

# **Greening Bonnaroo: Exploring the rhetoric and the reality of a ‘sustainable’ festival through ethnographic methods**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is based on a ‘micro’ or ‘little’ ethnography of greening policies at the Bonnaroo music festival in Tennessee in the United States. The results of this research suggest further applications of micro-ethnographic research in the study of event sustainability.

Bonnaroo is one of the largest music festivals in the US, taking place over 4 days each year in rural Tennessee, 60 miles outside of Nashville, and regularly attracting more than 70,000 attendees. This event has attracted significant attention for its greening policies, becoming one of only two US winners of the Greener Festival Award in 2008 and 2009 and marketing itself with messages of environmental responsibility and sustainability.

This research took place during the 2009 festival and used ethnographic methods to investigate the behaviours of festival attendees and volunteers. The researcher worked as a volunteer at the event and used methods of participant observation, auto-photography and photo-elicitation. The research setting was primarily inside the ‘planet Roo’ community of volunteers and focused on the practices associated with the greening policies of the festival. Further post-festival data was collected via an online survey of planet Roo volunteers.

The analysis of this data revealed that the greening policies of the festival were translated into sustainable event practice through: educational activities for volunteers and festival-goers, the creation of spaces of hyper-sustainability and embedding green issues into the core values of the event.

By using ethnographic methods to compare the rhetoric of the festival with the practices occurring within it, the researchers have been able to make a number of recommendations for continuing and deepening the greening policies of this event, including a need to increase the scope and influence of the spaces of hyper-sustainability within the festival so as to broaden their localised impacts; increasing direct engagement with festival goers on environmental issues and creating incentive schemes for attendees to encourage sustainable practices.

**Keywords:** greening, sustainability, ethnographic methods