



CAMPSITE WASTE

A SINGLE USE PLASTICS PROBLEM

By Teresa Moore

Yet again in 2018 we were confronted with the aftermath of festival camping when image after image of campsite waste, mainly tents, appeared in the press. The “teenage wasteland” of our times. But in fact, waste is a problem that besets many different types of events. Just watching the clear up after Notting Hill Carnival with over 60 tons of waste left behind confirms that waste is a problem not just restricted to festivals. But what is a uniquely festival problem and one that we are all too familiar with is that of single use disposable tent waste. The many schemes and approaches which have been tried over the last decade have not put paid to the problem and for the bigger camping festivals the problem just seems to get worse each year.

WHY - REASONS AND MYTHS?

Reasons for tent waste are variously given as **lazy punters** who couldn't care less; campers too hungover to repack popup tents, **the weather**, it's wet, its muddy and many just want to get home after the party; **simple economics**, a festival tent, chairs and table cost around £40 and hold little value so why bother to take home something that's, probably broken and you're going to get rid of anyway; **marketing** the “festival tent” has come to imply disposability and of course **peer influence**, everyone else leaves stuff behind. We've also

seen the rise of the “it's ok to leave your tent as they all go to charity” myth. It started with the best of intentions, a couple of festivals teamed up with charities in a genuine attempt to put leftover tents to good use. Suddenly leaving your tent behind became the morally right thing to do and resulted in even more tent waste. Those charities such as Festival Waste Reclamation and Distribution that collect tents say they are only able to salvage 1 in 10 at best partly because many are in no fit state for reuse, and partly because they simply don't have the storage capability to hold very many before redistribution. As a result, many festivals now tell their audience not to leave their tents as they don't go to charity

SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

This summer it was estimated that around 20% of tents (1 in 5) had been left at a major camping festival of 60,000-70,000 campers. My research into this problem in 2012 found that 1 in 6 tents were left behind. Evidence then of a growing problem. If the 2018 figures are accurate this would mean that around 14,000 tents were left at a single large festival. Scale this up across the UK and Europe, where we know the problem is also growing, and we are potentially looking at hundreds of thousands of left behind tents. All adding to the plastic pollution problem. It's rather ironic that in 2018 when David Attenborough and the so-called "Blue Planet" effect drew attention to a global plastic waste emergency, inspiring the national conscience to wage war on single use plastics, that the single use plastic tent somehow slipped the net. And of course, there is a financial cost to all of this.

SO, WHAT CAN BE DONE IN 2019?

The development of compostable tent materials. There are currently several forms on the market, some pre-erected, with new ideas being developed. For the most part this is a short-term solution. They don't have a long life and the term "compostable tent" tends to perpetuate the idea of single use and disposability when what we really need is to move towards longer life and reuse.

Speaking of pre-erected tents **Glamping** is likely to continue to grow potentially eliminating a proportion of tent waste however the majority of the tents are still made from plastic derivatives and there is little independent research currently to understand how many



"We need a more radical solution by turning the problem on its head. Let's make green camping the default option."

times these tents can/are being used before they are disposed of and where.

Bridging the gap between glamping's plastic tents and short-lived tents made of compostable materials is the comeback of the Canvas tent. **Canvas tents** have a much longer life and they are repairable. There are a few companies out there now who upcycle vintage tents from the seventies supplying them set up and ready to use by the festival goer. A cool option which avoids all the old issues of carrying a very heavy wet tent back home. The main problem though is that whilst these companies are filling a nostalgia niche with a sustainable option these are small operations and the supply of vintage tents is of course limited.

Buying a festival tent that you can repair is almost a thing of the past but new EU proposed

legislation now referred to as the "Right to Repair Law" may just change things. Although targeted at the manufacture of white and tech goods there is no reason why this law if introduced couldn't be used to target tent manufacturers. As the UK's environment minister is quoted as saying "We want manufacturers and producers to make products easier to reuse and repair, to make them last longer." (Independent Jan 2019). With 18 states in the US ready to enact this law along with the EU and UK it has the potential to transform manufactured goods eliminating built in obsolescence and the way they are made and with the right pressure there is no reason why this shouldn't include tents. It is unlikely to change things in the short term, sadly, but in the longer term... Watch this Space!

Schemes that have been successful are those which focus on green camping and behaviour change by which I mean those campsites where festival audiences bring their own tents and in exchange for things like better showers and toilets, security and great food, they agree to adhere to certain principles or rules such as taking their tents home and leaving a clean campsite. Love Your Tent and Respect schemes at the Isle of Wight Festival, Greenpeace's new "Eco Camp" at Download Festival and "Clean out Loud" at Roskilde Festival have all demonstrated that with the right approach things can change. It is only surprising that this approach hasn't gathered more momentum.

It could be argued though that these schemes don't go far enough as they only cover a small area, less than 10%, of total camping at festivals. Having researched this problem for the last few years talking to hundreds of festival campers along the way it's my conclusion that real behaviour change needs a bigger prompt. And the way to do this is to make green camping both the default camping option and at the same time the cheapest camping option. Yes, you can still camp brown and dirty if you choose too but it will cost you more.

So, my challenge to festival organisers with tent waste problems is to take a serious look at long term strategies to change festival camping behaviour. In 2019 festivals that have no green camping could make a start and introduce it as an option. Those that do already have green camping should focus on expanding their green campsites with a goal to make green camping the cheapest and the default camping option. This is a big ask for festival organisers but the tent waste problem has been going on for far too long now.

POSTSCRIPT - CAMPSITE CHAOS

In 2018 Yourope's GO Group and A Greener Festival joined forces and created "Campsite Chaos" a new initiative on the problem. Campsite Chaos is a closed group for festival organisers providing a forum for frank and honest discussion of their campsite waste problems. Members can share their experiences including their successes and failures.

The forum is held at both the Eurosonic and Green Events and Innovation Conference

TERESA MOORE IS A DIRECTOR OF A GREENER FESTIVAL

She is also a **researcher** and has been looking at the problem of tent waste at festivals for a number of years. She carried out the first pan European survey on the tent waste problem in 2012 for A Greener Festival and Go Group. For the last 4 years she has conducted research on the campsites at the Isle of Wight Festival amongst others and in 2018 advised Green Peace on setting up Eco Camp at Download Festival as part of ongoing research for her PhD in Sustainable Event Management.

This Article first appeared in Issue 82 of IQ magazine, March 2019 ■