

【Climate Change and Marathons】 Lessons in Sustainable Event Management from Four World Marathon Majors



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How should marathon races respond to the challenge of climate change?

Race directors from four of the seven World Marathon Majors—Tokyo, Sydney, Berlin, and Chicago—came together to discuss sustainability. Participating in the discussion were Yasuhiro Oshima of the Tokyo Marathon (March), Wayne Larden of the Sydney Marathon (August), Mark Milde of the Berlin Marathon (September), and Carey Pinkowski of the Chicago Marathon (October), listed in order of their race calendars.

A race director's role goes far beyond managing the competition itself. They shape the value a race represents and the direction it aims to pursue. Decisions about invited athletes, race presentation, and relationships with sponsors all reflect that vision.

This roundtable was prompted by the Tokyo Marathon's first comprehensive measurement and disclosure of GHG emissions across Scope 1 - 3. As a sport highly exposed to the impacts of climate change, marathon running faces questions about what responsibility it should take in the future.

For organizers managing events with tens of thousands of participants, issues such as measuring emissions, collaborating with corporate partners, and encouraging behavioral change among participants also mirror challenges faced in corporate sustainability management.

From the front lines of four of the world's leading races, we explore how they approach these issues.

★Photo

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GHG Measurement as the Foundation for Decision Making



From left: Carey Pinkowski (Chicago), Mark Milde (Berlin), Wayne Larden (Sydney), Yasuhiro Oshima(Tokyo)

—Why are your races working to measure GHG emissions?

Mark Milde (Berlin)

“Of course there are expectations from participants, partners, and society. But beyond that, we simply want to live in a clean environment ourselves. Taking action felt like the natural thing to do.”

Carey Pinkowski (Chicago)

“In Chicago, sustainability is one of the core pillars of race management. For about twenty years we’ve reviewed everything—from vendors and suppliers to the sourcing and disposal of materials.

Our emissions analysis is conducted with external auditing. It includes truck fuel, transport of materials, and even the travel methods used by athletes.”

Wayne Larden (Sydney)

“Sydney is still a relatively new race. The first step was understanding where we stand.

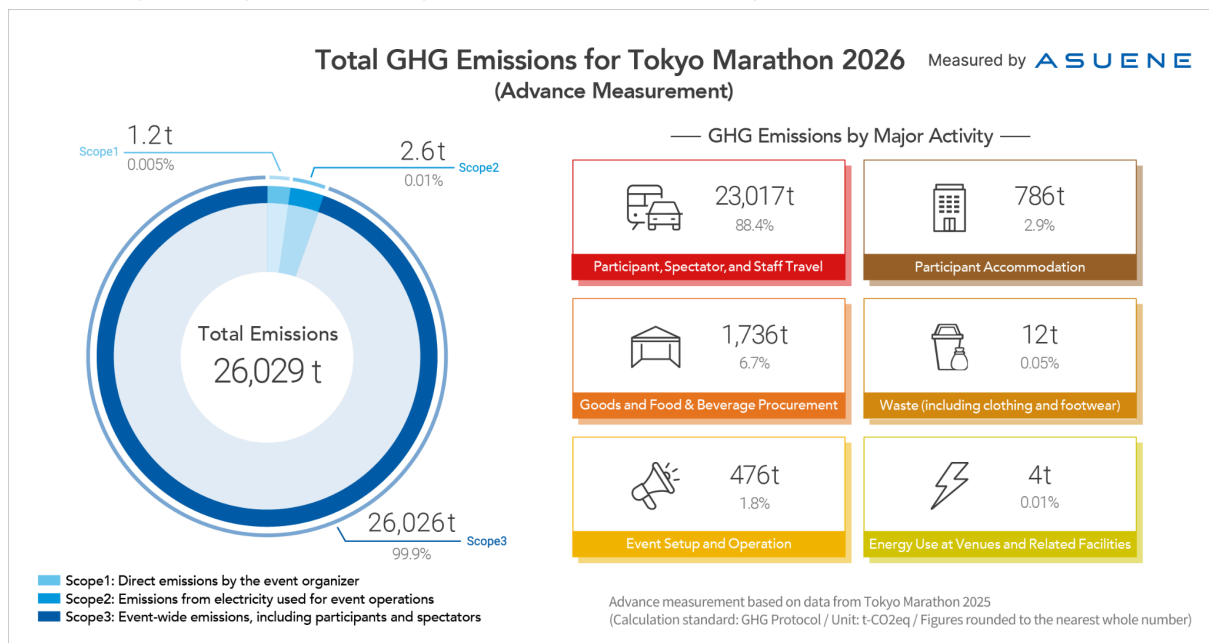
Our course runs through a beautiful environment surrounded by the harbor and nature, and Australians generally have strong environmental awareness.

So last year we began with measurement. Not only Scope 1 and Scope 2, but also supply chain emissions, how materials are used, and even runner behavior before and during the race.”

Yasuhiro Oshima (Tokyo)

“Last summer was extremely hot, and we strongly felt the impact of climate change.

As organizers we believed we needed to take action. Rather than relying on impressions or assumptions, we wanted to understand quantitatively where emissions are coming from. That is why we began measuring GHG emissions, working with ASUENE Inc.”



Pre-event measurement by ASUENE Inc.

Chicago

“Sustainability has rarely been a barrier to attracting sponsors. In fact, companies like Culligan Water have become partners because they align with our environmental efforts. Partnerships with companies that share these values will only become more important in the future.”

Addressing participant travel, the largest source of emissions



From Sydney Marathon

©TCS Sydney Marathon

—Participant travel accounts for a large share of emissions at any race. What steps are you taking to address this challenge?

(Approximately 35–50 percent of participants in each race travel from overseas or distant regions.)

Berlin

“We provide runners with information about lower emission travel options and let them decide how they want to travel.

Within Europe, trains can often replace flights. We also provide runners with a four day public transportation pass.”

Sydney

“We offer a Marathon Pass that can be used during the expo period and on race day. It allows free use of public transportation.

We see this as a realistic approach that races can implement.”

Chicago

“In Chicago we work with the Chicago Transit Authority to strongly encourage train travel from the airport to downtown.

Many international runners stay at hotels within walking distance of the start line. We also place the start and finish in the same location, which minimizes movement of equipment and staff.”

Berlin

“In Switzerland, some races provide free train travel nationwide. Conditions differ depending on the country and scale of the event, but it is an interesting example.”

Learning from other races and adapting best practices

—You’ve been taking notes about each other’s initiatives today. Are there other practices you find inspiring?

Sydney

“Trail running events are very instructive. Their basic principle is simple: everything you bring with you must be taken back.

Because the race takes place in nature, runners understand their responsibility to protect the environment.”

Chicago

“That mindset is standard in trail races. Not everything can be applied directly to road marathons, but the idea that runners themselves take responsibility is something we can learn from.”

Sydney

“As a newer race, we have a lot to learn. We want to take examples from other events and adapt them in ways that fit our race.”

The Influence of Events That Gather Hundreds of Thousands



Cups made of bamboo from Chicago Marathon

© Bank of America Chicago Marathon

—Are these initiatives leading to changes in runner awareness? What steps are you taking to encourage that shift?

Sydney

“We clearly see awareness increasing. In a survey last year, 65 percent of participants said they learned more about sustainability through the event.

Even more striking, 87 percent said they want to participate in races that take sustainability seriously.

Education is extremely important to us. One initiative is the ‘21 Day Pledge Challenge’ we run before race day. During training, runners earn points in an app by adopting more sustainable behaviors.

The goal is to change habits not just on race day but in daily life.”

Chicago

“In Chicago we partnered with Nike to produce commemorative T-shirts for 56,000 participants using recycled materials made from plastic bottles. Staff shoes are also made from recycled materials.

We want the message to come across naturally through what people wear.

At aid stations we use about 2.5 million bamboo cups. After use they are collected and composted over about nine months.

The compost is then used as fertilizer in the parks and flower beds where we run. Seeing this cycle helps volunteers and runners become more conscious about sorting waste.”

Berlin

“We encourage runners to bring their own bottles or hydration packs. Paper cups can be recycled, but manufacturing and washing them still requires energy.

Running with your own water may eventually become the standard.”

Tokyo

“In Tokyo, we collect unwanted running shoes. Those still in usable condition are directed toward reuse, while others are recycled—for example by transforming the soles into recycled sandals. Our goal is to reduce waste, and therefore GHG emissions, as much as possible. Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the Tokyo Marathon, and we hope to further advance our sustainability initiatives together with more runners and corporate partners.”



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Extending Sustainability from Race Day into Everyday Life



From Chicago Marathon © Bank of America Chicago Marathon

—Today’s discussion made it clear that marathons are not just sports events. They are platforms that gather tens of thousands of people and connect with companies and local communities. How can that influence be used from a sustainability perspective?

Chicago

“We hope runners take the recycling and waste sorting they experience at the race back to their homes and communities.

The event itself lasts only one day. But if what people learn there changes how they live afterwards, that is meaningful.

Ideally, sports events can become a model for a more sustainable way of living.”

Sydney

“Through education and engagement with communities, we want to encourage behavioral change that extends beyond race day into everyday life.”

Tokyo

“We want to actively adopt environmentally friendly technologies and eco products.

By working with the technologies and ideas of many companies, we believe we can continue making incremental improvements.”

Berlin

“When tens of thousands of runners gather, we have an opportunity to communicate messages about sustainability to a very large audience.

At the same time, it is true that people traveling from around the world to participate are not inherently environmentally friendly.

However, if the race encourages runners to rethink their lifestyles, it can still create a positive impact in other ways.”

One thing that stood out in the discussion was that every race is still moving forward through trial and error. Next year, the Tokyo Marathon will mark its 20th edition. What new ideas might emerge by then? As races around the world continue learning from one another, their efforts may lead to unexpected changes.