IOC Session in Paris, put a great deal of focus on sport and the environment. As aforementioned, this had been the intention of Samaranch already in 1992. An entire theme was dedicated to the topic and eventually the Congress declared the environment the third essential component of Olympism, besides sport and culture. Consequently, the IOC provided future hosts of the Olympic Games with the clear overall guideline that environmental protection had to be assured during the bidding and hosting phases of the Olympic Games (Pentifallo and VanWynsberghe, 2012).

Accompanying such wide-ranging statements, the guidelines included the following five clear recommendations:
1. The necessity of respecting the environment must figure among the Fundamental Principles of the Olympic Charter.

2. The role of the Olympic Movement in respecting the environment must be reinforced, not only on the occasion of the Olympic Games or other major sports competitions, but also through continuing action: to this end, it is suggested that the IOC create an Environment Commission.

3. The Olympic Movement and organizations specializing in environmental matters should cooperate and contribute to the education of the sporting world and young people in such matters.

4. Sport must be organized in a manner which respects the environment and promotes the implementation of techniques and procedures conducive to sustainable development.

5. All aspects of the environmental impact of organizing the Olympic Games must be a constant concern of the Olympic Movement. Respect for the environment must be an important criterion in the choice of host cities of the Olympic Games (IOC, 1994a).

Academics such as Chappelet (2008) and Cantelon and Letters (2000) argue that these objectives constitute the official beginning of the IOC’s policy on the environment. Without doubt, there is evidence to support such claims as the recommendations led the IOC to formally revise the Olympic Charter and introduce, as rule 2, paragraph 14, the IOC’s role:

The IOC (…) sees that the Olympic Games are held in conditions which demonstrate a responsible concern for environmental issues and encourages the Olympic Movement to demonstrate a responsible concern for environmental issues, takes measures to reflect such concern in its activities and educates all those connected with the Olympic Movement as to the importance of sustainable development.

Taking this into account, it is understandable that the IOC deflected to the meetings in Paris in 1994 when referring to the establishment of its environmental policies (see for example: IOC, 2014b; IOC 1999b). At the very least, this was the perception of IOC President Samaranch. ‘Following the Centennial Olympic Congress, Congress of Unity, organised in 1994 in Paris, the IOC recognised the importance of the environment and sustainable development […]’ (IOC, 2014b:1).

Proceeding the amendment to the Olympic Charter, it was important for the IOC to begin to bring about real change. One example of the concrete steps taken to implement the IOC’s new policy was that of its cooperation agreement with the United Nation’s Environmental Programme (UNEP). This initiative aimed to create joint projects fostering environmental awareness. In 1995, the two partners organised the World Conference on Sport and the Environment in Lausanne (IOC, 1996:165). To a large extent, this initiative alone provides evidence for the IOC’s willingness to become increasingly active in environmental issues. However, in view of the organisation’s dedication to its new role, it could be argued that this was surpassed by
the creation of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission. Installed in December 1995 as a direct result of the Olympic Congress recommendations, the commission set out to establish the Olympic Movement’s role in sustainability and issues with the environment. The former LOOC President Heiberg played a crucial role in this body from the very beginning as the IOC defined the Lillehammer Olympic Games as a role model for future Olympic Games (IOC, 2014a:1).

Therefore, for the years 1994 and 1995, one has to conclude that the IOC transformed from an observer in environmental questions to an active agent, pertaining its own policy framework. That said, even though first objectives were formulated at the Olympic Congress, concrete initiatives effecting real change were not yet defined. The implementation of such pragmatic proposals was planned to be the task of the newly established IOC Sport and Environment Commission, which will be subject to analysis in the following section.

Concrete developments: IOC Sessions in Atlanta (1996) and Lillehammer (1997)

In order to explore the IOC’s early environmental policy, one has to take a close look at the 105th IOC Session that took place in Atlanta in July 1996. At this meeting, the newly founded IOC Sport and Environment Commission reported for the first time about its activities on five detailed pages (IOC, 1996: 166f). This report delivered by Pal Schmitt, the IOC Vice President and Head of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission, resulted in the topic of the environment being intensively debated. Within his presentation, Schmitt stressed that the IOC occupied a unique role in the area of environmental protection and had the responsibility to extend the existing initiatives:

…there was now a set of minimum environmental requirements for bidding cities […]. The IOC’s main task was to set a good example in this respect, and raise awareness and a sense of responsibility. […] The IOC was in a unique position to make the rest of the world listen (IOC, 1996:29).

In addition to this, the presentation also saw the IOC Sport and Environment Commission (IOC, 1996:166f) outline nine concrete suggestions to IOC members:

1. The change in the Olympic Charta that aimed for the removal of the term ‘in a general way’ in the IOC’s responsibility for the entire Olympic Movement in environmental questions. Rather, the IOC should concretely encourage all its stakeholders to demonstrate concern for environmental issues.

2. The expansion of the environment onto the national level so that every sporting competition could make a contribution to strengthen the environment. This could be done through the foundation of national environment commissions in the NOCs. The IOC should support such initiatives.
3. The creation and development of educational material. In particular, the IOC Commission suggested a quick establishment of a website containing information on the environment, a handbook for schools and additional digital material.

4. The establishment of a cooperation and support network.

5. The development of guidelines and handbooks for organizing committees of sporting events. These should contain information for bidding cities, the construction of sporting facilities and infrastructure and the creation of an IOC Agenda 21 referring to the UN’s Agenda 21.

6. The involvement of Olympic athletes to spread the information on the environment. The IOC and the NOCs should select these athletes.

7. The staging of biannual seminars on the topic of sport and environment. The Commission already planned the first one in Asia in 1996. Moreover, the IOC should adopt a leading role in the organization of the ‘World Conference on Sport and the Environment’.

8. The establishment of a central information network on environment topics in the Olympic Movement.

9. The involvement of the media in order to generate attention for the environment aspect.

Drawing the report to a close, Schmitt called on the IOC President and the IOC Executive Board to allocate a ‘Green Fund’ for all activities.

It is important to give consideration to the figures who were involved in the recommendations’ formation, whereby two of the founding members of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission included Heiberg and Olav Myrholt. Given that both had been crucial in the implementation of the LOOC’s environmental policy, one might not be surprised by the fact that many of the recommendations find their origins in the staging of the 1994 Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer. Furthermore, Myrholt was also a representative of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission in the IOC Coordination and Evaluation Commissions for the Olympic Games and acted as advisor on environmental affairs in order to monitor ecological aspects of potential future hosts of the Olympic Games.

The documentation of the IOC Session instigates that the IOC Sport and Environment Commission’s recommendations and early activities were received well on account of there being little recorded disagreement. As evidence for this assumption, however, it could be argued that this lack of challenge was surpassed by the final resolution of the meeting. Therein, the IOC’s formalisation of its intention to support an environment and sustainability policy was emphasised:

The IOC Session 1. desires that further efforts be carried out to protect the environment and to educate the youth of the world concerning its responsibility in this regard; 2. notes that notwithstanding the establishment of the IOC Commission on Sport and the
Environment [...] and the proper role of the IOC is to encourage environmentally responsible conduct (IOC, 1996:82).

The evidence outlined within this study provides support to the claims of academics concerning the timing of the IOC’s commencement of environmental policies (Cantelon and Letters, 2000; Chappelet, 2008; Karamichas, 2014; Aragon-Perez, 2017). Taking this one step further, however, the findings also reveal answers as to ‘how’ the IOC began to implement its new policy. These new insights were able to be determined through the analysis of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission’s initial report.

As depicted through the presentation of concrete proposals at the IOC Session in Atlanta, it was the inaugural meeting of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission in spring 1996 that kicked off the IOC actively taking over responsibility. Amongst the recommended initiatives, one has to emphasize specifically the intention to educate youths in view of strengthening environmental awareness. Therewith, the Commission acknowledged that its responsibility went beyond solely controlling environmental aspects at the Olympic Games, demonstrating the Commission’s role within the spreading of environmentalism throughout the entire Olympic Movement. One has to consider this aim as very commendable, even though no concrete education material existed at the time.

Against this background, it is necessary to look at the subsequent IOC Session in Lillehammer in 1997 as to determine whether the newly formed environmental policy had been put into practice. Generally, based on the included topics, it could be considered that the discussion continued from where the previous IOC Session left off (IOC,1996:166-168; IOC, 1997:147-149). It should be acknowledged, however, that the IOC Sport and Environment Commission added to this, emphasizing the ever-growing number of concrete projects it had begun to implement.

Based on the presented projects, it appears that the Commission had focused its activities on four key areas. Examples demonstrating these areas include: First, there was the implementation of the ‘Clean-Up Day’, at which a total of 22 NOCs participated in 1997 (IOC 1997, S.147). Second, regarding educational material, a website had been created and the IOC Sport and Environment Commission had published a handbook and magazine about the environment in sport. Third, the Commission’s cooperation with other organizations had been enhanced and it had found new partners in the General Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF) and the World Olympians Association (WOA). Fourth, a success had been made of the plan to conduct regular meetings and get involved in the Second World Conference on Sport and the Environment, following on from that of the IOC. Whilst
these activities had only been presented as ideas in 1996, they had begun to come to fruition a year later.

In contrast to these achievements, it must be noted that other recommendations had not been followed up by the IOC Sport and Environment Commission. For example, no evidence or mention of the acquisition of national athletes to support the environmental campaigns could be found within the Session’s proceedings. Moreover, it seems that the IOC also rejected the most significant recommendation of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission in 1996, namely to make a key change to the Olympic Charter via changing the first fundamental principle of Olympism to the following:

Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture, education, and the environment, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles (IOC, 1997:146).

Even to this day, the IOC has still not decided to make this vital alteration to the definition (IOC, 2015:13). Based on this, Cantelon and Letters (2000:306) express doubt for the credibility of the IOC in terms of its claim to concern for the environment. In particular, they question the fast speed of the IOC’s actions: ‘The speed and willingness to transform itself does, however, pose questions as to the authenticity of these actions’. Nevertheless, despite this declination to change the Olympic Charter, such fundamental criticism must be partly rejected due to the evidence presented from the IOC Session reports.

The Session reports express that the IOC Sport and Environment Commission had formulated high goals since its establishment; although it must have been aware that the process to install most of the initiatives would take considerable time. Thus, one has to agree with Pal Schmitt’s statement in 1997 that the Commission had made progress in the positioning of concern for the environment within the IOC. This was particularly true when considering that the IOC Sport and Environment Commission had introduced long-time goals rather than ineffective short-time initiatives: ‘to raise awareness for the environment in bid and host cities and to help the Olympic Movement set an example of environmentally responsible conduct’ (IOC, 1997:20).

**Advanced initiatives: The IOC’s Agenda 21**

After the initiatives in 1997, three more IOC Sessions (Nagano in 1998 and twice in Lausanne in 1999) took place before the new millennium. That said, the focus of this last chapter shall be on the IOC Session in Seoul in 1999 as during this meeting the IOC dealt with the installation of its Agenda 21. This essential step led to wide-ranging consequences for the IOC’s environmental policies.
Laying out its development, it was in Seoul that the IOC Sport and Environment Commission’s Agenda 21 document, which has its origins in the UN’s Agenda 21, was both presented to and approved by the IOC Session. The purpose of this new guideline was to act as a reference document for the entire Olympic Movement in environmental questions as of the end of 1999 (IOC, 1999a:16f.). According to the IOC Sport and Environment Commission’s report, Agenda 21 had been the main focus of the Commission’s meetings in previous years. These discussions ultimately cultivated in the aim of developing the document for the IOC Session and 3rd World Conference on Sport and the Environment.

In essence, Agenda 21 presented the IOC’s action programme for worldwide sustainable development through focusing on three main aspects: improving socio-economic conditions; conservation and management of resources for sustainable development; strengthening the role of major groups. The claim can be made that these three aspects went beyond merely protecting the environment, including other facets such as personal development. Returning to environmental protection, however, it is necessary to stress the ‘Rio Statement on Sport and sustainable development’ (IOC, 1999a:48f).

The Rio statement was adopted by representatives of all the attending organisations of the Olympic Movement, namely the IOC, 19 IFs, 93 NOCs, 4 Organising Committees of upcoming Olympic Games, environment protection organisations such as Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature, UNEP and the World Health Organization (IOC, 1999a:46). What this essentially meant for the fight to protect the environment was that all the above listed organisations pledged their agreement to use Agenda 21 as a future action and policy plan.

The first five points of the Rio Statement outline the necessity of respecting social, economic, geographic, climatic, cultural and religious circumstances and the signees’ commitment towards implementing Agenda 21 in the best possible way. Significantly, points five to ten then essentially repeat the IOC Sport and Environment Commission’s original intentions stated in its first report in 1996. Hence, the focus was placed on ‘[…] awareness-raising, education and training in environmental protection’ (point 5). To this end, the agenda stresses that Olympic athletes should act as role models (point 6) and that participating organisations should foster collaboration in environmental projects (point 7). Overall, the agenda set out that the responsibility for all environmental activity within the Olympic Movement was to lie with the IOC Sport and Environment Commission and UNEP (point 8). It was also proposed that UNEP establish a working group (point 9) to report back to the members of the Olympic Movement at its main meetings as well as at future World Conferences on Sport and the Environment (point 10). This proximity to the Commission’s original recommendations clearly shows the significance that this body played in the formation.
of the Agenda 21 policies. It is also noteworthy that Agenda 21 defined very specific objectives with regards to landscape conservation (p.34), construction of sporting facilities (p.35), sporting equipment (p.36), traffic (p.36), energy consumption (p.37), mega sport events (p.38), water utilization (p.39), waste management (p.40) and biosphere / biodiversity (p.40).

**Conclusion**

In comparison with the almost non-existent environmental policy at the beginning of the 1990s, this study has shown that the IOC approached the topic of concerning for the environment more actively throughout this decade. It appears that the environmental disaster of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games brought the IOC to the harsh realisation that merely commendable intentions were not enough. The increasing societal interest in the Olympic Games and the consequent criticism resulted in an IOC awareness for the environment. It was the staging of the 1994 Olympic Games in Norway, with its high emphasis on environmental issues, that showcased to the IOC that, ‘the Olympic Games could never be staged again without similar attention given to the environmental details’ (Ivan and Pandev, 2010:471).

In the following years, however, the IOC only addressed the topic of the environment very gradually. The staging of the Olympic Congress in 1994 then proved to be a major turning point as the environment was defined as an essential dimension of Olympism. Moreover, the evidence outlined within this paper demonstrates that the IOC’s first objectives regarding the environment were a result of the Olympic Congress discussions.

Leading on, the next significant milestone in these transformations was the installation of the IOC Sport and Environment Commission that commenced its activities in 1995. Significantly, this newly formed commission developed concrete proposals, which were heavily influenced by the LOOC’s previous environmental policies. At the Atlanta IOC Session in 1996, the Commission presented its first recommendations, drawing a great deal of interest from those in attendance. It is also noteworthy that in the same year the IOC pointed the way towards an overreaching policy for environmental protection on the highest political level. Explicitly, the IOC signed a cooperation agreement with UNEP in 1996 (IOC, 1996:165), demonstrating its desire to take over greater public responsibility for the environment. Together with other organisations, the IOC-UNEP cooperation led to the publication of Agenda 21, with its focus on the environment.

Without doubt, the evidence presented within this study gives just cause to criticize the slow development of the IOC’s environmental policy between 1992 and 1999. After all, in light of the disaster of the 1992 Winter Olympics, it is perhaps astonishing that it took the IOC seven years to present far-reaching developments in
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form of Agenda 21. That said, Ivan and Pandev (2010:461) argue that it was ‘not easy for the IOC to implement its guiding principles’. The justification for this appears to have been centred in the fact that the IOC is bound to the regulations of the Olympic Charter and that these can only be adapted through the Olympic Session and subsequent internal structural reforms. Accordingly, only once such alterations are approved, may the IOC predetermine regulations for the Olympic Games or the entire Olympic Movement. Moreover, it is necessary to take into consideration that the NOCs and the Organising Committees are equally responsible for the implementation of the Olympic Movement’s environmental policies. Nevertheless, the IOC had the possibility to act faster and provide the NOCs and Organising Committees with clear guidelines, such as the ones that were later published in Agenda 21.

Whilst there is no room in this paper to analyse Agenda 21 in detail, one has to highlight that this document did not dispatch of the criticism directed at the IOC’s activities in regards to the environment and sustainability. For example, Lenskyj (2006:197) argues that Agenda 21 is merely ‘empty rhetoric’, concluding that the complete implementation of Agenda 21 would be unrealistic. Acknowledging that this is somewhat of a harsh statement, one cannot totally disregard her remark given the evidence. Furthermore, the recent lack of interest in bidding for the Olympic Games and negative referenda concerning the inhabitants of potential host cities partly on account of environmental concerns provides support to such claims. Perhaps the most drastic case in this regard was that of Munich’s bid for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, whereby it could be argued that residents’ concern for the environment, especially those of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, led to the final result to withdraw.

Such criticism has caused the IOC to undertake reforms in several areas, most evidently through the Olympic Agenda 2020. When considering the environmental aspects of the document, it evolves that they are closely linked to the bidding process as the IOC requires potential candidates to present a ‘holistic concept of respect for the environment, feasibility and of development, to leave a lasting legacy’ (p.3). The need for environmental concerns to be considered by future Olympic Games organisers is also listed in Recommendation 4, which addresses all aspects of sustainability (p.12). With the emergence of these new guidelines, it is as apparent today as it has ever been that environmental issues continue to be a necessary concern for all stakeholders of the Olympic Movement.

References


**JQRSS Author Profiles**

**Björn Langenbach** was a student for sports science at the Sports University Cologne in Germany. He wrote his master thesis about the raising environmental awareness of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). After graduating with a master of education in sports and history he began his teacher training to become a teacher at a secondary school for sports and history in January 2017.

**Jörg Krieger** is Lecturer at the Institute of Sport History at the German Sport University Cologne and appointed Research Fellow in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Contact: j.krieger@dshs-koeln.de

**Reviewer Comments**

This is a well-researched critique of the challenges and dilemmas facing the IOC to achieve, or be seen to be achieving a sustainable Olympic event. When an Olympics visits a country, somewhat like a tourist, it brings with it great opportunity for the host country, but also leaves a massive void when they leave. With so many Olympic Games in recent history having a negative socio-economic and environmental impact e.g. $1.6 billion debt from Montreal in 1976, social displacement in Sydney 2000 or deep-rooted cultural suspicion around Sochi 2014, it seems all the more poignant and timely for this paper to raise concerns and awareness to practice the ideals set out in Agenda 21. An illuminating and searching account of environmental ‘legacy’.