



From greenwashing to greenwishing

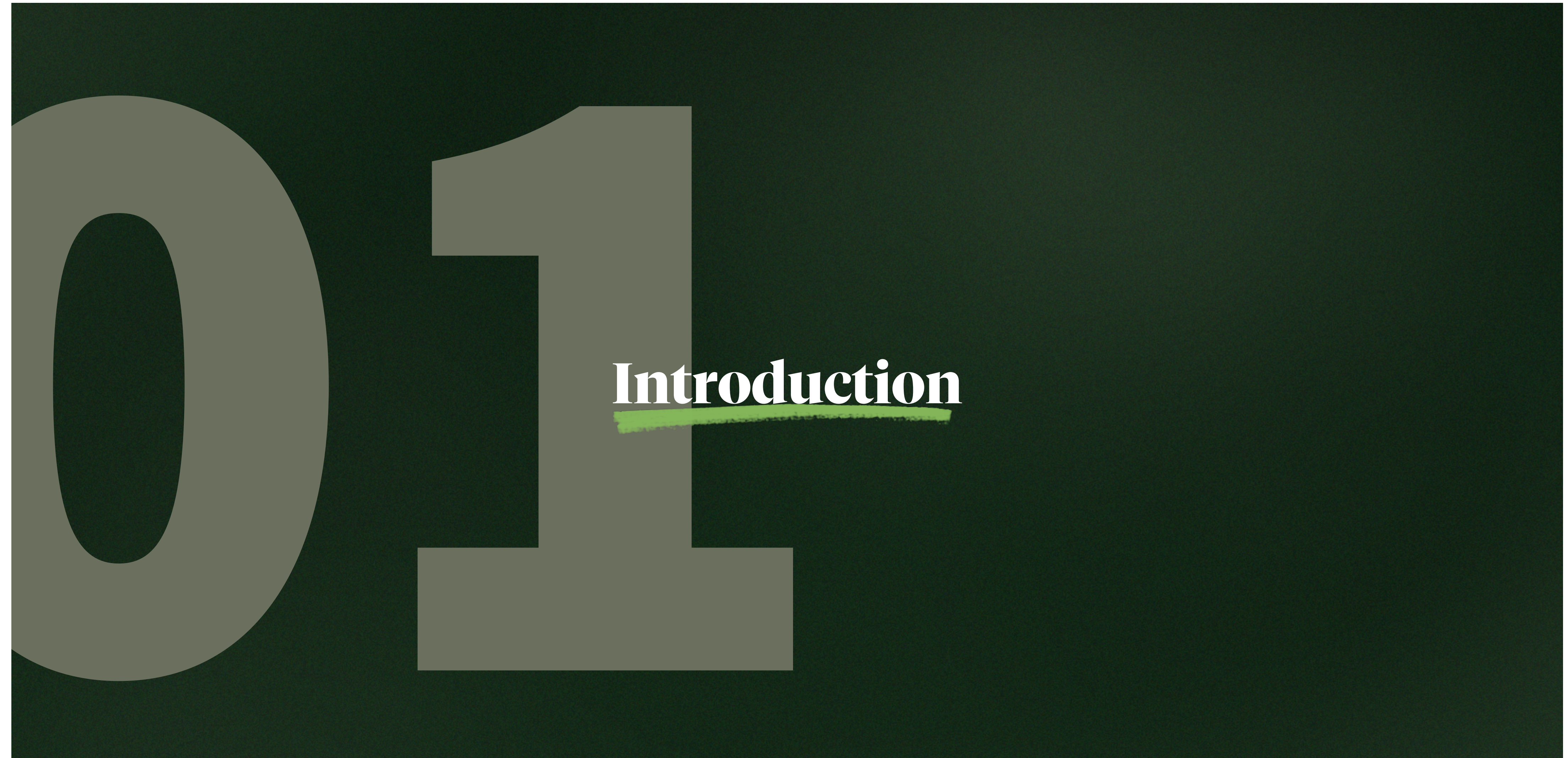
How to organise a sustainable event?

Everything you were too afraid to ask about green events



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“Today’s actions will determine how humanity adapts, and nature responds to the growing risks of climate change”

– warned us Hoesung Lee, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Chairman. According to the organisation’s climate report, over 3 billion people live in areas particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Immediate and coordinated global action is needed to avoid sinister predictions becoming news in the next few decades.

It seems like the events industry has received the message. Going green has become almost mandatory, the application of principles and methods aimed at preventing, reducing, and compensating for environmental impact. 59% of the organisers who participated in [Eventbrite's survey in 2020](#) stated that environmental awareness played a crucial role in their events. In 2019, this percentage was only 6%. We are seeing more and more attempts at “zero-waste” events to ensure that at least 90% of the waste generated is recycled back into the raw material cycle instead of ending up in landfills.



“Although it may sound scary at first, it is not impossible at all,” says Meegan Jones, co-founder of the [International Institute for Sustainable Events \(ISE\)](#).

“Like many other industries, the events industry has become almost insensitive to resource wastage and its consequences. Fortunately, this is starting to change.”

The sustainability expert brings the [Vancouver half marathon](#) as an example. In 2013, the waste generated at the event, which had nearly seven thousand participants, comfortably fit in just four normal-sized trash bags.

How? “There are events that call themselves green, and there are those that actually make an effort to be so,” [said Clifton Cunningham, one of the directors of the sports event company Canada Runner Series](#), in an interview with a magazine.

Similar experiences prompted us to establish HighVibes in 2020, Hungary’s first team specialised in organising “zero waste” events. After all, for every Vancouver half marathon, there are a dozen corporate events that proudly distribute “environmentally friendly” PLA cups, but they don’t mention that the bioplastic only decomposes with industrial composting, ensuring the appropriate temperature, humidity, and microorganisms - which is currently not available in our country.



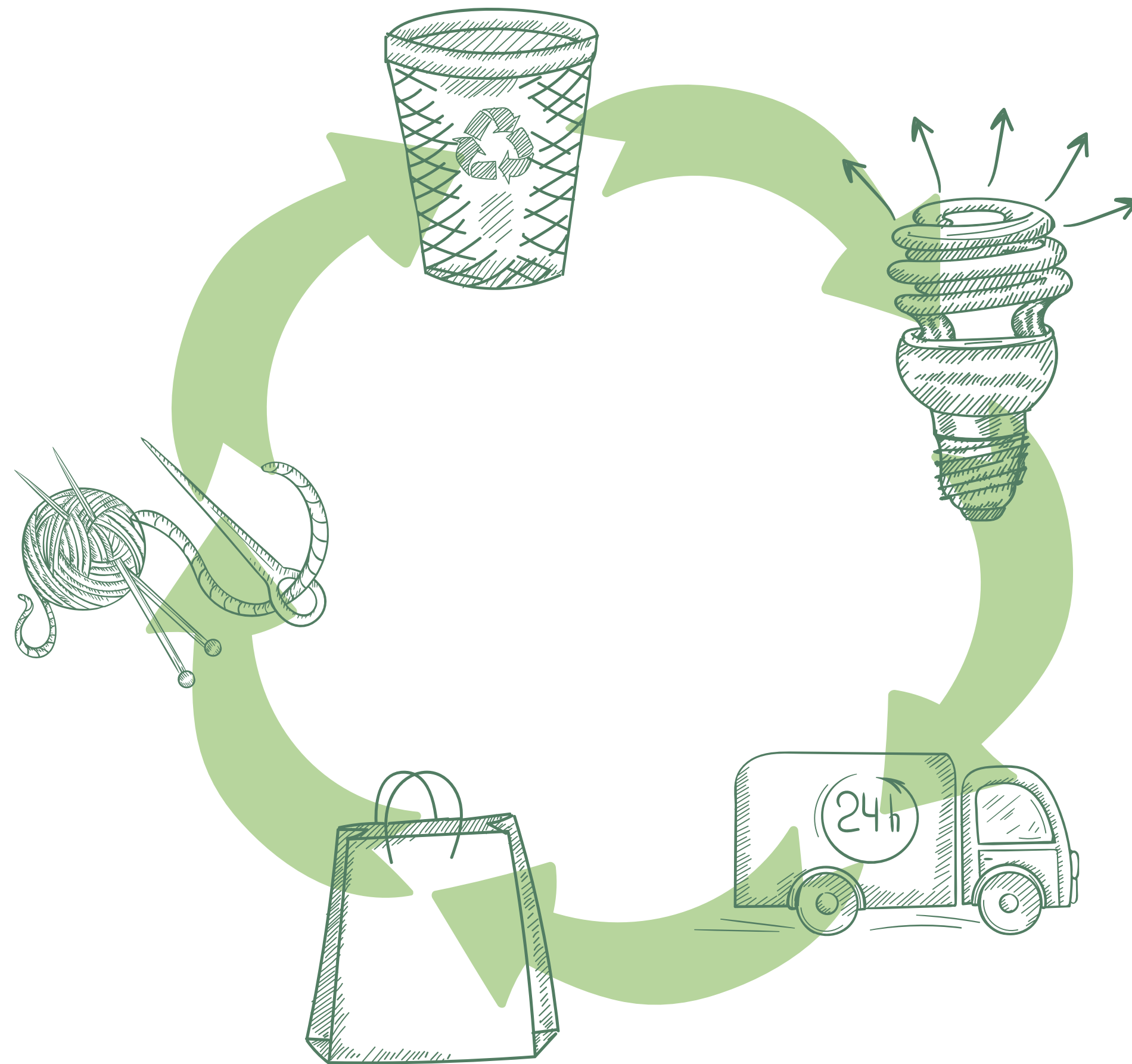
VW Caddy California product presentation

But what makes a green event genuinely green?

Is it not flying, or is it not having beef stew? How can we offset the emissions we can't prevent? We sat down with eight experts from HighVibes and other organisations and interviewed them on the principles that guide sustainability. How to distinguish greenwashing from truly climate-friendly solutions and ensure guests leave our event with a new perspective?

02

Sustainable planning



“The waste-free approach and the reuse of resources are closely related to the theory of circular economy,” explains Meegan Jones. According to the expert, these mean nothing more than recycling waste as raw materials into the circle.



Why is this important?

Only 1% of materials used in product manufacturing remain in use six months after sales. 50-75% of the resources used to return to nature as waste. This means a lost profit that, if returned to the economy, could save \$1 trillion by 2025, [according to PwC.](#)



The circular approach is based on a production-and-consumption model and aims to extend the product's lifespan as much as possible. Instead of buying, for example, we should rent, repair, refurbish, or pass on what we purchase before disposing of it. In other words, it goes against what the traditional linear model leads us to do: consume cheap, lower-quality products once. When a product reaches the end of its life cycle, the raw materials can be recycled back into production, reducing waste and contributing to economic value creation.

But how can all this be applied to events?

Primarily through a comprehensive approach. “When planning events, don’t focus on one sustainability area, such as eliminating meat or plastic. Try to consider what resources are needed for each element of the event and how we can keep them in the cycle after use,” - advises Panka Körmendy, event organiser at HighVibes.

The organisation of sustainable events starts with a collaborative thinking process involving all stakeholders, where we list all factors that contribute to environmental impact, from the largest to the smallest. The goal is to do all this while considering circularity, waste minimization, and carbon footprint. For example, bamboo straws may be biodegradable, but they likely come from the other side of the world, which harms our greenhouse gas balance. It’s also not ideal if we, as organisers, use porcelain for serving, but the sponsor responsible for coffee uses disposable cups.

“**In other words, we should consider the waste generated during the event as raw material and strive to ensure that as much of it as possible is reusable.**”

Bea Johnson's 5R model provides reliable guidance for planning. The environmental activist switched to a zero-waste lifestyle with her husband and children in 2007. Since then, the family of four has produced only one jar of trash per year. She summarised her experiences in a highly successful book with a philosophy based on five principles: refuse unnecessary waste, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot (the 5Rs). (More information on applying the model is in Chapter 5.)



“To achieve all of this, we need to make sure that everyone who produces waste or participates in its recycling at the event understands the purpose of these principles and their role in making them a reality,” explains Szabolcs Pécsi, co-founder of HighVibes. In addition to increasing efficiency, there is another advantage to this: thanks to the domino effect, we can help incorporate sustainable best practices into the daily lives of others or companies as well. [According to the Harvard Business Review:](#)

“**People like to be consistent: a single new sustainable habit can be enough to set us on the path towards positive change.**”

03

Venue management



180kg
average
emission (capita/day)



Three-quarters, and in some estimates, up to 90% of the carbon footprint of an event comes from the emissions generated by participant travel. The carbon emissions of a single guest typically range around 180 kilograms per day, but in the case of exceptional travel needs, this can be as much as 900 kilograms. As a point of reference, according to data from the US Environmental Protection Agency, it would take 14,882 newly planted trees in a period of 10 years to offset this latter amount.

“Choose a venue that participants can reach by public transportation! If this is not possible, try to provide them with the most carbon-neutral travel options,” advises Andrea Koller, co-president of a Hungarian green organisation called the **“Zöldövezet” Association. A specific example:** a nearly 4.5-hour flight produces 485 kilograms of carbon dioxide per passenger, while a train ride produces only fifty.

Regarding the issue of waste, according to sustainability experts, the most effective waste management is the one that starts early.

“When creating the venue layout, we already know where each item will go, what material it will be made of, and its future fate. If something cannot be made from leftover materials, we start thinking about who we can donate it to or order it from a supplier who can use it for future events,” says Koller. Remember that the construction before the event and the demolition afterward also generate waste.



To achieve efficient waste management, it is essential to provide opportunities for selective waste collection in the guest area and service rooms, with collection points, precisely planned. It is also necessary to decide in advance how many types of collection containers we will place, as certain wastes, such as rapid coronavirus tests, are considered hazardous waste. Clearly and understandably indicate which container should be used for each type of waste, and for foreign guests, use pictograms or multilingual labels.

But in most cases, our task is far from over here, especially when it comes to outdoor events.

According to Koller, it makes a big difference if the right staff or volunteers stand next to the collectors and help visitors. They can prevent the waste from getting contaminated and provide green education opportunities.

The employees of “Zöldövezet” ensure that the collected waste undergoes a post-selection process.

Alongside sorting, cleaning can also begin. A sustainable event involves environmentally friendly cleaning products and a staff familiar with sustainability principles or has received adequate training.

According to the co-president, clear and detailed communication about why this is necessary is also essential - preferably before, during, and after the event too. This way, a collection rate of up to 70% can be achieved, while public utilities typically only achieve 30% at a festival where selective waste collection points are set up. However, open, constructive communication is important with guests and organisers, who often need help recognizing their shortcomings in sustainability.

“Everyone is open-minded, but at first, many are scared. Then step by step, we can start moving towards becoming greener”

“For example, there is a remarkable development at the Paloznaki Jazz Picnic, which we attend yearly. We had a deposit-based trial year. Nobody asked for a plastic cup. We stickered glasses as refillable, and they returned them. We saved seven cubic metres of plastic only with this one change,” explains Koller, emphasising another important waste management principle: the best waste is the one that is not even generated. This is particularly true for catering equipment.

The most sustainable options are made of glass and metal and can be used multiple times, but reusable cups or deposit systems can also be a good solution. If none are feasible, choose items whose waste management is solved.

“In recent years, PLA products have become popular in Hungary, and many were happy because they thought it would solve everything. Unfortunately, this is not true: neither the collection nor the industrial composting of biodegradable plastics is solved here for now,” says Eszter Kiss-Szabó, the communication leader of the Hungarian [Felelős Gasztrohős](#), which can be best translated to Responsible Heroes of Gastronomy Hero Foundation. “Then there are versions made of bamboo, sugarcane, and banana leaves. Sugarcane can only be composted under special circumstances, and the others must first reach the composting plant, which is another harmful journey.”

04

Catering



The Glasgow climate summit last year was not exactly an uplifting event. “A statement was born, but it was watered down. They make the concrete results visible, but the previous commitments have not had an impact yet. India almost torpedoed the agreement but then made a significant commitment, while the EU performed modestly compared to its weight,” as the [Green Policy Center evaluated COP26](#).

The participants were disappointed, and not only for this reason. According to Bloomberg, these questions were discussed over a hearty dinner made from beef, the least climate-friendly meat in the world. The carbon footprint of a [single slice is equivalent to a hundred-kilometer car journey](#). Not to mention that the greenhouse effect of methane emitted by animals is far more significant than carbon dioxide.

According to Eszter Kiss-Szabó, the communication director of the Responsible Heroes of Gastronomy Foundation, research shows that over 90% of the ecological footprint of restaurants comes from sourcing ingredients, i.e., what kind of ingredients they use during their operation.

Their energy- and water consumption are also high, making them the third-largest water consumers in urban areas. This includes catering companies as well.

The answer to reducing the environmental impact of catering is primarily found at the food counter. “We encourage everyone to try to consume as little milk, dairy, and meat, i.e., animal-based products, as possible,” says the sustainability expert.

This principle is essential not only for carbon reduction but also for its educational impact. According to Kiss-Szabó, if someone tries a vegan or vegetarian dish they like, they may be more likely to choose it again or try it at home.

**70% of the ecological footprint
of a dinner is determined by
whether meat is included in the
menu and if so, what kind.**

Suppose, for some reason, we still decide to go with a meaty menu. Not all is lost if we focus on quality instead of quantity and prefer ingredients from domestic, ecological farming, and free-range sources. Kiss-Szabó adds: “Game meat can be a good solution. It is one of the most sustainable types of meat, as it cannot be produced industrially. It used to be a traditional ingredient here for a long time, but nowadays, it’s almost forgotten, even though it’s healthy.” Fish dishes can also be an option, but choosing domestic fish species instead of the overfished tuna-salmon-sea bass-cod quartet is crucial.





Another important aspect to consider when planning a sustainable menu for events is seasonality. Locally grown fruits and vegetables have the lowest greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), and they are grown outdoors during their natural season, which means they are consumed in the same country or region where they were produced. That way, farmers need less energy for artificial heating or lighting, transportation, cooling, and storage.

“This means that if we need to offer fruit platters in February, it should not include strawberries or grapes, as we’d surely have to import these. But there are many other ways to include some fruits in the menu, such as dried, preserved, or jammed fruits,” explains the expert.



The third mandatory element of a sustainable menu is reducing food waste. In the case of events, this requires more attention because it's difficult to predict precisely how many people will attend. However, we can still approach the final number. Panka Körmendy, an expert from HighVibes, advises that we strive to have guests confirm at least once, but preferably twice, which day and time they will arrive so that the portion sizes can be planned as accurately as possible.

Like in other areas of sustainable event planning, there's no single solution for menu planning that can ensure environmental friendliness. Different factors need to be balanced, and finding equilibrium is key. For example, don't fool yourself into thinking you've done everything you can by simply filling the menu with vegan dishes. If the appetiser includes avocados imported from Mexico and tomatoes grown in a greenhouse, we've already done more harm than good, compared to serving a locally sourced Hungarian "mangalica" pork chop.

05

Furniture, decoration, and technology



On average, a participant in an event produces 1.89 kilograms of waste per day, of which up to 85% may end up in a landfill. Let's see how we can minimise this by applying the principles of circularity and the 5R model!



Following Johnson's thought process, the first step (refuse) is to list the event elements we don't need. The choice of venue plays a crucial role. For example: if we organise the event in a beautiful environment or where decoration is already provided, we will need much less of the latter. For things we must acquire, it's better to rent! Additionally, if we plan the catering in a shaded area for a summer event, we can improve the guests' comfort and save on rental and transportation costs for umbrellas.

In the next step (reduce), we should consider how we can use less of what we do need while at the same time minimising our impact on the environment.

Without guests, there is no event - but is it really necessary for everyone to be physically present? One of the great lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic is the answer is not always yes to that question. In the first six months of the pandemic, the turnover of a **single event management platform increased by 1000%**, and in a survey by AnyRoad, 91% of organisers considered virtual events successful. For example, we can make knowledge-sharing meetings much more sustainable by replacing them with a playful, visually appealing online event. Similarly, we should reconsider the cost of inviting foreign guests, as we can easily afford a much bigger name to participate in the event online with the amount spent on the fee, transportation, and accommodation of a well-known foreign guest.



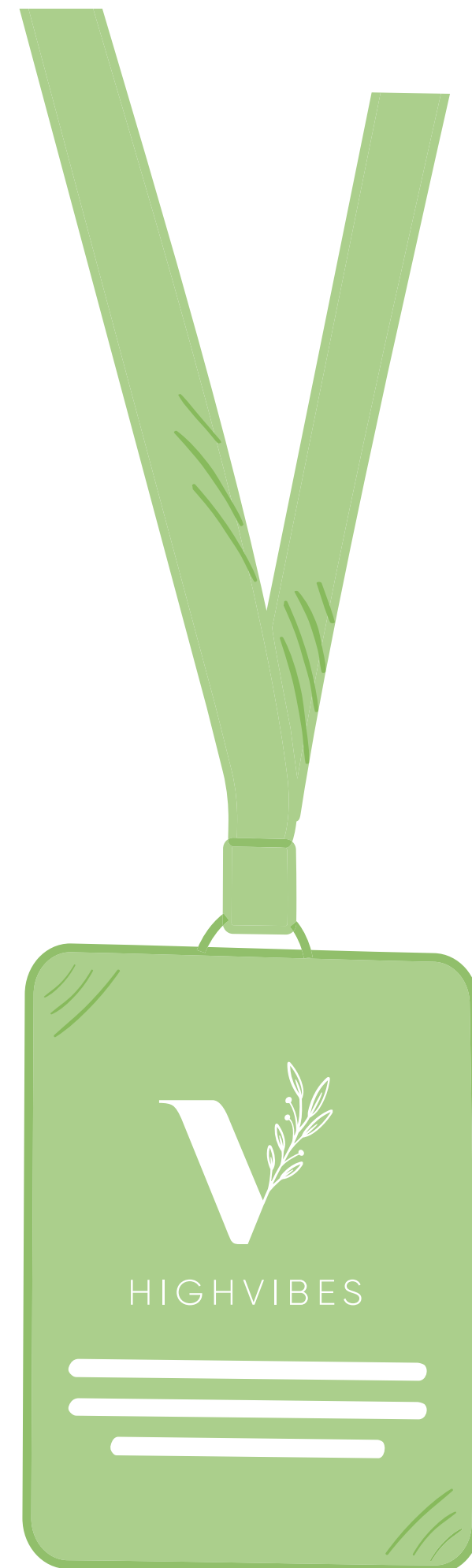
Medtronic online year-end event.



Syngenta online Christmas

We can follow the impact of the above through a specific example, thanks to the University of Michigan. **According to calculations by the university's committee responsible for carbon neutrality**, a 26,000-person international scientific conference results in 69,300 tons of carbon-dioxide emissions. If held virtually, this can be reduced by 99.9%, equivalent to the annual emissions of nearly 1,500 American households. And we can still do better! Data traffic accounts for 60% of the environmental impact of an online conference of this size, and internet use contributes to 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions. We can ask participants to turn off their cameras during idle times (e.g., while listening to a lecture), choose standard resolution instead of high, and, if possible, communicate via messaging (e.g., on Slack).

For physical events, let's follow the energy-saving approach: always turn off electronic devices that are not in use, and whenever possible, choose more modern and energy-efficient equipment (e.g., LED lights). Remember to ask our event technical supplier for the total energy consumption of the installed equipment so that we can also take it into account when offsetting carbon emissions later. In hot weather, consider whether we can provide a more comfortable temperature with a less energy-intensive solution (e.g., removing side walls) in a tent, considering the location's natural conditions!



Following the principle of reuse, consider whether we really need event items such as badges or if it's just a bad habit. If we do need them, collect the lanyards and badge holders after the event and use them again next time. At this point, the question usually arises: to brand or not to brand? Let's agree with the second option and use displays to showcase the company or event branding instead. Avoid printing the year on prints if possible, as this would make them disposable!

Our other important tool in this area is charity, which is becoming increasingly popular in Hungarian event circles. According to the co-chair of “Zöldövezet,” it is important to choose a partner who delivers the remaining materials to where they are needed. The association hardly needs to search: as part of the Hungarian [Helping Hands \(Segéd-Kezek\)](#) charity program, they connect companies and institutions in need so they can give surplus items and materials a new life.

Recycling is at the bottom of the waste reduction pyramid, and with a reason - consider this step only if none of the first three are viable! For example, email brochures and informational materials or make them available for QR code download instead of printing them. However, if we cannot avoid producing printed materials, coordinate with the printer to use FSC-certified or recycled paper and avoid paper handling procedures (such as formaldehyde) that make recycling difficult





Finally, let's take stock of what decorations we can compost. For example, cut plants and flowers, and collect them separately after the event. Rented plants, of course, have an advantage here, and potted plants used for decoration can be distributed as gifts among guests at the end of the event. Suppose we have a larger quantity of fresh ingredients left over because we used fruits or vegetables to decorate the buffet table. In that case, we donate these to a homeless shelter instead of composting them.

Carbon-footprint neutralisation

“Carbon neutrality, decarbonisation, and climate goals - these buzzwords are increasingly spreading in the corporate sector. However, when we talk about these, most companies think in terms of technological solutions, such as how to save or offset carbon emissions with another production line or solar panels,” explains Katalin Sipos, Director of [WWF Hungary](#).

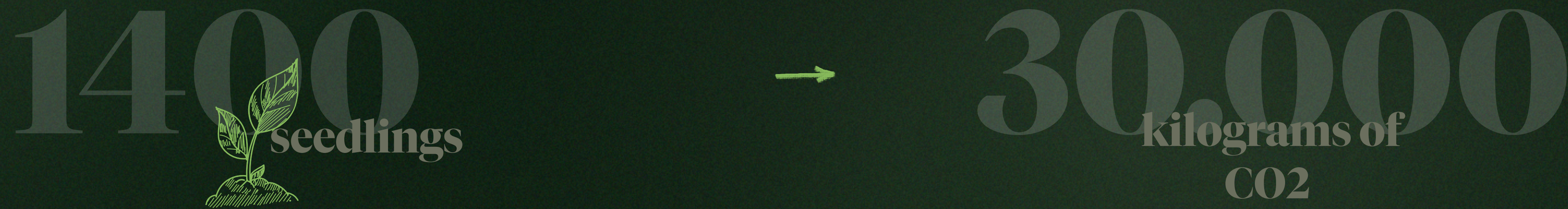
However, if we consider the effects of climate change from the planet’s perspective, the most important thing would be to restore the natural systems, including forests and wetland habitats.

Let’s take a closer look! Every living creature, including our bodies, comprises carbon-based compounds. Anything that is biomass absorbs carbon, but a tree can store a vast mass for hundreds of years compared to humans and animals. Natural habitats hold a lot of carbon dioxide, not only in vegetation and wildlife but also through the soil.

The decomposed material in the ground becomes humus; the richer the soil is in humus, the more carbon it stores. By restoring natural systems, one of the functions that we can rebuild is carbon absorption and storage.

The other is to protect against the effects of climate change. “We call this climate adaptation. We acknowledge that there is and will be climate change because there is already a lot of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. What we can do is to try to counteract its harmful effects, such as floods or droughts,” explains the leader of WWF Hungary. For example, a large forest can reduce peak temperatures through shading, and if there is intense rainfall, it acts like a sponge and absorbs the precipitation through the soil, leaves, and branches. We can restore these climate-regulating effects when we create habitats.

To translate all of this to events: although we may not be able to eliminate the emissions of harmful substances from events, we have more opportunities to compensate for them.



“Through the [MyForest Community Forest Foundation](#), we have contributed to the planting of nearly 1,400 tree seedlings over the past two years,” says Gyuri Ruisz, the communications leader of HighVibes. The organisation’s goal is ambitious: to work with volunteers, companies, and landowners to restore Hungary’s forest areas to their pre-industrial revolution levels, contributing to doubling the planet’s forest population.

Ten years of care follow the planting until the trees grow together and form an independent ecosystem. Such initiatives can provide a single event and a long-term, strategic solution to reduce the environmental impact of the entire organisation.



For example, the Hungarian National Bank (MNB), in cooperation with WWF Hungary, has committed to neutralising its entire carbon dioxide emissions from 2021 through forest planting near Geszt. The de-carbonization efforts of the central bank took shape in 2019 when the institution aimed to restore a complex alder habitat in Pápateszér to offset the carbon footprint of the first international Green Finance Conference.

And then they dreamed bigger: the MNB plans to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions by 30% in the next two years and by 80% by 2025. They will carry out habitat reconstruction projects to compensate for the unavoidable emissions. This is where the WWF comes in.

The central bank asked the civil organisation to explore habitat reconstruction projects that are reasonable solutions for nature conservation. This led to the decision to implement a 27-hectare forest planting project in the Körös-Maros National Park. According to Sipos, this step is not yet understood by many in terms of its significance. “Planting trees alone does not guarantee a self-sustaining habitat in the long term. Collaboratively restored habitats, such as the alder grove in Pápateszér, need to be cared for, but eventually, they will be able to renew themselves. Seedlings will appear, then grow into a natural habitat that does not require maintenance.”

The expert also warns us to start habitat reconstruction in an area no one plans to plough in twenty years. The areas selected by the foundation are either under nature conservation protection or are owned by the state or local governments, where mayors and council members are also committed to the projects. “We are also creating legal guarantees for the protection of habitats. For example, if we create a forest, it will be included in the forestry administration but recorded as a forest that does not serve timber production,” says Sipos.

“We are looking for partners committed to long-term preservation, so these areas will eventually merge into Hungary’s natural vegetation.”

07

Green education and communication

We need to bring the big global principles and phenomena down to the level of everyday life and show people the connections between them. For example, many have heard that vegetarianism is good for the planet. But if you ask why, few know the answer

Sipos Katalin, director of WWF, believes that this invisible link between the work of the areas responsible for the success of a green event is communication.

As mentioned earlier, involving stakeholders in reducing the environmental impact of an event can have multiple benefits: creative solutions during the planning phase and committed participants during the event itself. If we can effectively communicate our message to them, we can also increase the number of sustainability ambassadors in the event planning industry and beyond. But how can we achieve this?

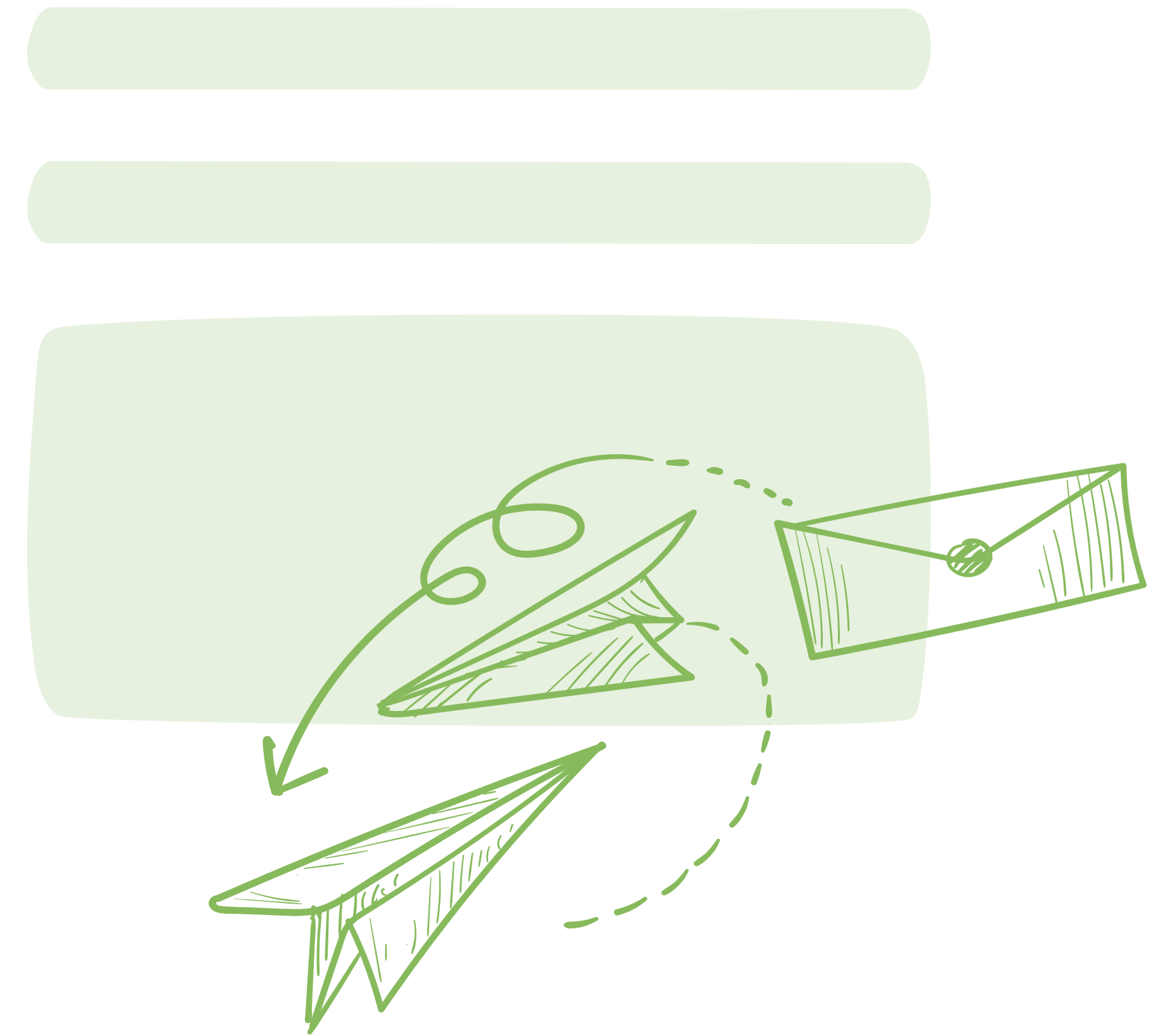
Organisers and subcontractors must share knowledge and discuss individual doubts so that they feel free from the pressure or burden of investing more energy into their usual tasks. Before the event, brief the staff so that everyone interacting with guests understands and can convey goals, from why the carpaccio is made from beets to where the selective waste bins are located.



As events usually reach many people, it is crucial to communicate their spirit, goals, and results to the guests. “At TEDx, for example, the two organisers took the stage at the beginning of the event and explained why there wouldn’t be a program booklet, badge, plastic pen, or cola in the menu because we need to start making these decisions at our own level,” says Csaba Klacsán, Head of Fundraising, Marketing, and Communications at WWF Hungary.

We can start green communication much earlier, during registration already. For example, when selecting the menu, we can show in a small pop-up window how much GHG emissions guests can save by choosing vegetarian or vegan options. A good idea may also be a challenge, such as a plogging competition, which organisers can promote on the company's internal channels or social media and then announce the results at the event.

According to Andrea Koller, an expert of “Zöldövezet,” post-communication is also crucial and should be emphasised. “It’s a great feeling at the end of the year to add up how many cubic metres of plastic we diverted from the landfill. Most of our partners specifically expect us to calculate how much we have reduced their carbon footprint after the events and see how much impact it had that they started greening,” says Andrea.



When putting together programs, choose those that entertain and educate guests. For adults, a psychologist talking about the positive effects on the physical and mental health of consuming more colourful fruits and vegetables could even work as a stage performance. Games, challenges, crafts, or obstacle courses can sensitise children to sustainability principles.

According to Klacsán, the most critical aspect of green education is finding points where our audience can connect to these messages.

The WWF currently has two major high school educational projects: one based on VR technology and the other on a theatrical, educational method.

The important thing is to bring the values and beauty of untouched nature within reach for students. In VR classes, nature films recorded with a 360-degree camera take students straight into the world of undisturbed forests and waters: we show what's happening in the Szigetköz and the Börzsöny.

In participatory theatre, involvement is also crucial, but the student's experience is the key here. The student himself is placed in a decision-making situation where it also depends on him what will happen to the natural environment of his place of origin.

08

Six steps to get started



1. Start at the planning table

The sustainability of an event is determined during the planning phase. For example, suppose you know how many square metres of used carpets you will have by the end. In that case, you can start researching if a nearby kindergarten or animal shelter could use it.

2. If you don't need it, ditch it

Think about what you can eliminate from the event supplies to be procured! Disposable plastic cups usually end up in the top three wasteful items. However, there are still many competitors, such as balloons, straws, or water bottles - of which everyone already has five at home.





3. If you do need it, make it reusable

Avoid those tools that will end up in landfill! Choose digital instead of printed, durable instead of disposable, and truly recyclable materials instead of those that only seem to be green.

4. Don't stop at meatless menus

By serving a menu without beef and lamb, you can reduce the carbon footprint of an event, but that's not the end of it. Few people think, for example, that the asparagus served as a starter for Christmas dinner likely arrived in Hungary by plane.



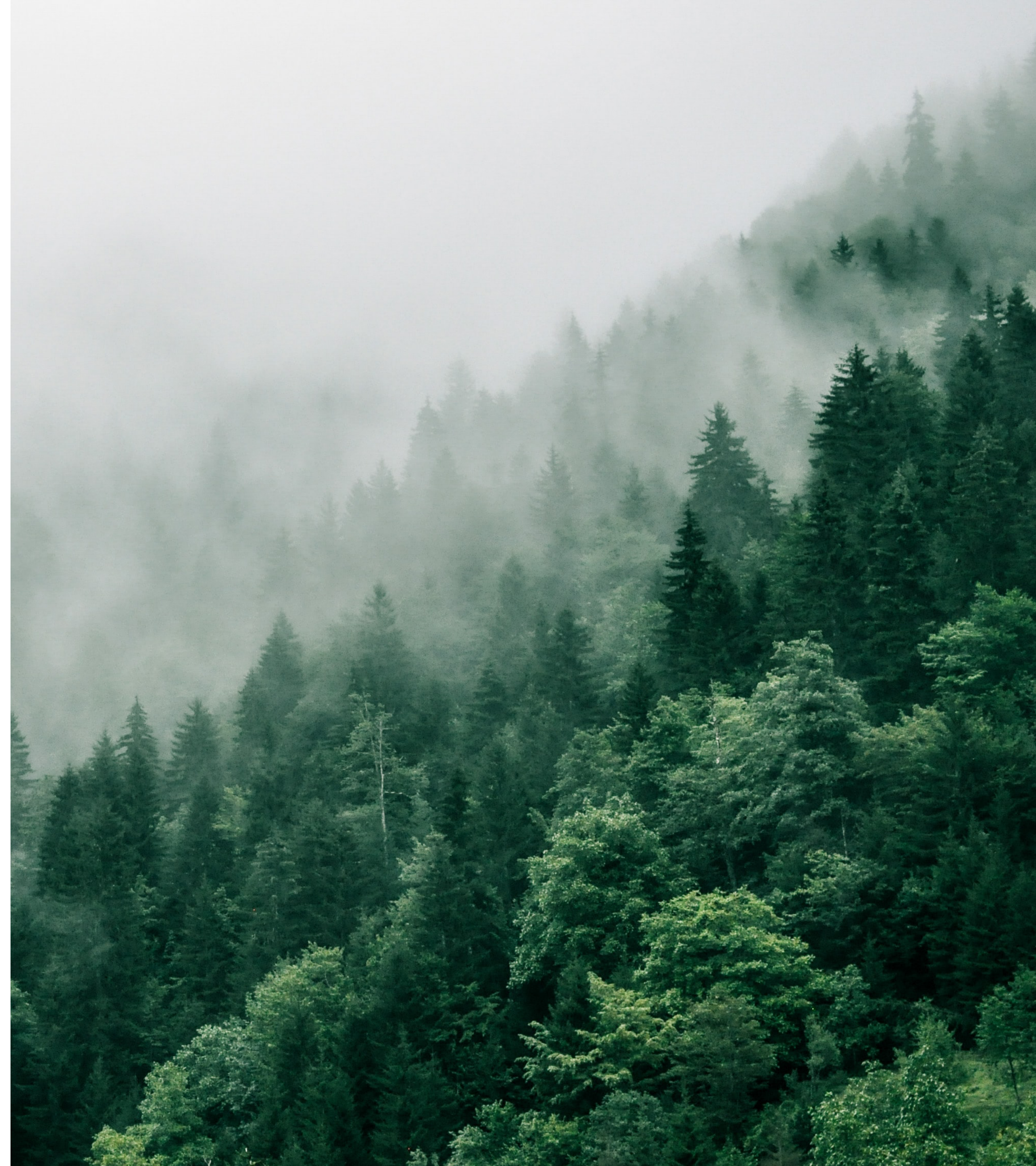


5. Get as many people on the side of sustainability as possible

Ensure that everyone involved in the event contributes to its sustainability and takes away their share of responsibility. It's worth involving suppliers in the initial brainstorming and informing guests about the green goals and the reasons behind them during registration.

6. Strive for net zero emissions

You cannot completely avoid GHG emissions, but the good news is that several civil organisations can assist in offsetting them. Important note: Choose a partner who protects and preserves the planted areas if you plant trees!



Do you need help making your events greener?

As the first agency in the region specialised in sustainable events, we strive to provide the ultimate guest experience while taking away as little as possible from our environment - and to show others how to achieve this.



Organising

Whether it's a live, online, or hybrid event, we assist in everything from finding the perfect venues to producing the event video.

Consultation

For events that our clients organise themselves due to their size, we provide individual consultation to contribute to greening efforts.

Communication

Trust our communication experts to handle guest invitations, registration, and ongoing updates!



Would you like to work with us?

Contact Panka Körmendy!

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