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Taking Vows to Save the Planet

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ABSTRACT
The events industry has a large environmental impact and carbon footprint. Several aspects of events and event planning have negative environmental consequences. From the single-use products used (decor, dinnerware, etc.) to the transportation needed by vendors and guests, the events industry continues to contribute to climate change. However, events are not going to go away. People will always want to gather and celebrate, but if events are not going to go away, there needs to be a way to make them more sustainable to continue being part of life. I propose that to make events more environmentally friendly; people must find creative ways to eliminate single-use materials (decorating with secondhand materials, reusing decorations, incorporating vintage dishes and silverware) and to support environmental organizations when reducing the specific event's carbon footprint is not feasible.

Keywords
Events, sustainability, hospitality, climate change

INTRODUCTION

Climate change and environmental sustainability are urgent global issues. The United Nations recognizes the global environmental crisis and advocates for a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a human right (UNDP, 2022). The hospitality and tourism industry has prioritized climate change since 2018, aligning with the World Travel and Tourism Council and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change for climate action (Ben Youssef & Zeqiri, 2022). The tourism industry's significant greenhouse gas emissions have raised concerns about its impact on climate change (Gossling, 2013). The hotel industry has been criticized for excessive water consumption and carbon emissions (Ben Youssef & Zeqiri, 2022). Additionally, events have been identified as sources of negative environmental impacts, including energy consumption, transportation emissions, waste generation, food waste, water consumption, noise pollution, and traffic congestion (Liu & Lei, 2021). The hospitality and tourism industry has a significant environmental impact, partly due to the sheer size of the industry and its nature, which involves the need to travel.

According to a recent survey conducted by Pew Research, climate change is a pressing concern for people worldwide, particularly those from developing countries. The survey encompassed respondents from 17 economically developed countries and revealed that 72% of participants

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expressed severe concern about the personal harm caused by global climate change (Greenwood, 2021). Interestingly, the distribution of this concern is not uniform across age groups. Generation Z (Gen. Z) and millennials exhibit heightened awareness of and engagement with climate change compared to Generation X or baby boomers (Tyson, Kennedy & Funk, 2021).

Young adults are strongly inclined to address climate change and are interested in contributing to its resolution. A survey discovered that 23.6% of people 16 and older actively sought environmentally friendly businesses (Ozbun, 2022). This indicates the receptiveness of consumers, especially within the young adult demographic, toward sustainable event businesses. Moreover, the aforementioned Pew research findings highlight that 80% of the respondents are willing to make substantial or moderate changes in their lifestyles and work routines to combat climate change (Greenwood, 2021). Given the significance of this demographic in the wedding industry, wedding planners must prioritize climate change concerns. However, this challenge also presents an opportunity for event organizers who proactively seek solutions, as there is a market demand and genuine interest in their services and the planet's health.

INDUSTRY CONTEXT

The wedding industry has an estimated value of $57.9 billion as of 2022. It peaked in 2016, with an estimated revenue of $87.3 billion (McCain, 2022). Weddings are social events and an important hospitality and tourism industry segment. In 2022, there were projected to be 2.6 million weddings in the United States alone. That amounts to approximately 7,123 weddings daily or every 12 seconds (McCain, 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the marriage rate in the U.S. has increased at the following rates: 6 marriages per 1,000 in 2021, 10.71 in 2022, and 10.28 in 2023. The data shows a compounded marriage growth in the USA of 9.6% from 2018 to 2023, followed by a projected decline of 3.18% from 2023 to 2028. (IBIS World, 2023). Weddings are a part of everyone's lives, so everyone has a stake in the industry's future. Moreover, there can be no future for the wedding industry or the world without changes made toward sustainability.

Statistics regarding the specific environmental impacts of certain events take time to estimate. This is especially true for the decentralized wedding industry, which is composed of many small businesses. However, the impact is widespread when looking at the overall size of the wedding industry. Four parts of weddings amount to the vast majority of the industry's carbon footprint: travel, venues, waste, and decor. Because weddings involve gathering family members and friends from around the world to celebrate the happy couple, travel plays a big part.

Travel, especially by airplane, significantly affects a wedding's carbon footprint. Regardless of whether the wedding is a destination, guests will have to travel to the venue, as nearly 20% of weddings involve airplane and car travel for a third of guests ("7 unorthodox ways to 'green' your wedding," 2012). For example, flying across the country round trip from New York City to Los Angeles produces "an estimated 0.62 tons of CO2 per passenger, according to the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) carbon calculator" (Sunkara, 2022). Furthermore, for a car driving the same cross-country route, 1.26 tons of carbon emissions would be released (Sunkara, 2022). This shows that the most common and popular transportation methods for guests to travel to weddings are heavy emitters of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. These emissions only increase the farther the trip is. Not only are guests traveling to the wedding venue, but also the vendors, wedding support staff, and materials for the wedding (decorations, food, linens, etc.) travel by plane or car. All this travel adds up, no matter the size of the wedding, and results in the average wedding emitting 62 tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (Terrapass, 2017).

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One key aspect of weddings is the venue. Venues include all the locations for the various events surrounding the wedding, for example, where all the guests are staying, where the rehearsal dinner is located, where the ceremony will be, and many more. Venues and venue operators run their restaurants, hotels, and event spaces differently, making some more environmentally friendly than others. Take the restaurant where the rehearsal dinner will be held, for example. If that chosen venue sets the table with more dinnerware than is used and washes those dishes anyway, gallons of water are wasted. Suppose that venue does not consciously budget and plan for a close estimate of how much food the party will require and then disposes of the waste at the end of the night, that is pounds of food wasted. However, on the contrary, if a venue runs its location according to sustainable principles, this will vastly decrease the overall environmental impact and carbon footprint of the wedding.

In addition to the chosen venue, the actual wedding events (rehearsal dinner, ceremony, reception, etc.) also result in extreme waste. In addition to all the food waste, decor is an issue, such as all the florals, decorations, and linens. Overall, based on a wedding of 100 to 120 guests, 400 to 600 pounds of waste are produced ("7 unorthodox ways to 'green' your wedding," 2012). This is partly because many communities do not have access to composting. Furthermore, composting is incredibly impactful when it comes to reducing the waste in landfills, as the average wedding spends about $2,300 on florals, about 10% of the typical wedding budget (Forrest, 2022). Florals include small arrangements like bouquets and boutonnieres and large-scale pieces, like floral arches or table centerpieces. Most of the time, these flowers are not adequately composted but instead thrown in the trash, adding to the waste from the event. Furthermore, non-floral decorations also amount to a large part of the wedding budget, costing couples $2,000 to $10,000 ("Average cost of wedding decorations," 2022). Most couples buy and throw these away immediately after the wedding, contributing to the waste produced.

If this continues without any changes or innovations, environmental degradation will continue. By no means will the events industry be solely responsible for climate change, but it is causing a substantial negative impact and is a salient concern for the generation that is most likely to get married in the near future. Therefore, change needs to be made; if not, scientists predict that environmental degradation will continue. Scientists at NASA predict that sea levels will continue to rise, glaciers and sea ice will keep melting, extreme heat waves will become more frequent, erosion and flooding will continue, and many more disastrous effects will occur (Jackson, 2022).

DISCUSSION

While this may seem overwhelming for an individual, collectively, members of the wedding industry can work together so each does their part, creating monumental change as a group. Given this previously discussed knowledge, wedding professionals can work with all other connected industries (food and beverage, hotels, etc.) to find creative solutions to make weddings more sustainable.
As far back as 1992, the hospitality industry has been aware of the industry's impact on the environment (History: See our organisational journey, 2023). Today, the hospitality and events industry's environmental impact is becoming a more serious and pressing issue. Despite environmental concerns, people will continue gathering for events, and weddings will remain an essential part of our culture. However, like all industries, the events industry needs to implement solutions and changes to reduce their wider environmental impact to remain sustainable for the long term. Many people hope there will be one easy, quick solution to climate change. However, there is not one. The solution combines solutions, creating small changes to make a big difference collectively.

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One solution for the wedding industry would be choosing environmentally friendly venues (*Sustainability in the Events Industry*, 2022). An environmentally friendly venue means that the venue is already making an effort to be more sustainable, whether in more efficient water and electricity usage or waste management services, among others. Many are identified as LEED-certified (Cain,2023). Selecting the venue includes finding sustainable lodging for guests. According to the latest Cornell Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking (CHSB) Index, hotels in the United States have made positive changes to the way that they run their operations, and this has resulted in a 12.1 percent decrease in their overall carbon footprint on average (Ruggles-Brise, 2022). Other venues can do the same, thereby showing how small changes in the venue are built and operated, resulting in a significant impact in reducing carbon emissions. This solution has two benefits, the first being that one would be supporting an environmentally friendly business. This would allow the business to have more money to continue its work in sustainability, creating a cycle where more and more events would be hosted at sustainable venues. The second benefit is that the venue is already sustainable. This is one step in the right direction, as non-environmentally conscious venues produce a lot of carbon dioxide and waste.

Environmentally friendly venues and wedding planners are also concerned about reducing waste. According to a 2019 PCMA article, Tracy Stuckrath, the president and chief connecting officer of Thrive Meetings and Events, states, “Meetings and events generate about $21 billion of that [food waste]” (“Figuring out Food Waste at Events” 2019). This is a large amount of money on food that is being wasted. While it is understandable that organizers and caterers worry about insufficient food at their events, this shows that a recalculation needs to be made or a secondary use for the additional food must be found. The Environment America Research and Policy Center states, “Composting could reduce the amount of trash sent to landfills and incinerators in the U.S. by at least 30 percent” (Environment America, 2019).

Another possible solution would be to use green suppliers and vendors (*Sustainability in the Events Industry*, 2022). Like the sustainable venues, using vendors who prioritize lowering their carbon footprint and environmental impact is a great way to decrease the carbon and waste footprint of the event. These vendors are experts in knowing products (decorations, tables, chairs, etc.) that have minimal environmental impact. Their knowledge will help make one’s event more sustainable. Some examples include renting wedding décor or selecting potted plants rather than cut flowers to enhance the venue (Hasan, 2023). Another specific example of an environmentally conscious vendor that would significantly impact event sustainability is a waste-conscious caterer who more accurately calculates the food prepared against the number of RSVPs and uses real dishes and reusable serving ware (Liu &Lei, 2021).

Wedding planners can impact the sustainability of wedding events by selecting green and local vendors. By choosing local vendors who use recycled and reusable items and local food, flowers, and drinks, wedding planners can plan carbon-neutral or carbon-reduced weddings. It also means the wedding would use less stuff and include more reusable items such as vintage clothing, rental linens, used or antique centerpieces, and décor (Hasan, 2023). Green vendors go as far as to recycle items during the wedding to reduce carbon footprint. One example is having guests toss flower petals from the floral arrangements over the happy couple instead of rice (Dreghorn, 2022). Since determining a wedding’s carbon footprint is complicated, some planners use carbon footprint calculators to determine the event’s environmental impact (Wray & Henri, 2023). Then to offset the carbon footprint due to travel emissions, such as plane flights, some weddings offer guests a charity registry where they can purchase trees to offset the carbon load from greenhouse gases generated by the event and guests traveling to the event (Cain, 2023).

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In addition, e-paper and/or plastic-free events are another excellent way to reduce environmental impact (*Sustainability in the Events Industry*, 2022). The production and unsustainable use of paper results in deforestation, meaning fewer trees are left to sequester the carbon dioxide that humans emit into the atmosphere. Going paperless for an event, like having virtual invitations and using other materials for signage, for example, results in less paper being used once and then wasted. Similarly, the production and disposal of plastic is a massive cause of climate change (Liu & Lei, 2021). Plastic is made from fossil fuels, and in its production, copious amounts of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere. There are many plastic alternatives, from glass to pre-owned items. These all result in less waste and fewer carbon dioxide emissions, making an event more sustainable.

Using pre-owned or vintage items for decorations, tableware, dishes, and linens is another small but effective way to make an event more sustainable (*Sustainability in the Events Industry*, 2022). Not only do vintage items add intrigue and individuality to the event, but they also are more sustainable than constantly buying new plastic or paper products for every event. While they are currently more expensive than paper and plastic alternatives, if they are demanded by more event professionals, the price will slowly decrease, according to basic economics. The key first step to making these sustainable options more economically viable is for the demand to increase.

CONCLUSION

The waste and carbon dioxide produced by weddings and their guests creates a huge negative impact on the planet. However, the wedding industry will be around for a while, meaning that changes need to be made to preserve the planet for future generations and create longevity for the industry. Overall, the primary solution to making events more sustainable and decreasing their carbon footprint is a combination of small changes in how we plan and execute weddings. Those include swapping typical decor items with reusable or vintage pieces; using environmentally conscious vendors, caterers, and venues; and having fewer destination events. Since the wedding industry is so large, these tiny changes have the chance to make a significant impact on their own. Additionally, together, they can have an even more significant impact.

However, it must be noted that this paper is not all-encompassing. This topic needs more research, especially scholarly papers, to determine the proposed solutions' quantifiable results (in terms of waste and reduced carbon emissions). Furthermore, the wedding industry cannot do this alone. Sustainable weddings must partner with vendors, accommodations, and travel providers to create sustainable and carbon-neutral wedding events. This is because the hospitality industry, especially the wedding industry, is closely related to many other industries. Because of this unique position, actual change will mean that all industries must pitch in. However, starting to make changes will mean the wedding industry will contribute to the health of our planet both in the short and long term.

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