

Opinion & Analysis

At last, a summer festival with green credentials



**JOHN
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The Electric Picnic is one of the most impressive environmental showcases ever assembled in Ireland

SUMMER FESTIVALS and ecology make uneasy camping buddies. It's only a few weeks since the Oxegen festival in Punchestown, but long after the music has faded, the images of casual detritus and hedonistic hubris linger. Ironically, this year's event had been flagged by its organisers as "the greenest ever".

Photographs of the campsite the morning after the festival could have been mistaken for images from a refugee camp which the inhabitants had been forced to abandon, dumping their chattels as they fled.

The truth is rather more banal: the point at which our rising expectations intersect with sharp falls in the real prices of goods, from tents to folding chairs, portable lanterns and sleeping bags, is now marked by a literal mountain of waste.

You can, for instance, buy a two-man dome tent for €22 in Argos. That's around half of what you'd have paid for the cheapest tent available 25 years ago when pursuing Christy Moore's injunction to head to Lisdoonvarna. This modern miracle of globalised production is likely to have been manufactured in a coal-powered factory in China, using petrochemicals shipped thousands of miles

from the Middle East. The finished product is then trucked hundreds of miles to a Chinese port, before being re-shipped 10,000 miles to Europe, then on to Dublin Port before being trucked to your local store.

All this flurry of effort, logistics and emissions delivers a product which is likely to have a working life of one or two days, before ending up in landfill. It's a sad end to an extraordinary odyssey, which is all the more shocking in how utterly unremarkable we regard it. As one contributor to a recent BBC radio documentary on festivals candidly suggested: "The best thing for the whole green argument is to just close the show down, isn't it?" In the UK alone, some five million people attended festivals this summer.

Tomorrow, thousands more will descend on Stradbally, Co Laois, for the Electric Picnic. The theme for this year's Picnic is *The Climate's Changing... Will You?* While you could be forgiven for being sceptical about yet another festival touting its green credentials, in fact, this event is probably one of the most impressive environmental showcases ever assembled in Ireland.

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direct and indirect environmental impact. The weekend is an opportunity for attendees to delve into grass-roots environmentalism and get to grips with sustainable living. A whole new area has been added to this year's Picnic, called The Global Green, and it's the hub of much of the event.

To get an idea of just how seriously the festival is taking climate change and related issues, the listings guide to this segment alone covers four dense pages. Cultivate, the Dublin-based sustainability centre, is

operating what it calls the Rethink Tank. There people can watch short films, view exhibits, listen to and engage with experts on topics from peak oil to transition towns, and sample organic foods. And did I mention there's a music festival going on as well?

If this all sounds a little like a hippy hug-fest, rest assured there is a hard edge. Sustainability expert Gavin Harte will offer a hair-raising account of just how utterly out of kilter our lifestyles have become. Harte, founder of The Village, a sustainable living project in Co Tipperary, sees the Picnic as reaching well beyond those in the know.

Duncan Stewart will deliver a twist to his television programme in *Eco Black Eye*, billed as a no-holds-barred analysis of Ireland's dire environmental record.

The Electric Picnic has taken a range of steps to lighten its carbon footprint; festival organisers aim to have the event genuinely carbon-neutral within three years. Whether that is really possible with an event attracting around 35,000 people remains to be seen.

Those who do stray from the path in Stradbally can visit the Carbon Confession Box, where you can both calculate your carbon footprint and perhaps ease the guilt

you may be experiencing at having driven down in your V8 Range Rover. Transportation remains the Achilles' heel of rural-based festivals such as the Electric Picnic, given that an estimated 70 per cent of an event's carbon impact is in the transport used getting there. Encouraging the use of public transport and car-pooling can sharply cut this impact.

Every public gathering, be it festival, sports or social event, carries some environmental cost. The GAA's recent initiative, Cúl Green, is asking fans to help offset some of its annual emissions of around 4,500 tonnes. The GAA's involvement is significant, debunking the idea that environmentalism is the preserve of urban elites.

Davie Philip of Cultivate, one of the driving forces behind the greening of the Electric Picnic, sums it up: "We are at the peak of our affluence. We're about to hit a serious downturn. There are tough times ahead but now's the time to start preparing." Change is possible, he reminds us, "but no one said it would be a picnic".

John Gibbons is founder of Climatechange.ie and is a guest speaker at the Electric Picnic on Saturday