

Olympic sports making slow progress on environmental sustainability, study finds

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Most International Federations in this summer's Olympics are taking minimal if any action at all on climate and the environment, a new study has found.

Research from the University of Exeter Business School and the University's Global Systems Institute examined and ranked the progress on environmental sustainability made by each of the 32 Olympic-recognised International Federations—representing 47 sports—since 2010.

It found only four International Federations had any kind of strategic plan on environmental sustainability.

Sports with a close relationship to the natural [environment](#) were found to be making most progress, with World Sailing coming out on top.

In corporate communications World Sailing's use of terms such as 'sustainability' was found to be genuine and not 'green washing', and there was also evidence the Federation was involved in [environmental initiatives](#) and had sustainability guidelines for events.

It was also found to have an organisation-wide strategy and objectives related to environmental sustainability, as well as an accountability system to ensure the strategy was being implemented.

Close on the heels of World Sailing was World Athletics, the only other Olympic federation found to have mandatory accountability measures on the environment.

World Rowing and FIFA made up the top four, though the researchers noted that neither federation's strategy on the environment required any of their subsidiary organisations to engage in activities related to the environment.

But for 17 International Federations, including for high profile sports such as tennis and swimming, no evidence was found of progress on environmental sustainability.

The research team highlighted a lack of understanding of environmental practices across the Olympic federations and a lack of internal accountability.

The Olympic Movement's decentralised governance structure, which hands power to International Federations, has been blamed for a lack of internal accountability on environmental issues.

Previous studies have concluded that decentralised governance has led to strategic aims being watered down locally, resulting in inconsistent progress among the federations on environment.

For the research team this lack of internal accountability made identifying the progress International Federations were making on the environment a challenge.

They therefore looked at how International Federations were communicating their strategic aims to the public.

Their analysis consisted of a review of previous academic research—only 50 academic articles were found relating to environmental sustainability and any of the Olympic sports federations.

The research team trawled International Federation websites for mentions of the environment and sustainability, categorising each mention as to whether it showed evidence of accountability, a strategic plan, a proof of commitment or was more of a cosmetic or tokenistic use of 'green language'.

They also looked at the social media accounts of International Federations to see how frequently environmental sustainability was mentioned, and of a total of 718,295 tweets could identify only 188 relevant posts across all 32 International Federations since 2010.

Seven International Federations were judged not to have published any content on Twitter at all related to environment and sustainability issues.

They included the International Federations for golf, tennis, handball, badminton, gymnastics, shooting and skating.

The researchers also considered external factors on progress such as the publication of reports, climate summits, high-profile documentaries and the influence of prominent environmental activists such as Greta Thunberg.

They found that formal events such as the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report, the Paris Agreement of 2015 and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals had little to no impact on environmental activities.

However, certain peaks in environmental activity could be mapped to less formal agenda-setting events.

The broadcast of Blue Planet 2 from October to December 2017 raised global awareness of plastics pollution and coincided with a spike in plastic pollution-related content the following year, particularly from World Sailing and the International Surf Association.

And the global rise of environmental activism triggered by Greta Thunberg's 'Fridays for Future' protests saw an increase in social media content from late 2018 related to the environment and activism, with World Athletics actively promoting the involvement of famous athletes in environmental projects from around this time.

The authors, Dominique Santini of the University of Exeter Global Systems Institute and Dr. Holly Henderson, Senior Lecturer in Management at the University of Exeter Business School, state that the study is the first to create a "benchmark of understanding for

environmental sustainability in the Summer Olympic Programme".

It is hoped it will inform decision-making on how the Olympic Movement responds to the challenges brought about by climate change.

"Climate change poses a multitude of risks for the sporting sector. Immediate climate change mitigation among sports organisations is therefore vital," said Dominique Santini.

"To accelerate progress on environmental sustainability throughout the Olympic Movement an impact assessment should be conducted.

"The International Olympics Committee (IOC) should also establish a mandatory annual environmental sustainability reporting system for International Federations to increase accountability.

"A platform needs to be created to train, support and accelerate progress on environmental [sustainability](#) among the International Federations by enabling resources to be shared regarding transferrable practices related to funding, procurement and partnerships."

'The winners and losers in the race to [environmental sustainability](#): a ranking of Summer Olympic International Federation progress' is published in Emerald Open Research.

More information: Dominique Santini et al, The winners and losers in the race to environmental sustainability: a ranking of Summer Olympic International Federation progress, *Emerald Open Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.35241/emeraldopenres.14195.1](https://doi.org/10.35241/emeraldopenres.14195.1)

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