



# *Creating* **More Sustainable** *Events*

**COLLABORATE WITH HOST  
DESTINATIONS AND VENUES TO DRIVE  
MEANINGFUL CHANGE**



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DRIVE MEANINGFUL CHANGE**

**M**ore than two and a half years after the pandemic first restricted our movement around the planet, people are returning to in-person meetings with a renewed focus on reducing their negative environmental and community impact. "Sustainability is now an even bigger priority than before Covid," says Milda Salciute, Changemaker with the Global Destination Sustainability Movement. Companies and

destinations want to know how they can reduce their carbon imprint and educate their teams to make events more sustainable.

They are also trying to be more socially responsible, choosing venues with strong diversity, equity and inclusion programs, and making events more meaningful by positively impacting local communities.

The following are guidelines, provided by experts and sponsored by Sonoma County Tourism, for creating more sustainable events — and a better future for the meetings industry and the planet.



# Questions to Ask When Choosing a DESTINATION

**DOES THE DESTINATION HAVE SUSTAINABILITY INFRASTRUCTURE IN PLACE?** Your event can be sustainable even if the destination is not, but it is much easier if the destination has the resources or they can be easily brought in, says Salciute. When the infrastructure is in place, it makes the collaboration between the city and planner easy, she says. Convention and visitor bureaus can provide sustainability metrics from their databases, and you can use these in your decision-making process.

“Meetings are coming back with a vengeance,” says Paloma Zapata, CEO of Sustainable Travel International, and she’s pleased to see that more clients are demanding sustainability be a priority. Before choosing a destination, Zapata says, planners must ask a lot of questions, beginning with: “Do we need this meeting?” If the answer is yes, then producing a sustainable meeting starts with choosing a destination that is conducive to the event’s purpose and addresses the factors impacting its carbon footprint.



—PALOMA ZAPATA,  
CEO of Sustainable Travel International

**HOW FAR WILL YOU TRAVEL?** Travel is the biggest factor in a total carbon footprint and is the elephant in the room for events, says Eric Wallinger, director of sustainability for MeetGreen. Rather than overcomplicate the process, simplify it by choosing destinations close to most attendees, or easily accessed from major hubs.

**WHAT ABOUT CARBON OFFSETTING?** Carbon offset programs let businesses offset their environmental footprint by paying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere. Airlines offer travelers the option to purchase carbon offsets when booking, but numerous other options are available. Justine Broughal, managing partner of Greater Good Events, advises her clients to be selective when choosing carbon offsets as they are not all the same. “Look for high-quality carbon offsets — generally, the more expensive, the better,” she says.

Seek out programs that are certified by third-party organizations. Less expensive, less reputable programs put you at risk of not having your funds go to an actual offset project. “We do our research and make sure the company we are partnering with is following through and not just greenwashing,” says Chelsea Anderson, senior partnerships and events manager for sustainability consulting group Verdical.

# Questions to Ask **BEFORE** Signing a **CONTRACT**

**R**educing waste, air and water pollution, and tackling plastic use, are top sustainability issues for companies and destinations — and they can be addressed for your event by asking the right questions and taking the time to put sustainability in your RFP. Incorporating sustainability in the proposal stage is often overlooked, says Salciute. “We ask if the property can accommodate 300 people, but we don’t always ask what kind of electricity they use or if they source their food locally. It’s an extra step, but it simplifies your planning.”



**IS THE VENUE ENERGY EFFICIENT?** “Ask if they are using renewable energy,” advises Zapata.

Also, determine if they use low-emissions LED lightbulbs, solar power and water-reduction devices. Ask about credentials such as an energy efficiency rating or LEED certification, which helps generate analytics on energy use.



**HOW DOES THE VENUE MANAGE WATER?** What are

they doing to reduce the amount of water for an event? Ask about their water reserve process and whether they have water-efficient equipment and appliances, says Anderson. You can also select catering choices that require less water to prepare, be mindful of how much coffee you are ordering and refrain from pre-filling water glasses for sit-down meals.

**ARE THE FACILITY AND SUPPLIERS PLASTIC-FREE?** “Plastic-



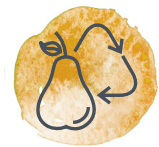
free is an easy win, and you can get most of your clients to commit to it,” says Anderson. “But zero-plastic means more than just eliminating plastic water bottles and cutlery—it also includes microplastics.” For instance, use 100 percent cotton linens rather than polyester, which has microplastics. Small changes, such as swapping packaged snacks for handheld fruits, make a huge difference.

**WHERE DOES THE FOOD COME FROM?**



Avoid global food distributors and favor seasonal produce and locally sourced items from farms and purveyors within a 100-mile radius whenever possible — it cuts down on transportation costs and helps local businesses, says Justine Broughal of Greater Good Events. Opting for vegan and vegetarian dishes instead of meat reduces waste and water usage.

**WHERE DOES THE LEFTOVER FOOD**



**GO?** Food waste plays a huge part in managing the event’s sustainability, says Wallinger. “Ask if they have a food-donation program, as donating unserved food lowers landfill waste and contributes to the community,” he says. You can work with the destination to coordinate food donation through a third party or food-rescue organization, Broughal suggests.



## DOES THE FACILITY HAVE AN ORGANICS (COMPOSTING)

**PROGRAM?** Organic waste can go to a composter, pig farm or biodigester, says Wallinger. Integrating a kitchen organics program requires training the kitchen, operations and stewarding teams, but it's nearly guaranteed to make a difference: On average, a hefty 40 percent of an event's waste stream is organic. "We have seen some events with organics taking up 70 percent of the waste stream," Wallinger points out. "Not having a program to manage this is a lost opportunity for event centers."



## HOW DO THEY PROCESS AND REDUCE MATERIAL

**WASTE?** "Are they measuring, recycling and promoting a circular economy?" says Zapata. "Ask what materials they use and how the waste is treated."

Venues that commit to reusable serviceware, rather than plastic or compostable, will lower your material waste impact, explains Wallinger. Compostable serviceware may seem like a good idea, but it can present challenges, as the venue must collect and sort it, and ensure it is clean to send to the composter.

When it comes to what you or your exhibitors bring into the space — particularly gifts or swag — bring in consumable materials whenever

possible. When waste is unavoidable, such as rentals that are wrapped in plastic for safety reasons or the materials left behind by contractors, check if the venue is using a service such as Terracycle or Ridwell to recycle difficult items, suggests Broughal.



## HOW CAN I DONATE LEFTOVER MATERIALS?

Destinations with material donation programs can help you lower your waste by routing items such as unused water bottles or t-shirts to local organizations, says Wallinger. Finding places to donate oversized items such as sofas, tables and podiums avoids costly shipping and the temptation of paying a disposal fee.

Event organizers simply need guidance in directing their surplus supplies to worthy recipients, adds Salciute. "We need the support of the destination to find a school that could use leftover pens or a shelter that could benefit from simple, unused gifts," she says.



**"Not having a program to manage organic composting is a lost opportunity for event centers."**

— ERIC WALLINGER,  
MeetGreen





## IS THE ON-SITE TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE UP TO DATE?

Tech can promote waste reduction, says Zapata, such as digital signage and personalized mobile event apps that allow you to chat, send messages, set up meetings and share information. That can eliminate business cards, save time and reduce the amount of paper — and it all relies on solid connectivity and bandwidth. That's also crucial for hybrid events — which can significantly extend the reach of the event without increasing the environmental impact of additional travel.

## ARE THE DESTINATION AND VENUES SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE?

"There is a huge human component to sustainability," says Wallinger.

Ask about the policies for workers, determine whether the environment is safe and equitable, and ask if they are involved in community projects and education, he says.

"It's important to do your research beforehand," adds Anderson. Investigate the venue and the venue owners and look for pending lawsuits or anything negative with the partners you are incorporating into your event. "The venue is a reflection of your event, so make sure everyone you are partnering with aligns with your goals."



**"We need the support of the destination to find a school that could use leftover pens or a shelter that could benefit from simple, unused gifts."**

—MILDA SALCIUTE,  
GLOBAL DESTINATION  
SUSTAINABILITY MOVEMENT



# Metrics the **DESTINATION** Can Help You Track

“Sustainability strategies are good, but if we don’t track and have metrics, we cannot evaluate our performance,” Salciute points out. Tracking and reporting sustainability metrics is important for improving a company’s green initiatives and helps increase transparency for stakeholders. “For larger companies who are strict on their ESG (environmental, social and governance) measurements, tracking sustainability is a must,” says Zapata. “Companies need to report on these metrics, and event managers need to have the tools to provide accurate measurements.” In many cases, CVBs can connect you with suppliers that are tracking their footprint, and a number of venues can offer reports on the carbon impact of your event and F&B.

## **START WITH REGISTRATION.**

“To set up tracking, you have to make it part of the foundation and strategy for your event,” says Alexis Kereluk, partner with Connect Seven Group. Incorporate it into registration by asking specific questions that allow you to track attendee travel and anticipate food-and-beverage needs, which will help to eliminate leftovers.

## **DETERMINE THE CARBON FOOTPRINT.**

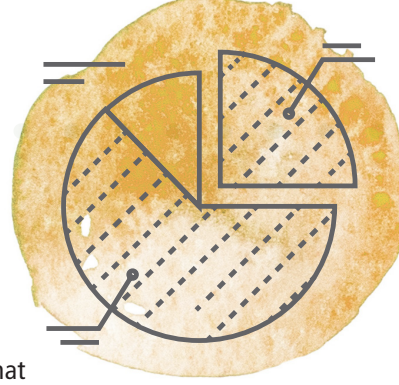
“Carbon-emission metrics need to be established, and there should be a path to neutralizing them,” says Zapata. Collect information about where attendees travel from and how they get to the conference. Encourage or incentivize low-carbon travel and ask if the venue works with green transport services. Venues that are generating or

sourcing renewable energy often can provide carbon metrics, since that lower on-site carbon footprint has become a selling feature for the destination.

**ASPIRE TO ATTAIN NET ZERO.** When considering a destination or venue, ask how they can make the event net-zero — meaning carbon emissions from the event are reduced to nothing, or are balanced by efforts that remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Many companies and cities have already set targets to achieve this goal. Learn how you can take advantage of those efforts and reduce your emissions through resources such as [Net Zero Carbon Events](#) and sign the pledge and join the Race to Zero at [Positive Impact Events](#).

**CALCULATE THE  
DIVERSION RATE.** The percentage of event waste we keep out of the landfill is known as the diversion rate. For example, an event with a 75 percent landfill diversion rate means that 75 percent of the waste was diverted into other channels, such as recycling, composting or donation. Many destinations or venues may already track this rate with respect to certain activities, providing a solid basis for calculating the rate for your event.

**ANALYZE THE METRICS.** It is essential to capture metrics and analyze the event’s impact when it has ended, says Anderson. “We need to set goals for the next year — you can’t show progress if you don’t know where you have been.”





# SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

## The Natural Setting for Your Sustainable Event

**S**onoma County, in California's wine country, is the ideal venue for groups seeking a sustainably focused, low carbon-impact **meetings destination**. A pioneer in **sustainability**, Sonoma County actively works towards a carbon-free future. Sonoma County Tourism works with groups to further the organization's commitment to making a positive impact by, among other efforts, supporting the offsetting of carbon emissions.

"Meetings and events positioned as sustainable or net-zero, are (rightly) expected to back those assertions with quantitative data. Destination stewardship organizations, like Sonoma County Tourism, can help calculate negative impacts and determine suitable countermeasures," said Devin McConnell, manager, sustainability and climate initiatives, Sonoma County Tourism.

### ADDITIONAL INITIATIVES MAKING A DIFFERENCE INCLUDE:

- Sonoma County's **Charles M. Schultz Airport** connects travelers to the destination seamlessly, while being 100 percent powered by solar energy.
- Sonoma Clean Power is the only utility in California to offer the option of 100 percent renewable, locally produced, solar and geothermal energy for homes and businesses — effectively eliminating all greenhouse gas emissions from electricity use.
- The destination promotes and encourages the use of alternate modes of transportation, including bike and car pool incentives, regional rail (SMART), and "last-mile" solutions connecting bus and train stations to worksites and visitor experiences.

- Sonoma County strives to maximize carbon sequestration and minimize loss of natural carbon sinks including old growth forests, the Laguna de Santa Rosa and open space land management.
- Sonoma County's goal is to be carbon neutral by 2030.
- Ninety-nine percent of Sonoma County's 425+ wineries are certified sustainable.

Sonoma County Tourism encourages you to help our destination in its mission to reach carbon neutrality by offsetting the carbon emissions from your Sonoma County meetings experience. Sonoma County Tourism's team can help you curate a plan to offset your group's carbon emissions through a partnership with Sustainable Travel International. By offsetting your group's emissions, your incremental investment will be applied towards climate projects that meet the most rigorous standards for carbon offsetting. Sustainable Travel International carefully vets all carbon offset projects to ensure they truly reduce emissions. Projects meet rigorous third-party verification standards to make certain credits are not double counted and meet the following criteria: ensure additionality, reduce leakage, increase permanence and avoid harm to ecosystems' communities.

Let Sonoma County Tourism help cultivate your ideal sustainable meeting in California's **wine country**, where experiencing Sonoma County through low-carbon impact practices gives you an opportunity to make a difference. Together, we can protect and preserve this special corner of the world for generations to come.

Contact Sonoma County Tourism to learn more about sustainable meetings and contribute to the vital work of global climate action.



CONTACT

800-576-6662, [meetings@sonomacounty.com](mailto:meetings@sonomacounty.com),  
[SonomaCounty.com](http://SonomaCounty.com)

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# Ways to **GIVE BACK** to the Community

A successful sustainable event not only reduces environmental impact, it also positively impacts the host community, explains Alexis Kereluk. Following are suggestions for maximizing that impact.

## **REACH OUT TO THE CVB.**

Ask the CVB for guidance in connecting with key community representatives and addressing the biggest local challenges. If the event returns again to the same destination, you can then nurture the established relationships, suggests Salciute.



**MAKE YOUR ACTIVITIES MEANINGFUL.** Instead of a one-and-done volunteer activity, consider a program that aligns directly with your mission, provides lasting benefits to a community group and educates your attendees. "For example, if an indigenous population wants to share their history, figure out how you can serve that wish by incorporating it into the event and sharing with your attendees," says Kereluk.

## **ENSURE THE LASTING EFFECTS ARE POSITIVE.**

Particularly when your event is in a more remote destination, you'll need to offset the negative environmental



effects of traveling there. In that case, well-researched social programs and activities that address community needs are essential. "In many cases it's simply not practical to cut travel or eliminate meetings," says Kereluk, "and we understand the value of those things. Driving somewhere will create emissions, but you can help the community by trying to leave the destination better off than when you came to it," she says. ■



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—ALEXIS KERELUK  
Connect Seven Group