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Green Festival Chicago

Pat Terry

From elephant dung paper to green home technology, organic food and beverages to the Green Kids' Zone, Chicago's recent Green Festival offered a wealth of ideas, products and information for 35,361 eco-minded folks who showed up at Navy Pier for the two-day event.

Green Festival, produced by Co-op America and Global Exchange, debuted in San Francisco in 2002, and has expanded to Washington D.C, Chicago and Seattle. Next year it's Denver.

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Enviros who rode bikes or hopped public transit saved \$5 on the modest (\$15) admission fee (\$15), as did seniors and students. The free Bike Valet - a great alternative to Navy Pier's \$23 a day parking tab - overflowed. Overall show attendance beat 2007 by more than 4,000 people, many of them first-timers.

James Fry, director of volunteer outreach for Earthwatch Institute, a new exhibitor, talked to a lot of those information-hungry attendees.

"There is a newly defined segment of the population called 'awakening consumers,'" Fry says. "They're probably doing a few basics like recycling, but they want to see how they can further a sustainable lifestyle."

Some "awakening consumers" are into volunteer travel (Earthwatch sends volunteers out worldwide to support scientific research), so Fry was pleased with the heavy traffic at his booth: *At times, people stood three-deep, patiently waiting to ask questions.*

But sustainable home building was probably the big draw, gauging by the long lines of show-goers.



"When I asked people, 'What brings you down here?,' most said they came to learn about sustainable energy," relates Fry. "They want to incorporate green technology into their homes and buildings."

The Fair Trade Pavilion also provided education. "We want people to be aware that so many everyday objects are available through Fair Trade companies—from paper to kitchenware, food and beverages to items like decorative hats and jewelry," says Greg Roberts, producer for all the Green Festivals.

Tasting is believing, and festival attendees had their pick: Fresh vegetarian, organic and locally grown foods, the Organic Beer & Wine Garden and the Numi Fair Trade Tea Garden gave people a taste of the healthy options in their own communities. "We can't have a

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strong sustainability movement if people are existing on French fries and painted, hormone- and antibiotic-ridden meat, and pesticide- and herbicide-drenched vegetables," says Roberts.

Then there's the money. Several speakers and exhibitors focused on Socially Responsible Investing for people looking to invest their money with a certain kind of conscience. "These firms use more than just shareholder profitability as their lone guide to success," notes Roberts. "They look at the triple bottom line: its impact on the community, the company and the environment."

First-time attendee Vicki Harrer, founder of GreenSceneUSA, was impressed with the size of the fair, and the diversity of products. "I brought a team with me for just one day, but we really needed two," she says. (They managed to walk every aisle.)

Harrer ran into some delightful surprises. In products, it was the beautiful elephant dung paper, with a handmade paper-mache look, and all kind of vibrant colors. "I mean, here is real green in action," she laughs. The new entrepreneur was pleased with the professionalism of the booths and exhibitors. "Everybody knew their products – which were very genuine. There wasn't anybody there that I felt was 'green washing' at all."

Attendees, too, were diverse - a smörgåsbord of colors, ethnic groups and religions, from young people to elderly. While the environmental movement is often considered a white, middleclass phenomenon, Green Festival staff worked hard with host committees, community organizations, the city and sponsors to involve a wide range of participants.

Ironically, a suburban travel fair once complained about "tire-kickers" collecting heaps of literature, only to dump it in the trash as they left, but Green Festival was a contrast.

Of the trash that *was* generated, Green Festival reported a 95 per cent diversion rate (from landfills) in Chicago. The goal was ever-present, as volunteers stood by prominently positioned blue and green recycling bins around the show.

Some things needed no diversion, though, as happy Festival-goers bit into lots of melt-in-your mouth, organic, Fair Trade chocolate. Healthy, too, they said.

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