



Good Practice Story Title:

From the Singing Revolution to The Anti-Waste Revolution: How We Cleaned Up Our Nation's Backbone Event

Destination: Tallinn

Country: Estonia

Submitting Organization: Tourism Department of the [Tallinn Strategic Management Office](#)

Category:

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

Destination Description

Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, is a compact and multifaceted city located by the Baltic Sea in Northern Europe. Our country, with a population of just 1.4 million, boasts a captivating history, a rich cultural heritage, and breathtaking natural beauty. The country consistently ranks high in international assessments for quality of life, education, press freedom, digitalisation of public services, and the prevalence of tech companies. These qualities are evident in Tallinn, a city known for valuing its history while leading in innovation. Tallinn effectively utilises its limited resources, both human and natural, emphasising innovation, smart solutions, community building, strong partnerships, and networks as the core of its strength.

The city is home to many traditions that are crucial to preserving the heritage of Estonians as a nation. One of these traditions, the [Estonian Song Festival](#), is linked to Tallinn's entry into the Green Destinations Top 100 Stories. The tradition began at the end of the 19th century, before Estonia was declared independent, and continued through periods of oppression and Soviet occupation. It is also deeply connected to the [Singing Revolution](#), which played an integral part in the independence movement of the Baltic countries. This tradition is deeply ingrained in our national identity, symbolising the continuation of our heritage. Therefore, everything associated with this event is of utmost importance to Estonians and Estonia.



Summary of Good Practice Story

Every two years, our modern and tech-savvy digital nation, gathers at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds to connect with its roots and heritage through singing. The [Estonian Song Festival](#), declared a [Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity](#) by UNESCO, is one of the largest choral events in the world, with over 125,000 people participating as either performers or spectators.

The ecological footprint of the event grew through the years due to the modern consumer economy and its challenges. Therefore, the festival produced not only memorable experiences but also vast quantities of waste. A couple of years before the [13th Youth Song and Dance Celebration "Holy is the Land"](#) was held in 2023, the organisers, [Eesti Laulu- ja Tantsupeo Sihtasutus](#) (Estonian Song and Dance Festival Foundation), made a strong decision to fully align their actions with their sustainable values. Partnering with the [City of Tallinn](#), the [European Green Capital 2023](#), the festival adopted environmentally friendly criteria. This included complying fully to Tallinn's ban on single use plastics at events, even though the magnitude of the event provided the organizers an exemption. The commitment to sustainability aimed to minimise the festival's ecological footprint by targeting waste reduction, particularly the elimination of single-use disposable dishes and cutlery that had often ended up in bins and scattered across the grounds.

The goal was reached successfully through bringing in extra sustainability know-how, procuring suitable partners and the implementation of various tools and practices, including scaling up previously used systems of distribution and washing multiple-use dishes and applying a so-called horizontal approach to communication that involved every participant and spectator in the goal of achieving a waste free festival. For the first time at a major large scale event in Estonia, the festival used only reusable dishes, a practice that is not yet commonplace in the world. Thanks to the reusable tableware system, over half a million pieces of single-use tableware were left unused, preventing over 3.5 tonnes of plastic waste.

We now want to inspire others to clean up their important cultural events, be they large or small and to encourage them to think big, set high goals, scale up dreams! We encourage the public sector to bring in expert knowledge from the private sector – this synergy allows the whole to be much greater than the sum of its parts!

Issues Faced

Deciding to become more environmentally friendly is inevitably easier than bringing that plan to fruition. The organising team faced many challenges, that made it more difficult to move forward.

Scale of the Event

The singing festival is one of the largest choral events in the world. The highlights of the event are the concerts, but the performers, approximately 35,000 singers and dancers, also take part in several practices during the preparation week. The concerts, held at the Song Festival Ground and the Kalevi Central Stadium, are attended by approximately 90,000 spectators from all over Estonia and the world. To succeed, the organisers needed to scale up practices that had previously only been partly applied to small scale events.

Different locations

As mentioned before, the performances took place in two separate locations, the Song Festival Ground and the Kalevi Central Stadium. The locations are situated in different parts of the city, which made the logistics of the tableware gathering and pick-up more challenging.

Waste Generation

The singers and dancers take part of the concerts and several practices during the preparation week. The performers are provided with food by the organisers throughout this period. As tens of thousands of portions needed to be handed out, this created a huge need for serving dishes. A need that had been previously satisfied by using single-use plastic items. In addition to the performers also the food and beverage needs of

the need to be considered. Therefore, food stalls are set up during the concerts that also have a need for serving dishes. Additional waste generation also takes place as people spend the whole day at the locations.

The previous festival in 2019 generated approximately 178 grams of different waste per person. Around 320,000 pieces of single-use plastic utensils (cups, cutlery, plates) were used, generating a total of approximately 2.3 tonnes of mixed waste. These numbers don't bring about feelings of pride.

Elevating Sustainable Practices to Unmatched Scale

The singing festival is a unique concept that not many countries know about. If we consider the scale, the multiple locations, and the specifics of the waste reducing goals, there were no international examples to use as a template. The know-how needed to be pieced together or developed on the spot.

Lack of Environmental Knowledge

The devastating waste statistics were the targets that the organisers decided to combat, as they were in stark contrast to what the event and the Estonian psyche stand for. The title of the 13th Youth Song and Dance Celebration "Holy is the Land" clearly reflects what matters to Estonians. We consider our land sacred and are a nation still connected to nature, whether through foraging during summer and autumn, relaxing in the forests, or by the sea. However, this does not automatically mean that sustainable practices come naturally to companies and individuals or that they are all well-educated on the topic. There is constant need to educate both citizens and businesses and encourage them to reduce their ecological footprint and give meaning to everyday sustainable practices. In this case the festival was not an exception.

There was uncertainty about how the public would react to the introduction of innovation and whether there were enough like-minded people in the public and private sectors to share their passion and drive for the cause. These issues could only be overcome by finding partners equally committed to making the project a success and willing to invest time and resources to develop previously unused systems.

Myths and Facts

There are many myths circulating around environmental protection and energy-efficient operations. The reason for the creation of myths is often that we tend to overestimate those parts of the processes that we can see or at least imagine but have a vaguer idea about the extraction of raw materials, the production process, and waste management. All this had to be considered while finding the solutions for waste reduction and working with partners.

Solution

Sustainable steps were taken across all organisational decisions of the event to reduce its footprint.

Sustainable Actions

Actions included encouraging and providing more sustainable transport options like shuttle buses and additional trams, providing vegetarian meals and meals made of local produce to performers and spectators, working with caterers to reduce packaging, setting up 70 waste management stations for sorting waste, introducing green ambassadors to advise participants, ensuring venues provided access to fresh drinking water from public faucets to encourage using reusable water bottles, allowing attendees to bring their own food and drinks as long as they were safely packaged, and producing minimal amounts of merchandise and materials. The City of Tallinn supported these efforts by assisting with waste management, providing free additional public transport, adjusting timetables to meet participants' needs, and offering bicycle parking options. The biggest hurdle however was overcoming the use of single-use plastic tableware and cutlery, which had become standard for catering at large events like the song festival.

Sustainable Event Industry in Tallinn

The City of Tallinn has been working towards a more sustainable events industry for many years, recognising the significant potential for change and impact in this field. In 2019, the city banned the use of single-use plastic tableware during public events, allowing only biodegradable items. However, it became clear that simply switching materials did not solve the problem of waste creation and environmental impact, as both

plastic and biodegradable materials stress the environment. There are no facilities in Estonia capable of composting bioplastics, so these items end up as mixed waste destined for landfills or incineration.

Guidelines for Sustainable Events

In 2022, the City of Tallinn developed guidelines for sustainable events, and on 5 April, the mayor signed [“The Rules of Organising Sustainable Events,”](#) which are mandatory for all city departments and their partners. The use of reusable tableware during public events became mandatory in Tallinn in the summer of 2023. Additionally, only sustainable accessories like straws, mixing sticks, and decorations can be used, and both plastic and biodegradable plastic items are forbidden.

Why was this rule set? Unlike disposable dishes, reusable ones can be used approximately 100 times. Every time we transport and wash reusable dishes, we save the raw materials needed to make disposable ones. After all, they need to be mined or grown, processed into the appropriate material, processed into dishes, and packaged. There is often intercontinental transport in between, and in the end, disposable dishes must also be handled as mixed household waste. One of the most controversial issues is the comparison of the energy required to produce single-use plastic products and to clean reusable containers. Numerous studies show that although both processes have an environmental impact, this is significantly less with reusable dishes.

As the application of the new rules was quite sudden, an exception was made for events with over 30,000 participants until the end of 2023. The song festival fell under the category of the large events that could benefit from the exemption, but the organising team had higher goals and opted to follow the rules, taking on a task never realised in Estonia or Europe.

Previous Tests with Reusable Tableware

Some smaller events in Tallinn with attendees up to 30,000 had already tested the use of reusable cups and plates in 2022: the Maijooks running event, Tallinn Sea Days, Birgitta Festival, and the Tallinn Marathon, to name a few. Some large indoor venues had also used the system with the help of various partners. We also want to mention that similar developments have been happening all over the world. However, the scale of the previous local attempts and to our knowledge, also the international, was not comparable to the song festival, the biggest event in Estonia.

Ambitious Goals of the Festival

The ambition to replace single-use tableware with reusable items at the song festival was seen by many as an impossible feat. Just to remind and to give scope, the reusable tableware and cutlery had to be used both during the long preparation week and the performance days. Plus, the flow of clean reusable dishes for the participant’s catering and the traders providing food and drink for the spectators, had to be continuous. The washing needed to happen during the event, otherwise the number of dishes would not have been enough. Fifty thousand sets were distributed daily among the performers alone, not including tens of thousands of sets used by the spectators.

Introducing the new system required extensive research and development. The plan meant taking the practice to an entirely new level and scope. Existing systems needed to be rethought. The COVID period provided extra time, as the event was postponed by a year, but that did not mean that the application came easily.

Methods, Steps, and Tools Applied

Let’s investigate the ingredients of the secret sauce that guaranteed the success.

- 1) **The Estonian Mindset.** We are a nation of doers - when we put our mind to something, we push on until we have results. The nation is small, and everyone knows everyone. We also don’t believe in hierarchies, which means that networking, getting the needed know-how and organising things overall is relatively easy compared to societies that function differently from us.
- 2) **Collaborating with the Local Government.** The event was a success because all partners truly wanted it to be. All the stakeholders were motivated and therefore went the extra mile to achieve the goals. A key factor in success was the inclusion of the city as a motivated partner. Collaboration with local governments and

authorities eases problem-solving and provides tailored solutions. Long-term cooperation makes the process easier. The quality and high sustainability level of the event industry benefits destinations.

3) **Bringing in Experts.** Early on, it was decided by the festival that a qualified sustainability consultancy firm should be brought in. Acknowledging one's lack of know-how is a smart thing to do, and so is acquiring the services of experts. [Acento](#), a front-runner in the field of sustainable event production in Estonia, was chosen for the role. The organisers relied heavily on their expertise and their research into the developments of the sustainable event industry. There was great trust between the partners.

- **Training and Preparation.** Acento's cooperation with the festival team started with a training day at the beginning of 2022. A common understanding of what an environmentally friendly event is, was established. The festival organisers also stated which steps they were willing to take and how far they were planning to take their sustainability efforts.

- **Setting Focus Areas.** The preparation process started in the winter of 2023. In cooperation with Acento, the organising team focused on two main environmental activities: 1) reduction of waste generation and separate collection of waste; 2) organising all the catering for the festival on a reusable basis.

- **Procurement and Support.** Acento determined the needs of the waste management of the festival and planned and prepared the relevant public procurement input. They also consulted on the introduction of the reuse requirement and the preparation of the public procurement input necessary to find a partner. They supported and advised the organising team in the preparation and implementation of communication related to the reuse requirement. They created the team structure necessary for the on-site implementation.

- **Ongoing Support.** During the whole organisational period, ongoing counselling was provided for the management team in mitigating risks related to environmental activities, as well as support in responding to media inquiries. One of the key factors was that the environmental activities team assembled for the festival worked as part of the organising team. Many Acento team members were also at the festival to help with specific tasks like advising and supervising traders etc.

4) **Procuring Able Partners and Service Providers.** [Eesti Keskkonnateenused](#) was procured for the waste management and [Eesti Pandipakend](#), for the implementation and management of the reusable tableware use and washing system. The latter already had some experience providing small-scale events with reusable tableware and cutlery, but they needed to scale up the operation.

- **System Analysis and Preparation.** Before the festival took place, the service provider analysed the customer journey with the festival team for several months and prepared so that the system would be smooth during the party. Dirty dishes were collected at the festival in 11 designated return tents in the Song Festival Grounds and two in Kalevi Central Stadium where the dancers performed. There was also readiness to add more return tents to the party area as needed to ensure the smoothest possible return of the pledge.

- **Washing and Distribution.** Dirty dishes from the festival grounds were transported to Eesti Pandipakend's Panditops washing centre and then returned to the festival clean. Pandipakend used dishes and cutlery produced by European manufacturers with the necessary safety and sustainability certificates. The City of Tallinn supported the event with 27,000 euros to purchase additional tableware, ensuring a large stock.

5) **Education and Communication.** It was realised early on that the plan would not succeed without including the performers and spectators of the festival. The result depended as much on them coming on board as on the organisers and partners providing the system. This, in turn, relied on easy solutions and so-called horizontal communication, that included both visual communication and actual human advice on the ground provided by volunteers.

- **An Easy Well Communicated System.** The system needed to be easy, inclusive, clearly communicated, and understandable for everyone. There should be no extra steps compared to the usual action of throwing away trash. A deposit of 2 euros was set for each bowl, plate, and cup. Cutlery was distributed without a deposit.

- **Volunteer Support.** Special stations were set up where customers could return the tableware and get their deposit back. Approximately 100 volunteers, called Green Ambassadors, who were trained beforehand, guided waste sorting. Only cash was used for deposit returns to avoid forming queues. All food stalls were provided with posters describing the process and giving information on where to return the tableware. Additional signage was created to direct people to the stations, and the stations were marked on the general location plans at the festival entrances and meeting points. Customers could also ask to have their drinks served in existing cups they already had. Attendees could also bring their own packed lunches, tableware, and cups if they were not made of glass. Cleaning these items was the customers' responsibility.

Achievements and Results

The festival was the biggest event so far in Estonia (and probably also in the Baltic-Nordic region) organised with the expectations and guidelines based on the principles of circular economy. The festival demonstrated that even large and seemingly impossible sustainability goals can be achieved with determination, knowledge, motivated partners, and public inclusion.

Measurable results

This year, only 22 tonnes of waste were created, with 64% being separately collected and sent to recycling. The mixed waste amount per person dropped from 178 grams in 2019 to 60 grams per person in 2023. Thanks to the reusable tableware system, over half a million pieces of single-use tableware were left unused, preventing over 3.5 tonnes of plastic waste.

Added Educational Value

Even more impactful than the waste reduction was the educational value of this project. Over 100,000 people participated in the event, representing cities, rural areas, and everything in between. The united choir on stage symbolised all of Estonia, and in the case of the youth festival, the future of our country. Thousands of people experienced the easy reusable tableware system firsthand. Thousands more watched the event on TV, listened on the radio, or read about it in the media - learning about the system and the positive reactions it received.

The new knowledge was wellcomed during the festival, there were no negative reactions. The same was clear while going through the media coverage and the comments. It was clear that the initial uncertainty of how the project would be perceived, was overthrown by a clear view that Estonians were willing to come on board and be part of the solution of cleaning up one of the most important events of our nation.

International Impact

Performers and spectators also included people from abroad. Tallinn welcomes thousands of visitors each festival, including curious guests and members of the Estonian diaspora who want to connect with their culture, as well as e-residents interested in participating in the local economy. This time, the cultural experience included a small sustainability revolution, a welcomed initiative, and a positive change.

Sharing the Story

We have already been sharing this story with our partners and colleagues within the country and abroad. For example, Kungliga Djurgården, Stockholm's most visited recreation area that was awarded the 2022 Green Destinations Award and 2023 Green Destinations Story Award, considers our story to be an inspiration while staying ahead of the EU's plastic directive.

Locally the event is considered a milestone in the development of the local sustainable event organisation. It is used as an example when it comes to big and complex events. We simply can not go back to lesser expectations of what events should think of and do in the future in terms of reducing waste.

Lessons Learned and Advice

We believe this story and practices are worth emulating. It doesn't matter if you start small or go large. This project is part of a larger unfolding story that contributes to changing the world and people's mindsets one plate and cup at a time. Events that use reusable dishes once will not return to single-use items. Same goes to the Song Festival – the 2025 event will be organised according to the same principles as the 2023 event!

The organising committee was happy with the results overall. Considering the number of attendees, the grounds remained clean, and only a small amount of waste was created. The success relied on the steps, methods and tools previously described. It was both visually evident and proven by data. However, there is still work to do to make the process run smoothly and for it to become the new normal in event planning. Here are the key take-aways that are going to be considered during organizing the next event:

- 1) **Waste Sorting Challenges.** The biggest learning came from analysing waste sorting. The confusion and stress of being among thousands of people can cause individuals to forget their recycling habits. The presence of different waste containers was not enough to signal the rules. Legally required sign sizes were not noticeable enough and need to be larger at future events with even better instructions.
- 2) **Reporting And Data Collection.** Improving the ease of reporting is also necessary. Service providers should be more obligated to report data on waste and other sustainability KPIs. Currently, there is no legal means to ensure they do. This time, the partners cooperated, but it is not always the case. The lack of competition among waste management companies or tableware providers for large events can lead to them setting their own terms and refraining from improving services. There is also no easy way to access sales and waste data from food and drink stalls, which would provide valuable insight but is currently too resource-intensive for small organising teams.
- 3) **Emphasis On Visual Communication.** Communicating and raising awareness during these events requires excellent visual communication, including established and universally understandable pictograms for reusable tableware to direct people to return stations.
- 4) **Continuous Influence and Nudging.** Influencing overall mindsets cannot rely on one-time campaigns; it must be continuous and gentle. Event organisers can provide opportunities for responsible and sustainable behaviour, but success depends on attendees and is achieved together over time with the whole society's contribution.

And this is where our story comes to an end! We hope we lighted a spark so that events in your home country will be more sustainable and as waste free as possible!

Recognitions and Additional References

The 13th Youth Song and Dance Celebration "Holy is the Land" was the most sustainable song festival yet. It was organised by the [Estonian Song and Dance Festival Foundation](#) in collaboration with the [City of Tallinn](#), the [European Green Capital 2023](#), sustainable events consultation firm [Acento](#), the Circular Economy Department of the [Tallinn Strategic Management Office](#), [Eesti Pandipakend](#), and many others.

We welcome you all to join us in the celebrations of 2025. The Song and Dance Festival "[Kinship](#)" will take place from July 3rd to 6th, 2025. The event will feature over 40,000 choir singers, orchestral musicians, folk dancers, and folk musicians. More than 100,000 spectators are expected to gather to witness the dance performances and concerts of the festival and to enjoy the popular procession. And not to stray from our topic, take part of the almost waste free festival experience that is going to be even more successful as all of the little bumps in the road have been ironed out.

Important links:

Background on the [Estonian Song Festival](#), declared a [Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity](#) by UNESCO.

Background on the [Singing Revolution](#) of Estonia.

Background on the 2023 event [13th Youth Song and Dance Celebration "Holy is the Land"](#) organised by the foundation [Eesti Laulu- ja Tantsupeo Sihtasutus](#)

360 images of the event can be found here: <https://2023.laulupidu.ee/galeriid/360-fotod-2023/>