

# change the world

Green meetings are the future.  
Step up and avoid the rush.

Greg Oates

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) examines how companies impact the communities where they conduct business. It's not new but the amount of attention it's receiving is. This ramped up focus on CSR is being proclaimed as the "new normal," demanding companies implement transparent, sustainable best practices to protect the planet in the face of oil dependence and climate change.

No one needs to ask why in the wake of this decade.

Previous: Vancouver Convention Centre  
Opposite: Virginia Beach Convention Center  
Below: Virginia Beach sea kayak

The exponential growth in attention surrounding CSR is affecting the evolution of green meetings. A couple years ago, the perception of corporate meeting planners recycling, reusing and reducing was considered a little “granola.” Today, the issue is at the forefront of corporate strategy.

Growing legions within both the public and private sectors are determining spending based on how corporations are working to minimize their carbon footprint. When Shell Oil develops Shell WindEnergy, or Wal-Mart hires the ex-president of Sierra Club, it's because they're responding to market forces. It isn't disingenuous—it's just good business.

So corporations are putting muscle into their CSR statements and establishing earth-first initiatives to become

better corporate citizens and environmental stewards. For example, Northeast Utilities, the largest energy provider in New England, released its first-ever CSR statement in July.

Naturally, this affects how corporations operate their offsite meetings, and it's where corporate planners can help change the world.

Will composting trash at a convention center change the world, significantly? Yes, over time, absolutely. Because it erodes skepticism in the minds of others, which influences behavior, which changes worlds.

“We have such an incredible opportunity to impact millions of people by holding meetings responsibly,” says Bridget Chisholm, conference manager for the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). “It's

becoming mainstream and it's what society wants. If a company is not conscious of the waste it produces, it's going to eventually lose customers.”

Or as Peter Robinson, CEO of the David Suzuki Foundation succinctly puts it, “Ethics is the new competitive environment.”

But just because planners have an opportunity for such a leadership role by promoting green meetings, where's the incentive to do so, beyond the feel good?

The demand for CSR-savvy planners is spiking.

IBM this year unveiled its second annual survey of senior executives regarding how sustainability issues affect their corporate strategies. Of the 224 respondents, no less than 60% said, despite the global recession, CSR is more important to them this year than in 2008.

A July poll of 759 new MBA grads taken by Stanford and UC Santa Barbara states 97 percent of these graduates were willing to lop \$15,000 a year off their salary for a company that practices transparent CSR.

Kelly McElhane is faculty director of the Center for Responsible Business at UC, Berkeley. She writes in *Just Good Business* (2009): “Truly treating CSR as a brand strategy...can serve to keep your brand relevant to the themes and trends of today as well as the future. Society and the environment surrounding it will always be relevant.”

So I ask Chisholm, should planners do more than just request corn-based flatware and composting. Can planners inspire their groups to change the world?

“Please,” says Chisholm. “Of course. A planner needs to do more than just buy the green meetings package.”

### Virginia Beach gets its green on

When Chisholm brought NAAEE's annual conference to Virginia Beach in November 2007, it was a major catalyst for the city to go above and beyond the previous benchmarks of sustainable venues, operations and best practices, according to Al Hutchinson, vp of convention sales/marketing for **Virginia Beach CVB**.

“From there, we really took the lead with the eco-friendly concept because we wanted to get ahead of that line,” he says. “It just makes sense to reduce operating costs and attract the good will that social responsibility brings.” For example, the **Virginia Beach Convention Center (VBCC)** opened in January 2007, but new upgrades will bring the gleaming, futuristic facility to Silver LEED status this year.



## got green?

The Convention Industry Council (CIC), the EPA and the Green Meeting Industry Council (GMIC) are crafting the Accepted Practices Exchange (APEX) Environmental/Green Standards. They're designed to quantify “green” by establishing baselines in nine categories, from A/V to venues.

“This will take the unknown out of greening a meeting,” says Danielle Adams, CMP, founding board member of GMIC Florida. “Many planners and hoteliers are already practicing green initiatives and may not even realize it. These standards will clarify and simplify the process.”

Also, MPI will launch ECOS (Events for Communities of Sustainability) next year, after this year's launch in Canada. The program is an educational framework for planners for the global sustainability of human, natural and economic resources.

“If you as a planner can speak to the triple bottom line of people, planet and profit, you're going to be taken seriously,” says Elizabeth Henderson, CMM/CMP, director of CSR for MPI.

Can one planner make a difference?

“Yes,” says Henderson. “There is huge value in incremental change.”

[apexsolution.org](http://apexsolution.org); [mpiweb.org](http://mpiweb.org)



Opposite: San Jose Airport garage  
Below: Denver mountains

"A planner needs to do more than just buy the green meetings package."



So what's the big deal with LEED certification? Aside from the issue of sustainability, it's also about higher standards of livability and alleviating the body's negative reactions to toxins thriving in aging buildings. It's about creating a better quality of air we breathe and resultant, increased productivity.

Courtney Dyer, general manager of the VBCC, adds that demand is on the rise. "The convention center's commitment to the environment is not only a preferred amenity," she says, "but more frequently it's a requirement for meeting planners."

Chisholm adds, "Every city is trying so hard today to attract green meetings, they just need you to put it in the RFP. Nobody's like: 'Oh, you're so much work for us'."

She explains two of her primary concerns when setting up a conference are sourcing food and never eating anything out of season. That means working with local farmers, which can be a challenge when you need 1,000 filet mignons cut the exact same way, and you need to buy from three different farms to secure the required amount.

"No matter where we go, we hope to begin to create those relationships between farmers and convention bureaus," she explains. "It's fascinating because it's creating a community. It's making us all work together and it's helping build business for local suppliers."

Another advantage is the trickle down benefits throughout the community. For example, Laura Wood Habr owns Croc's 19th St Bistro, the first restaurant in the state to be awarded the official Virginia Green certification. She's been on a one-woman warpath since NEEAA's event to motivate over 100 other small businesses to win the same classification.

"All my menu items are SOL: sustainable, organic, local," she laughs. "Being green makes sense to the bottom line, I save \$200 a month just by composting." Habr can seat 300 in her restaurant, housed in a 50 year-old, ex-grocery store with a 200-ft hedge of rosemary just six blocks from the beach.

For another groovy green group venue, look into meeting at the **Virginia Aquarium**. The 700,000-gallon facility has a

new \$25 million Restless Planet exhibit showing how global warming is causing a lot of "commotion in the ocean."

### San Jose's Green Vision

You know a city is serious about energy conservation when residents are urged to sign out "Kill-A-Watt" meters from public libraries to gauge electricity consumption in their homes. San Jose made it official in 2007 with a 15-year Green Vision program designed to bolster its claim as the World Center of Clean Tech Innovation. Just some of the goals include converting 100% of waste into recycled energy and using 100% renewable energy. It's the country's most ambitious eco-plan, deemed reasonable around Silicon Valley with its wealth of brainy types at Berkeley, Stanford and pioneering tech firms such as Google and Intel, etc.

"The real goal is to make sure some day we're completely trash free, and we're very close to that today," says Dan Fenton, president/CEO of **Team San Jose**. The organization operates the 143,000-sf **McEnergy Convention Center**, along with numerous cultural arts venues like the 1936 Spanish Mission-style Civic Auditorium that can host up to 3,000. It also partners with the major group hotels to provide planners with one-stop shopping.

The airport is getting a new \$2 million gray water recycling system, and buses have been reconfigured from diesel to compressed natural gas. Almost 50% of airport taxis are clean fuel, and goats and sheep provide weed control, versus commercial landscaping equipment.

Yes, we confirmed the goats/sheep deal.

Fenton also mentions San Jose is comparable to a collegiate campus, where attendees can easily walk from their hotels to many of the various venues, relieving the need for rental cars and shuttles. Both Berkeley and Stanford offer educational group tours, and check out the **Tech Museum of Innovation** where the permanent Green By Design exhibit teaches attendees about wind and solar power.

"Our academic incubators tied to green technology make us the most progressive city in the country when it comes to putting sustainability into practice," says Fenton.

Also, the city is extremely well situated for offsite excursions, mixing big city sophistication and outdoor attractions. San Jose is the third largest city in California and the gateway to northern California, just 30 miles from San Francisco and close to both Monterrey and Napa. Plus, *Wine Spectator* called the nearby Santa Cruz Mountain wine region "the most underappreciated appellation in the world."

### Things to do in Denver when you're green

The **Colorado Convention Center (CCC)** is expected to win Silver LEED certification by February 2010, after installing the state's largest solar array in March. Denver is also set to unveil a first of its kind Bike Share program where attendees rent bikes from street locations with a credit card. The CCC is walking distance to 300 restaurants and 7,000 hotel rooms.

"Improving your green practices is about re-engaging," says Lindsay Smith, sustainability programs manager at the CCC in downtown Denver. "This is a way to save money, save resources and engage attendees in an exciting new way, and strive for a bigger mission."

Smith's newly created position was the first of its kind on this continent, recently co-opted in Toronto and Portland. Denver has a lot of firsts. It was the first city in the country to convert city vehicles to alternative fuels; its largest taxi fleet will be 100% Prius next year; and the Pepsi Center sports arena is the first in the country to be 100% powered by renewables.

Smith says two years ago, it was a very peripheral group asking about green meetings, wherein the last six months she's seeing "many more sophisticated planners with very detailed specifics in their RFPs, who want to quantify their meeting's impact."

She adds there are three big misconceptions she keeps hearing about greening a meeting that "intimidate" a lot of planners: it costs too much, it's a huge endeavor, and it's a hassle for attendees.



Opposite: Banyan Tree Mayakoba  
Below: The Tech Museum, San Jose

## A lesson in leadership

**On February 16, 2005, the Kyoto Protocol went into effect with 141 countries agreeing to lower greenhouse emissions by varying degrees. Seattle mayor Greg Nickels took issue with the US not ratifying, because Washington's snowpack was diminishing, rapidly. Meaning, there was less freshwater to drink in Seattle, and less hydroelectric energy produced by the dams.**

**Nickels held a press conference that very same day asking other mayors to work toward Kyoto's mandate for the US—a seven percent reduction of 1990 emission levels by 2012—on their own.**

**Within three months, 131 mayors took up the challenge. In 2007 at the US Conference of Mayors, President Clinton spoke about sustainability (link to video at [prevueonline.net](http://prevueonline.net)) and by then, 710 mayors were onboard.**

**Today, 956 mayors have joined Nickels' crusade, signing off on billions of dollars in clean tech investments to upgrade airports, public transportation, convention centers and public utilities. Hotels are following suit, and the meeting industry is getting a whole new sandbox. The world is changing.**

[usmayors.org](http://usmayors.org)

"I'll tell you this," says Smith, "I've never heard of any planners who started to improve their green practices and then went back to the old way."

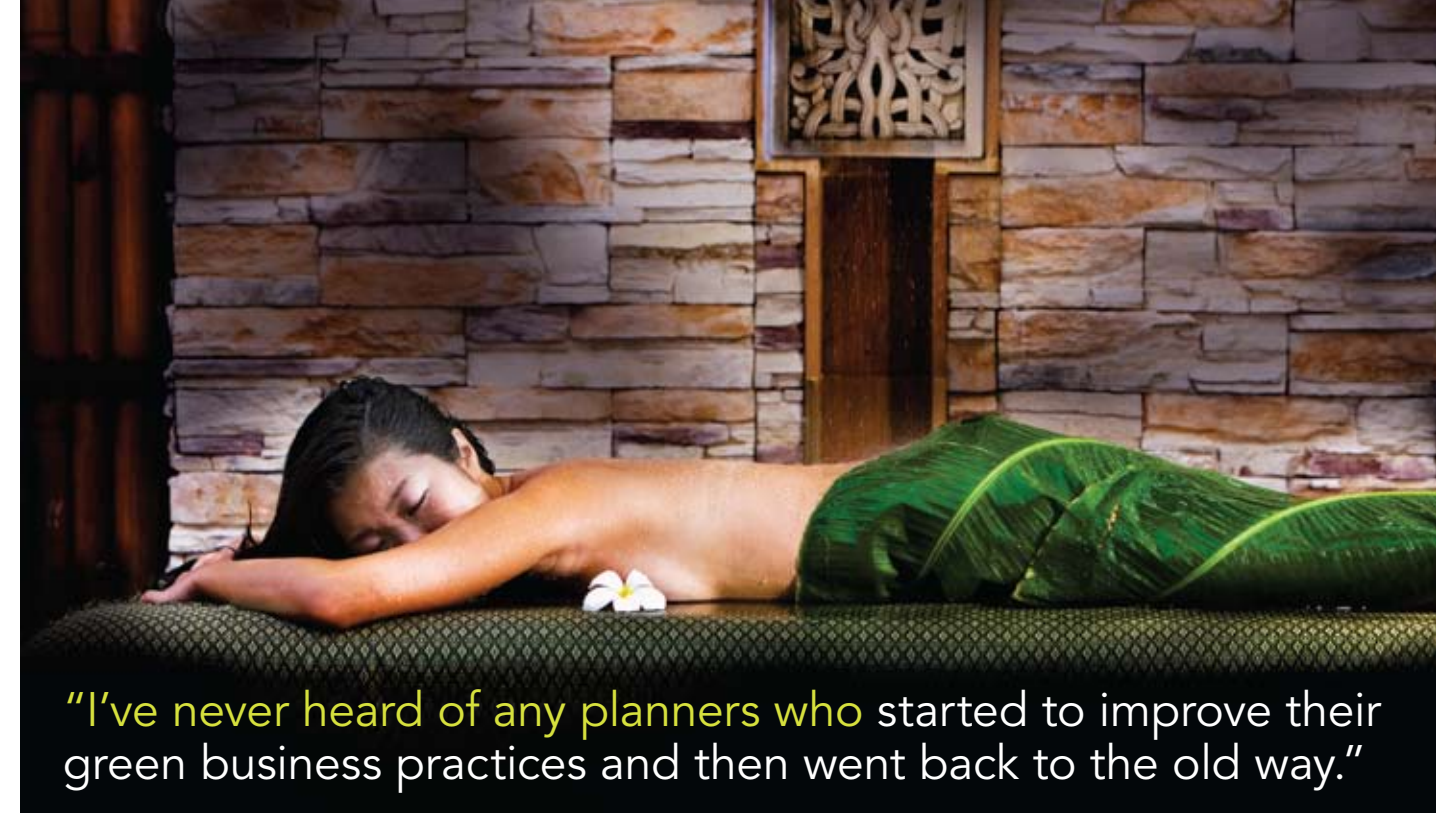
Things to do in Denver when you're green includes visiting the **National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL)**, the national government's primary lab for energy efficiency R&D. NREL has a robust public outreach program and full-time exhibits about wind, solar, biotech and geothermal energy.

Likewise, the **Denver Museum of Science & Nature** welcomes groups up to 3,500 with more than a dozen corporate venues. The Sky Terrace is the most requested due to Denver's best views of the city park, skyline and mountains. Call for more info about group lectures and IMAX rentals.

### Vancouver: birthplace of Greenpeace

Silver LEED certification is a bear to achieve, but you have to be almost religious about protecting the planet to earn Gold certification. The new **Vancouver Convention Centre** has been doing just that since opening in April.

A "habitat skirt" surrounding the facility is a series of steps that function as an artificial reef, while the underside is gouged to also attract reef-borne marine life. Glass blocks along public walkways act as prisms to direct increased sunlight into the sea; seawater runs the entire cooling/heating processes indoors; and the grass roof dampens temperature extremes indoors. Our fave is the big glass envelope that provides one



huge proscenium arch showcasing the bay and mountains.

"We recycle everything because our goal is zero waste and we expect to be carbon neutral by the end of 2010," says Catherine Wong, vp of operations. "Even an apple core goes into an organic recycling bin to be converted into plant fertilizer." Wong is especially proud of the "scratch" kitchen where prepackaged food is forbidden. "Everything is fresh daily and we only serve BC wine and produce," she says.

*The Economist* anointed Vancouver the world's most livable city, and with the Olympics in less than a year, the city is gearing up for its international coming out party.

Vancouver is arguably the most well-balanced large city in the world—an urban planning ode to yin and yang. The downtown peninsula where the Centre is located is the second most dense per-capita community in North America after Manhattan. The adjacent Stanley Park is the largest urban green space in North America, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. We recommend visiting Granville Island and the largest fresh market in the country, surrounded by restaurants housed in old boatbuilding warehouses.

### Riviera Maya's village green

A combination of Zen-like minimalism fused with modern Mayan artistry is the design theme at the new **Banyan Tree Mayakoba**, about 40 minutes south of Cancun. The "eco-chic" resort opened in March in the 1,600-acre Mayakoba development that Banyan Tree shares with **Fairmont, Rosewood** and **Mandarin Oriental**.

Mayakoba from the beginning was envisioned as a village on the water, where native vegetation was replanted in nurseries during construction and later replaced. Meanwhile, a winding system of lagoons and canals was created to function in a natural manner based on applied ecological science. Nowhere comes to mind in the tropics in this

hemisphere where such a large project was undertaken with such a profound respect for the local habitat.

"The development promotes its environmental comparative advantages through a design of tourism infrastructure that is congruent with the ecosystems of the property, and is ecologically sustainable," says Michael Kwee, Banyan Tree's group director for CSR strategy. "So choosing Banyan Tree Mayakoba is already a step in the right direction [for eco-minded planners] as the resort is built on environmentally sound principles."

This is your dream eco-tropical incentive with individual private pool villas shaped like a "U" for absolute privacy while lounging around the pool and garden sun decks with outdoor bathtubs. Meanwhile, the Banyan Tree Spa includes a Rainforest Experience incorporating a medley of hydrothermal treatments "combining the best of European spa and hydrothermal therapy with the essence of Asian wellness philosophy," says Ravi Chandran, corporate managing director of spa operations.

**Virginia Beach CVB;** [vbfun.com](http://vbfun.com)

**Virginia Beach CC;** [virginiabeachconventioncenter.com](http://virginiabeachconventioncenter.com)

**Virginia Aquarium;** [virginiaaquarium.com](http://virginiaaquarium.com)

**Team San Jose;** [sanjose.org](http://sanjose.org)

**McEnery Convention Center;** [sjcc.com](http://sjcc.com)

**The Tech Museum;** [thetech.org](http://thetech.org)

**Denver CVB;** [denver.org](http://denver.org)

**Colorado Convention Center;** [denverconvention.com](http://denverconvention.com)

**National Renewable Energy Lab;** [nrel.gov](http://nrel.gov)

**Denver Museum of Science/Nature;** [dmns.org](http://dmns.org)

**Vancouver CVB;** [tourismvancouver.com](http://tourismvancouver.com)

**Vancouver CC;** [vancouverconventioncentre.com](http://vancouverconventioncentre.com)

**Riviera Maya;** [rivieramaya.com](http://rivieramaya.com)

**Banyan Tree Mayakoba;** [banyantree.com](http://banyantree.com)