

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

[advertise](#)

[subscribe](#)

[about us](#)

[contact us](#)

[back page](#)

## Cleanse the oil from sport – and the arts

**BP's sponsorship of the London Olympics breaches the International Olympic Committee's code of ethics and is a stain on the name of sport, argues Nick Reeves**

I don't suppose many will boycott the Olympic Games or turn over to Dave instead but that doesn't mean there aren't issues (other than the events and how many medals we must win) worthy of the public's attention; far from it.

The controversies over the high-profile Dow Chemical contract to provide a decorative wrapping for the London Olympic Stadium and the honourable resignation of Meredith Alexander from the Commission for a Sustainable London 2012 (CSL) have raised wider questions about corporate behaviour and how ethical issues are effectively factored into decision-making. At the time of writing, the Commission is committed to addressing the challenge and will consider "new approaches that incorporate a broader range of ethical issues into decision making" in its forthcoming annual review, to be published in May.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has a code of ethics. It states that "The Olympic parties recognise the significant contribution that... sponsors... make to the development and prestige of the Olympic Games throughout the world. However, such support must be in a form consistent with the rules of sport and the principles defined in the Olympic Charter and the present Code." The present code of ethics includes protecting the environment, and the Olympic Charter states: "Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles."

Great. But, bearing all this in mind, it is obvious that neither the CSL, the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) nor the IOC have lived up to these standards. They have not responded effectively to the challenges posed by the choice of sponsors for London 2012. This is made clear by the scant attention to sponsors other than Dow and BP, and the lack of an ethical sponsorship policy addressing the broader ethical, social and environmental impacts of a potential sponsor that could prevent such problems in the future. I'm heartened that the CSL is now taking these matters seriously but we must all be concerned about the lack of similar action on the part of the IOC and LOCOG.

Consider the question of BP's sponsorship. It has become the paradigm example of bad sponsorship deals because of wholly inadequate ethical sponsorship policies. A section of the arts community has already raged against the heads of the Tate Galleries, the British Museum, the National Portrait Gallery and other public cultural institutions for accepting BP money, which they say tarnishes art.

While BP may have won its bid to sponsor the London Olympics with an impressive list of proposals, the company's ethics and history seem to have evaded scrutiny or were conveniently forgotten. BP has long used its sponsorship of the arts as a catalyst for forging a positive reputation among the cultural elite, especially in London. This has effectively acted as a buffer to soften the reputational damage it suffered in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon disaster which caused death, destruction and irrevocable ecological damage. Its sponsorship of the arts will help divert attention from the court case against the company over its responsibility for the catastrophe.

Sponsorship acts as a smokescreen, obscuring embarrassing political and human rights slip-ups such as BP's formerly close relationships with the Mubarak regime in Egypt and the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Its carefully crafted 'positive reputation' also allows its investments in controversial new 'frontier oil'

**"While BP may have won its bid to sponsor the London Olympics with an impressive list of proposals, the company's ethics and history seem to have evaded scrutiny or were conveniently forgotten."**

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:

**tlr.comms**  
TLR Communications Limited

projects to go virtually unquestioned by the media, the government and the public. Examples include the recent decision to go into Alberta's highly carbon-intensive and locally destructive tar sands, despite the calls by local indigenous communities for no new tar sands extraction projects; and the announcement last February that BP's Russian partner organisation TNK-BP will accelerate development of five giant oil fields in the pristine and vulnerable Russian Arctic in a deal said to be worth \$12 billion. BP's business model involves continuing to extract fossil fuels long into the future, using the promise of jobs and economic growth to cover its role in irreversible climate change. In other words, it is one of the least sustainable companies on the planet.

In order to blind us to this fact BP's multi-faceted sponsorship of the London 2012 Olympics provides a number of new opportunities for the company to associate itself with the excitement of the Olympics, and of elite sport, shared by millions of people and the world's media. Yet in virtually every element of BP's involvement in London 2012 there is cause for alarm as to how it got LOCOG's blessing and slipped past the Commission's watchful eye.

As well as furthering BP's projection of a trusted, well-loved, 'British' company, this aspect of Olympic sponsorship provides a unique opportunity for this environmentally unsustainable company to perpetuate a highly dubious interpretation of sustainability. And with such intensity that they even come to believe it.

As London 2012 Sustainability Partner, BP is promoting biofuels and carbon offsets as the main solutions offered to the public, ignoring what many see as genuinely sustainable solutions: political and social reform, major shifts in energy and transport infrastructure, an end to the myth of infinite economic growth and large-scale reductions in consumption. Arguably, putting a corporation like BP – which recently closed down its solar division because it felt it wasn't profitable enough – at the helm of the sustainability agenda does not just slow progress towards environmental goals, it reverses it. Co-option of the term 'sustainable development' has meant that greedy companies can continue to exploit the environment while appearing green, and also dictate how governments and society will envisage solutions to environmental problems.

As Official Oil and Gas Partner, BP has the responsibility of providing fuel for more than 5,000 official Olympic vehicles. Yet an ENDS Report analysis discovered that over 99% of the fleet would be using conventional fuel, and that of BP's three listed 'advanced' biofuel projects, two can realistically be considered 'first generation' (and much less sustainable) rather than 'advanced'. In any case, extensive research has concluded that 'advanced' biofuels could not be produced on a large enough scale to meet the world's current level of oil consumption; we need to start reducing our liquid fuel dependence. As Official Carbon Offset Partner, BP promotes the seductive idea that barely any behavioural change is needed to combat climate change because offsetting effectively eliminates carbon emissions. Yet not only is carbon offsetting considered notoriously unsuccessful as a tactic for reducing carbon emissions, it is known to create many more problems than it solves, by disrupting communities on the sites of these projects. To date carbon offsetting has allowed companies to rake in substantial profits, while overall emissions remain relatively unchanged and local communities suffer devastating impacts – both from badly-conceived offset projects and from the fossil fuel extraction that is thereby allowed to continue unabated.

As Premier Partner of the Cultural Olympiad, BP is able not only to strengthen its existing relationships with the Tate Galleries, the British Museum and other London arts venues, but also host events all around the UK, including at the Aberdeen Art Gallery, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon and at the Newcastle Theatre Royal. Within the context of Olympic hype, BP is able to maximise its exposure as a supporter of the under-funded arts and fill a funding vacuum. However, this is taking place against a backdrop of increasing numbers of people from within the arts, heritage and culture speaking out against BP's long-standing involvement in arts sponsorship. This further entrenchment goes against the tide of those in the worlds of arts and the environment who are coming together to prevent cherished cultural institutions being used as a vehicle for green-washing by some of the most powerful, destructive and controversial companies in the world.

Ultimately, to address the twin problems of peak oil and climate change, overall use of liquid fuel must be diminished. This would devastate BP's business model, not to mention the politically influential oil industry. By allowing BP the opportunity to continue to shape the debate on sustainability, alternative and more effective visions remain largely obscured to the public.

For these reasons it is disconcerting to see that LOCOG, the IOC and even an independent Commission has so far let BP's sponsorship deal go unchallenged. The terms of the partnership with BP should be reconsidered. It should be replaced by a more stringent and robust ethical sponsorship policy, one that is in line with Olympic principles and the IOC's code of ethics. This would prevent BP and similar companies basking in such undeserved glory in the future.

At times of economic restraint there are legitimate debates to be had about alternative funding for sport and the arts, but crimes against the environment are crimes against humanity and oil money is an expedient too far. As the world and indeed all sports have learned to flourish without support from slavery, tobacco and alcohol, we and they must learn to emerge from a culture of fossil fuels. It is time to halt the tyranny of oil patronage and cleanse the oil from sport (oh, and art).

To paraphrase one recently published comment on the matter: for now the Olympics sucks dogshit through a straw. It's horrible and corrupt. Folk have been sold the dumb idea that they encourage 'the youth' to take up running, jumping and falling in coils – but this is nonsense. They're a boondoggle for politicians, business leaders, corporate junkies and financiers. And the stadia themselves are a folly and the architects should walk. They're temples to vanity, self-entitlement, moribund consumerism and homogeny. In ten years' time they'll all be cracked and spalled; a Hitlerian mass of post-pomo, post-modernist rotteness – and a million miles from the roots of the Olympic idea.

#### **Nick Reeves is executive director of CIWEM**

*This article is an adaptation of an open letter sent in February 2012 to the International Olympic Committee, the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the Commission for a Sustainable London 2012. The letter was referenced in a Guardian editorial by the Guardian's Environment Editor, John Vidal, and published on 17th February 2012.*

*Signatories to the letter included Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace UK, Platform London, People & Planet, World Development Movement, The Polaris Institute, Climate Rush, London Mayoral Candidate, Jenny Jones AM, Nick Reeves OBE, CIWEM and 26 other organisations.*

#### **The Leisure Review, April 2012**

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.