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Exploring Congruence in Global Sport Governance between Environmental Policy and Practice

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Abstract: Global sport governance and environmental sustainability is a novel topic in the academic literature. This paper explores global sport governance with respect to the congruence exhibited between website disclosures of environmental policy and the implementation in practice by the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF). Congruence is noted as a requirement for success. To begin, this paper discusses the notions of global sport governance, environmental policy and governance, and congruence for environmental sustainability. Next, content analysis is used to explore the various environmental disclosures and initiatives by the ASOIF. The results provide evidence of the environmental governance conducted by the sport organizations. A total of 44% of the organizations under study did not report any environmental disclosures or initiatives; however, the majority supported the growth of environmental action by sport with disclosures on their websites. The results outline the current achievements with respect to congruence through three key elements, including formulated strategies, policy development, and implementation, which are noted as leading to successful environmental sustainability. This study offers a baseline concerning the status of these international sport organizations and the pursuit of environmental sustainability.

Keywords: global sport governance; environmental sustainability; Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF); sport management; sport policy



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1. Introduction

Contemporary sport is a significant social activity that encompasses a number of sport-related pursuits that range from amateur and “Sport for All” to the elite and professional sport level. As a result, sport is influenced by developments derived from globalization, and vice versa [1–8]. This includes influences that are derived from a range of policy areas where sport has, or may have, a direct or indirect impact [9–13]. Moreover, this influence includes the fact that sport may address developing social and political issues [3,14–16]. This means that sport can be a cost-effective policy tool to promote social policies that contribute to tackling major global challenges such as social inclusion, education, health, international development, conflict resolution, and the focus of this paper, environmental sustainability [17–20].

As the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight, environmental sustainability is of utmost importance for the modern world and may take a variety of forms, including, for example, waste management, a focus on climate change, pollution, carbon emissions, recycling, the use of (in)sufficient natural resources, the consequences of modern living on biodiversity, etc. It has been noted that environmental sustainability is important to sport organizations for the staging of sport events, as well as the behavior of sport participants, organizers, and fans [21]. Questions arise, however, such as: Can the organization of sport events be environmentally sustainable? Is there a role that international sport organizations can play in advancing environmental sustainability given their global reach and recognition? To what degree can they contribute to the protection of the environment?

The authors of this paper argue that global sport governance can play a significant role in advancing environmental sustainability. We begin with a literature review that offers definitions of governance and global governance. Next, definitions of environmental policy and governance, along with the noted requirements for such governance, are outlined. The literature on the application of governance with respect to sport is then presented, which is underscored with a discussion on the significance of sport to society and the fact that sport can act to safeguard the natural environment. Importantly, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), its environmental policy, and the Olympic Agenda are presented as leading the way in sport environmental sustainability.

This leads us to the literature that purports that congruence is required for success in environmentalism. The concept of congruence/incongruence and its importance in successful environmental sustainability will be presented. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) that are eligible to participate in the Summer Olympic Games, and their actions for environmental sustainability. The results of an analysis of website data indicate whether the ASOIF organizations are meeting the requirements for congruence and heading towards success in environmental sustainability.

1.1. Governance, Global Sport Governance, and Environmental Policy

According to Rosenau (2002), globalization and governance need to be discussed together because of their interdependencies, which were created after the Second World War and that tend to have global consequences [3]. While the term governance has various definitions [22], it means the processes and institutions that lead and confine group activities, as opposed to the definition of government, which refers to the responsibilities, power and rights of traditional exertion of authority and the subsequent obligations of the state [22,23]. Additionally, Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson [23] argued that governance occurs “in a world where boundaries are largely in flux and are being shaped and pursued in constellation of public and private actors that include states, international organizations, professional associations, expert groups, civil society groups and business corporations”. Furthermore, global governance is defined by the UN Commission Report on Global Governance (1995) as “the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs” [24], and by Finkelstein (1995) as “the activity of governing relations that transcend national frontiers without having sovereign authority” [25].

In this paper, Eitzen’s definition of globalization is used, which is the “process whereby goods, information, people, money, communication, sport, fashion, and other forms of culture move across national boundaries” [26]. This means that the influence on the governance of sport is “globalized” [3]. Sport can thus be used by a number of international organizations as a cost-effective social tool to promote, for example, global peace and prosperity, and to contribute to global challenges such as social inclusion, education, health, international development, environmental sustainability, and conflict resolution. It has been noted that ongoing and future challenges in global governance can be managed through adequate leadership development [27].

The globalization of sport and global sport governance have been topics of academic study in the past few years. Related discussion has focused on a variety of areas, such as: the nature of sport governance and the role of the IOC [28], the Olympic system [29], traditional and modern global sport governance [3], the accountability of sport International Non-Governmental Organizations [30–33], international sport business and global sport governance [3]. Further topics include the impact of sport governance on the promotion of health and well-being of people in the framework of international organizations, as well as the contribution of sport to the achievement of the United Nations Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals (MDGs and SDGs, respectively) [11] and the impact of international organizations, mainly the European Union, on global sport governance [34].

The traditional governance of global sport is established based on the structures of the Olympic Movement (OM) [3]. Those involved in the OM include the IOC, the National

Olympic Committees (NOCs), the Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games, the International Federations (IFs), and the National Federations (NFs) [29]. In addition, the International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), Transnational Companies (TNCs), media corporations and organizations, civil society associations, and new sport regulatory authorities have emerged as significant actors in global sport governance. Consequently, following the multi-actor perspective, modern sport governance involves “the plethora of actors that participate in the international sport related policy-making and implementation system as a result of globalization” [3]. In this sphere, sport is used by a number of international organizations as a cost-effective social tool to promote global peace and prosperity and contribute to global challenges, such as social inclusion, education, health, international development, sustainability, and conflict resolution.

In this framework, the organization of sport events can significantly contribute to the promotion and achievement of the United Nations’ SDGs. In particular, the hosting of the Summer Olympics, by virtue of the size of the event, may reflect and facilitate social change in the hosting country, around the world, and at the same time, showcase innovative environmentally sustainable solutions at a global level. Given that the organization and governance of the Summer Olympics highly depends on the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF), which are international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) responsible for the governance of one or more summer sports at a global level, the present study aims towards highlighting aspects of ASOIF governance that may have an impact on the promotion of environmental sustainability.

We now move to discuss environmental policy and governance, and then the application to sport of sport policy and environmental sustainability.

1.2. About Environmental Policy and Governance

Roberts (2004) defines environmental policy as “a set of principles and intentions used to guide decision making about human management of environmental capital and environmental services” [35]. King and Mori [36] emphasize that “policy instruments are defined as the means by which these principles and intentions are turned into action. These instruments are not necessarily used by public agencies, although they often are” (p. 7). As a result of globalization and good governance, an ideal policy framework requires the integration of all sustainable dimensions at all levels [37].

Environmental policy focuses on goals and principles within a society that aim to protect and enhance natural benefits for its citizens [38,39]. Further, such policy is designed by an organization as means to enhance the organization’s environmental performance. The design is not the same for every organization. It may vary from a simple statement of the organization’s commitment to a detailed environmental plan [40]. Burns (2019) notes that the benefits of environmental policy are difficult to measure because they may be long-term or difficult to quantify. Yet, according to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP):

Environmental governance is a key driver for the achievement of sustainable development. The undivided nature of the environment and its inextricable links with the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development relies on good decision-making processes, effective institutions, policies, laws, standards, and norms.

Therefore, environmental governance requires the mobilization of available resources and the enhancement of global partnerships, which bring together, among others, national governments, the private sector, the UN system, and civil society—facts that are also outlined in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, Goal 17). Undoubtedly, multiple bodies have a significant role to play in the field of global environmental governance towards efficient and legitimate environmental agreements on global level [41]—including sport.

1.3. Sport, Environmental Policy, and Sustainability

The significance of sport in societies around the world is embedded in cultural foundations that allow it to shape and be shaped by societal issues [42,43]. Consequently, global sport governance reflects socio-political changes that aim to address these issues and adequately respond to contemporary challenges. Given that all levels and types of sport leave a footprint on the environment [43], those involved in global sport governance need to examine sport disclosures and initiatives in relation to the safeguarding of that environment.

Sport was first linked to environmental policy officially in connection with the 1994 Lillehammer Olympic Games—also known as the “Green Games”. Responding to concerns raised about the negative impact of the Games’ organization, the 1994 Organizing Committee initiated twenty sustainability projects as means to safeguard the environmental friendliness of the Games [44]. Since then, there has been a push towards acting for environmental sustainability on the assumption that the organization of sport events threatens the sustainability of the natural environment, and thus, measures are taken in most sporting events to tackle threats to the challenge of safeguarding the natural environment, or environmental sustainability.

The IOC, as the leader of the Olympic Movement (OM), is also leading the way to environmentally sustainable sport organizations. With the adoption of the Olympic Agenda 2020 in December 2014, the IOC officially included sustainability in the strategic roadmap, and embraces environmentally sustainable actions in all actions of the OM [45]. In particular, the IOC Agenda Recommendation 4 confirms that the responsibility of the IOC is to “... take a more proactive position and leadership role with regard to sustainability and ensure that it is included in all aspects of the planning and staging of the Olympic Games” (IOC Agenda, Recommendation 4). Furthermore, recommendation 5 aims to include sustainability in the everyday operations of the OM and the engagement of the OM stakeholders in the fostering of sustainability based on a number of principles. These principles include: the development of recommendations and the provision of adequate tools, such as best practices and scorecards, the provision of mechanisms to ensure the exchange of information between Olympic stakeholders and the use of using existing channels such as Olympic Solidarity, and to help and assist in the implementation of initiatives. Additionally, it is noted in the Agenda that the IOC cooperates with organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in order to achieve its goals in the field of environmental sustainability [46].

The Olympic Agenda 2020+5, adopted in March 2021, maintains sustainability as an IOC priority and integral part of the Olympic roadmap through the promotion of sustainable Olympic Games (Recommendation 2), along with the strengthening of the role of sport as an enabler for the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the continuing of IOC engagement to serve as “a leader by example” in corporate citizenship (Recommendation 13). A number of IOC initiatives, such as the launch of a Sport for Development Coalition of Public Development Banks and partners, sought to increase investment and cooperation between development banks and agencies. Further, the international sport movement, and the publication of an environmental evaluation study in March 2021 followed by a practical guide in April 2021, resulted in cooperation between the IOC, FIFA and Ocean Race, and illustrates the IOC’s commitment and progress in the field of sustainable development [45].

Overall, sport’s actions due to their communication abilities can have a significant impact on protecting the natural environment. This impact stems from the ability of sport to exert influence on governments and international governmental and non-governmental organizations in the framework of global governance, so as to develop and implement sustainably environmental policies [38].

Despite advances in sport and environmental sustainability, no studies could be found on sport and environmental sustainability with respect to congruence. Such congruence is noted as necessary for successful environmental actions.

1.4. Congruence and Incongruence

Importantly, James et al. (1999), along with Ghobadian et al. (2001), outlined that a state of congruence, or alignment, is important in the organizational governance of environmental policy development and implementation to achieve successful environmental sustainability [39,47]. Congruence involves three equally important areas or variables, including:

- I Formulated strategies, with the topic as a priority issue and resource availability issues being managed to support the strategies [39,47];
- II Policy development, stemming from interpretations (knowledge for decisions) that impact the policy development and implementation. This includes “mechanisms within the environmental strategy formulation process that will allow for their strategic capability to be more clearly understood before a policy is defined” [39];
- III Policy implementation [39,47].

To achieve congruence, clearly understanding the strategic capability of a strategy is necessary prior to generating any environmental policy. Such understandings or knowledge aid to align the policy with the strategy that will then be implemented.

A lack of congruence—or incongruence—expresses the divergence (or a lack of alignment) between the formulated strategies, policy development, and implementation [47]. It has been noted that achieving congruence is difficult and that a state of incongruence is common [39,47]. Incongruence occurs as it is difficult to move environmental “policy pronouncements into actual practice” [47]. Such incongruence generally falls under three conditions, including:

That many environmental strategies are developed without evaluation of the companies’ capability to undertake the necessary activities, in terms of resource availability; . . . That many strategies are developed without consideration of the differing operational priorities that exist within modern organizations, and the effect that delegation of responsibility for decision making can have upon a policy that is identified, either officially or unofficially, as a second order priority [and]; . . . That the signals sent by decision makers may, if unaccompanied by clear and coherent leadership on the issue, be interpreted differently within an organization, possibly jeopardizing the potential for success of a policies’ implementation [47].

Overall, working to ensure congruence is noted as aiding the success of policy in practice.

This paper investigates the various approaches that the summer Olympic sports within the ASOIF pursue (if any), as offered on sport association websites with respect to environmental policy and its implementation within practice. The ASOIF was selected as it represents the federations that compete in the global event of the Summer Olympic Games. The guiding research question was: Do the governance strategies of the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) exhibit congruence between formulated environmental strategies, policy, and implementation as outlined by James et al. [39] and Ghobadian et al. [47] as necessary for successful environmental action?

2. Method

The research process utilized content/thematic analysis. Krippendorff (2012) stated that content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” [48]. Further, the research followed the statement of Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, and Morrison (2008) that content analysis is “a well-established research methodology” that “has remarkably benefited from the exponentially increasing volume of electronic data” [49].

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection and analysis process involved a four-step framework derived from the work of Krippendorff (2004), Weber (1980), and Wolfe (1985, 1991) [48,50–52]. The first step involved establishing the sampling units. In this research, the sampling

units encompassed a total of 34 sport organizations, including 5 associate members. The organizations were members of the ASOIF and are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Environmental sustainability data on websites of organizations under study.

Sport Organization	Examples of Environmental Sustainability (ES) Policies and/or Statements
Badminton World Federation	ES not found on the website
Fédération Équestre Internationale	ES not found on the website
Federation International de Basketball	Multiple news releases outlined, for example, environmental advances in venue flooring, waste management efforts, network in ES relationships, and a commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 50% by 2050.
Fédération Internationale de Football Association	Multiple news releases promoted, for example, efforts at major events in promoting renewable energy, water efficiency, recycling, and carbon emission reduction; joining environmental organizations; the outlining of networks to aid in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique	ES not found on the website
Fédération International de Hockey (field hockey)	ES not found on the website
Fédération Internationale de Natation (aquatic sports)	Sought to raise ES awareness with #WaterisOurWorld
Fédération Internationale de Volleyball	ES not found on the website
International Boxing Association	ES not found on the website
International Canoe Federation	Multiple news releases outlined, for example, a commitment to raise ES awareness, to become carbon neutral; describing a pilot project on reducing the environmental footprint of events, including an event template and sustainable boat building, a good practices toolkit, and announcements of ES partnerships.
International Federation of Sport Climbing	A statement that indicated the organizational values of “respect and support for Olympic values and principles”, which included environmentalism.
International Fencing Federation	Multiple news releases stated, for example, an initiative on plastic waste collection; promotion of ES policies; a photo contest via #FencingforourPlanet
International Golf Federation	Section encouraged ES as a core priority; promoted “United to make a real difference”; offered stewardship strategies for areas such as landscapes and ecosystems, water, energy and resources, and manufacturing; established a standard for the leadership that included ES leadership and best practices.
International Handball Federation	ES not found on the website
International Judo Federation	Multiple news releases stated, for example, a message of coming together to safeguard the environment, preserve the planet, and promote ES with posters encouraging participation in a plethora of action statements.
International Shooting Sport Federation	ES not found on the website
International Surfing Association	A news release on joining an environmental organizations program and efforts to eliminate marine plastic litter.
International Table Tennis Federation	News releases that promoted, for example, the establishment of a working group to implement the UN Sustainability Development Goals through sport, and promoted a need to find solutions to the environmental issues.
International Tennis Federation	ES not found on the website—but a news release issued a statement that the organization is inviting those with expertise in environmentalism to come forward to collaborate in the future.
International Weightlifting Federation	News reports that outlined, for example, a speakers’ forum that promoted ES and a duty to care for the natural environment, and encouraged action, such as utilizing hydrogen for the Games cauldron and relay torch.

Table 1. Cont.

Sport Organization	Examples of Environmental Sustainability (ES) Policies and/or Statements
Union Cycliste Internationale	Multiple news releases outlined, for example, a world environment day; encouraging reductions in environmental impacts by cyclists; releasing case study research on sustainable practices; offering a vision, commitment, and outlining principles for UCI concerning sustainability.
Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne	ES not found on the website
United World Wrestling	ES not found on the website
World Archery	ES not found on the website
World Athletics	Multiple news releases outlined, for example, the extensive efforts underway in the IAAF Air Quality project; preliminary data on the Air Quality program; testing equipment being used; efforts to be carbon neutral; and network ES relationships.
World Baseball Softball Confederation	ES not found on the website
World DanceSport Federation	Released information that outlined guidelines that, for example, encourage ES responsibility with respect to the use of energy, water, and waste; focus on reducing the sport's environmental impact.
World Karate Federation	Promotion of a webinar series on environmentally sustainable development, and joining environmental organizations and aiding their efforts.
Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Aviron (rowing)	Multiple statements concerning, for example, their sustainability award.
World Rugby	Multiple news releases on their 2030 Environment Plan that focused on climate action, a circular economy, and safeguarding the natural environment, as well as joining other environmental organizational initiatives.
World Sailing	News releases outlining, for example, a sustainability program and racing sustainability award.
World Skate	ES not found on the website
World Taekwondo	ES not found on the website
World Triathlon	News reports that outlined, for example, sustainability guidelines for event organizers; the receipt of a sustainability award, joining environmental organizations, and a push to combat global warming and to clean up the seas.

The second step involved the unit of text. In this research the unit of text concerned website disclosures on the topic of environmental sustainability. This involved “a word, sentence, paragraph, or any other meaningful unit of text” [50]. A summary of each unit of text was outlined in a table. The examination of website texts spanned a 5-year time period of data from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2021 that was posted on the website during January/February, 2022. For triangulation purposes, one member of the research team conducted the search independently and devised the data table, which was double-checked by the other researcher.

The third step established themes. There was a search for themes during each of the four readings of the summary data in the table as the process of analysis [53–55]. For triangulation purposes, the members of the research team conducted the search for themes independently. The research team then compared their data, searched for discrepancies, and resolved any decisions. There were no major discrepancies, and discussion and consensus on terminology for the themes were managed over several discussions and determined.

The fourth step involved a joint analysis process that applied the theory of successful congruence between policy and practice, as outlined by James, Ghobadian, Viney, and Liu [39] along with Ghobadian, Viney, and Holt [47], based upon three equally important variables: policy, formulated strategies, and implementation. This meant the reviewers examined the data for an associated policy that guided the formulated environmental strategy outlined on the website, as well as the strategies for implementation.

3. Results and Discussion

Content/thematic analysis was used to systematically examine the websites of the member organizations of the ASOIF for disclosure and initiative data on environmental sustainability. It was found that 44% of the sport organizations did not broach the environmental topic on their websites, including: the World Archery; Badminton World Federation; World Baseball Softball Confederation; International Boxing Association; the Fédération Équestre Internationale; International Hockey Federation; Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique; International Handball Federation; Modern Pentathlon; Roller Sports; International Shooting Sport Federation; World Taekwondo; International Tennis Federation; Fédération Internationale de Volleyball; and United World Wrestling.

The results of the remaining majority of sport organizations indicate that the environmental issue is gaining significance, and that these international sport organizations are inching towards playing a role in sport safeguarding the natural environment. This is interpreted to mean that sport is being shaped by the societal environmental issue [42,43]. The sport organization's response to the contemporary environmental issue is illustrated in the organization's behavior, which is encompassed in six (6) themes. The themes are as follows:

Theme 1—Advancing environmental awareness

There were numerous examples of the sport organizations working to advance environmental awareness. This awareness was promoted throughout the organization and generally extended from the elite level to the grassroots organizational level, and illustrated an impact through global sport governance. For instance, the aquatic sport organization, the Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA), promoted environmental awareness in their members with a statement on the webpage entitled "About FINA", which states the organization intends to: "Raise awareness on environmental sustainability"; further, this organization promotes the hashtag #WaterisOurWorld" [56]. Additionally, the International Canoe Federation (ICF) raised environmental awareness through the hosting of workshops on environmental strategies [57,58], as well as distributing messages concerning the role that the sport can play in becoming environmentally sustainable [57,58]. The Fédération Internationale d'Escrime (FIE) hosted a photo contest on World Fencing Day and promoted #FencingforourPlanet [59]. Meanwhile, World Triathlon had the IOC present at their Congress on the importance of advancing sustainability [60], and in 2020, the organization received a sustainability award from the IOC for advancing awareness of World Triathlon's promotion of environmental sustainability [61].

The examples of sport organizations working to advance environmental awareness illustrate a trajectory of safeguarding the natural environment—albeit not in one voice or with the same specific strategies, formulated policies, or implementation. This result is interpreted to lack the three requirements for congruence in the governance towards environmental sustainability, and thus, a common state of incongruence exists.

Theme 2—Commitments to become carbon neutral

Several sport organizations under study are working towards improving their carbon emission situation. For instance, World Athletics stated in a press release on 13 March 2019 that their World Championship event will be carbon-neutral by the year 2030 [62]. The International Canoe Federation (ICF) announced plans to become climate-neutral through "a multi-year program that will reduce the environmental footprint of major paddling events ... helping all ICF world disciplines to become climate neutral" [63]. The Federation Internationale de Basketball is seeking a pathway to reducing their emissions [64]. Additionally, World Rugby launched their 2030 plan for net zero emissions [65]. Additionally, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) pledged to reduce by 50% its carbon emissions by 2030, and to be carbon-neutral by 2040 [66]. Promoting a target and reaching a target can be two different things—but working towards such targets is evidence of progress. This theme is interpreted as a pronouncement that needs to be supported with formulated environmental strategies that support a reduction in carbon

emissions, associated policy development, and implementation requirements in order to achieve congruence for successful environmental action. Ghobadian et al. [47] outlined that it is difficult to move such “policy pronouncements into actual practice”. Time will tell if these pledges are actualized or if there is difficulty obtaining results.

Theme 3—Generating guidelines that underscore environmental action

No specific environmental mandates were found to be operated by the sport organizations; however, guidelines, plans, toolkits, blueprints, documents, and environmental statements were available that sought to influence those in sport to advance environmental sustainability. Examples abound. The Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) published their 2021 comprehensive and publicly available UCI Sustainability Guidelines [67], along with stated principles and an associated Sustainability Policy Statement that discusses that the guidelines offer a framework to build upon into the future [68]. World Triathlon also published guidelines for organizers of events to improve environmental sustainability [60,61,69]. Meanwhile, the International Canoe Federation (ICF) promoted a “good practices toolkit focusing on recycling and the reduction of plastic used during competition” [70]. The World DanceSport Federation outlined a comprehensive document on their rules and regulations webpage on the impacts of those in the sport on the natural environment and how they can act to decrease such impacts [71]. The International Golf Federation (IGF) promotes environmental best practices, the setting of targets, and the measurement of actions, and underscoring all activities is the recognition that sustainability is “a core priority” [72,73], supporting the Golf Environment Organization’s (GEO) voluntary third party certification system [74]. World Rugby established their Environmental Sustainability Plan 2030 “as a statement of intent and a tangible roadmap for tackling environmental sustainability issues that both affect our sport and/or are affected by our sport” [75].

Theme 3 illustrates that the environmental issue is being pursued as an intertwined activity within the ASOIF sport organizations—albeit on a voluntary basis—by posting on the policies and regulations section of their website. The voluntary state is interpreted to mean that sustainability is not a priority topic for the sport organizations involved, and no noted supporting resources were outlined. There is, however, a forward trajectory with voluntary guidelines generated to promote the formulated environmental strategies within the sport. An interpretation is that there is incongruence, with the lack of formulated policy and implementation requirements for these guidelines. When the guidelines are utilized, however, there is the potential to generate learning or knowledge that can support future environmental policy development and implementation. There continues to be an apparent common state of incongruence in successful governance in environmental sustainability.

Theme 4—Joining environmental organizations and/or activities

Multiple sport organizations have joined environmental organizations and/or participated in joint environmental activities. For instance, many of the sport organizations have joined the United Nations (UN) Sports for Climate Action framework [76,77]. The Union Cycliste Internationale joined, and “is committed to reducing the impact of its operations on the environment and collaborating with stakeholders to achieve significant changes within the sport” [78]. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) also joined, and has established environmental strategies for major events [66,79]. The International Surfing Association (ISA) outlined that they too joined, and support the UN Environments’ CleanSeas campaign to join the fight against marine plastic litter [80], along with the International Canoe Federation (ICF) [58], World Rugby [65,75] and World Triathlon [77]. World Athletics partnered with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in the development of their air quality monitoring program, and in support of the UN BreatheLife Challenge [62,81–87]. Further, World Athletics (IAAF) reported becoming a member of Sport and Sustainability International (SandSI), along with generating a memorandum of understanding with two groups: Runnin’City (a smartphone app that is offered free of charge to aid runners when in different cities, which can also state air quality statistics in the future) and Plume Labs (makers of air quality monitors for personal use to aid athletes as to

when is the best air quality time to run outdoors) [81]. The World Karate Federation (WKF) joined UNESCO for a series of webinars that focused on sustainable development [88]. The Federation International de Basketball (FIBA), the International Canoe Federation (ICF), and World Rugby are examples of sport organizations that have joined the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) [63–65,75,89], including the Race to Zero campaign for reducing airborne emissions [65]. The ICF also teamed up with the International Academy of Sport Science and Technology [57]. Meanwhile, the Fédération des Sociétés d’Avron partnered with the World Wildlife Federation (WWF) to judge their annual World Rowing Sustainability Award [90] and for their Clean Water partnership [91]. Interestingly, the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) released a 2020 statement that it “is keen to invite those with expertise and knowledge in the field to express their interest in collaboration” [92]. Additionally, sport organizations have coordinated environmental actions with environmental groups to participate in environmental activities. For instance, international athletes at an FIBA Women’s Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Belgium participated in the garbage removal campaign “sand dunes free from litter” organized by the Local Organizing Committee with FIBA [93]. Finally, the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) outlined that they were guided by the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) values to preserve the natural environment throughout their facility use and event hosting. These values and principles may underscore the environmental actions of these sport organizations.

Overall, sport organizations exhibit that they have sought outside expertise to aid them in environmental program strategy development and participation. Joining forces with organizations, such as the UN Sports for Climate Action Framework, has a coordination effect with the bringing of different sports together, along with the groups within each sport organization, to work towards similar goals, targets, and timeframes. This result is interpreted to mean that the sport organizations are encouraging self-regulation with public and private cooperation [94], and that the rise of the issue is moving it to a primary priority (and not secondary priority) with organizational linkages to generate action, along with aid in resource availability that supports the formulated strategies. The linkages are interpreted as reducing the resources required for managing the environmental issue(s) by creating resource efficiencies and generating movement for issue management implementation. Further, the collaborative action is interpreted as aiding in developing knowledge concerning the strategic capabilities of the sport organization for environmental governance prior to generating defined policy for the issue, which is required to meet the third element of congruence in the future. Congruence has not been achieved; however, movement towards congruence is illustrated.

Theme 5—Supporting the development of sustainable sports equipment and facilities

The International Canoe Federation (ICF) launched what was termed as “the legacy venue” [95], as the Munich Olympic slalom venue “will act as a sustainability prototype for future events” [95], along with the promotion of a sustainable boat design project [95]. The Federation International de Basketball (FIBA) supports sustainable flooring systems, and indicated that “FIBA’s Equipment and Venue Centre encourages the development of sustainable arenas and offers a global platform to find the highest level of quality, testing and innovation related to basketball equipment and software” [96]. Work towards making sports equipment and venues more environmentally friendly has begun.

This theme is interpreted as a movement towards making environmental sustainability a priority issue—albeit only in specific areas such as sport equipment and flooring. This does, however, represent the outlining of new parameters with respect to a formulated strategy, and that self-governance is evolving concerning the environmental issue. It is unknown, however, if the resource support for the implementation of this theme comes from the manufacturers promoting environmental products, from the sport organization(s), or a combination. Further, the environmental activities are not interpreted as impacting the specific sport organizations’ policy development and implementation in the future. Overall,

congruence is not interpreted as being achieved, and the common state of incongruence is illustrated.

Theme 6—Conducting projects that will produce data to support the development of standards for environmental action in the future

There have been pilot projects that have advanced understanding concerning efficient and effective environmental sustainability actions within sport, and that aid in the development of standards [58,95]. One key sport organization, however, is building a base of data, which they will use to establish environmental standards. The World Athletics (formally IAAF) announced in 2019 that they had an air quality project underway that involved a “monitoring network across 1000 athletics tracks around the world . . . to learn how low-cost sensors can provide evidence to improve the health of its citizens and future athletes. It also demonstrates an innovative sport-based approach to solving the air pollution problem” [84]. This sport organization has been releasing news reports indicating where they are collecting data, the data points collected, and information on the advance of a second phase of the project [82,84–86]. This is a comprehensive project, as revealed in a report on the 21 October 2020 that indicated that monitors were set up to measure air quality at the World Athletics Half Marathon Championship at the start line, with another on a bicycle that followed the athletes, by which “more than 70,000 data points were collected for various pollutant gases concentrations, particle concentrations and meteorological parameters across an 18-h period in Gdynia” [82]. Further, it was reported that low anthropogenic emissions levels were detected, and it was noted that COVID-19 may have impacted the results by decreasing the mobility of city residents [82]. Additionally, in 2020, World Athletics air quality data were posted in real time [83]. Importantly, World Athletics stated that: “Upon implementation of air monitoring programmes, World Athletics will set air quality standards for major championships and sanctioned events, utilizing the WHO [World Health Organization] air quality standards” [82].

Importantly, this theme of conducting pilot projects has been interpreted as a formulated strategy that moves the environmental issue to become a priority, with the provision of resources to support the strategy. Importantly, this theme exhibits a mechanism “within the environmental strategy formulations process that will allow for their strategic capabilities to be more clearly understood before a policy is defined” [39]. This means that the participating sport organizations are exhibiting a trajectory that supports knowledge development, impacting future policy development and implementation, which will lead towards congruence. A further interpretation is that this theme has the potential to be extended to other sport organizations, and the establishment of future standards for outdoor sport training and competitions with respect to air quality, thus safeguarding athletes by determining where there is dangerous air quality, and ensuring athletes are not required to train/compete in such conditions. The pilot studies are interpreted to have the potential to offer knowledge that aids other sport organizations, and which will develop the requisite knowledge to formulate strategies, and develop and implement policy, so as to achieve congruence in the future.

Overall, with respect to the research question, it is noted that the governance strategies of the ASOIF did not exhibit congruence between formulated environmental strategies, policy, and implementation, which have been outlined by James et al. [39] and Ghobadian et al. [47] as necessary for successful environmental action. There is thus no ability to diffuse successful sport organizational environmental policy throughout the sport organization and society. Theme 6, however, shows a strong trajectory towards achieving congruence in the future, with pilot projects that are being staged today. In particular, World Athletics is leading sports in addressing the environmental issue, with the establishment of the air quality issue as a primary issue, and providing resources for pilot projects that generate an understanding of the topic, which will support decisions related to policy development and implementation—the elements supporting congruence in successful environmental sustainability. Further, the resulting knowledge from the pilot project is interpreted as having the potential to impact future standards through policy development

and implementation, which encompasses all of the sport organizations' events. This organization is a leader in the movement to achieve congruence through three key elements, which are noted as having the potential to advance well-defined environmental policies for successful implementation [47].

There is support for greater environmental action on the behalf of sport over time as the breadth of the six themes now includes growing environmental participation, a trajectory towards making it a primary issue, and statements that outline a vision for the future that includes advancing environmental sustainability. For instance, the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) outlined their vision concerning making "cycling one of the world's most sustainable sports and promote the bicycle as a key transport mode in combating climate change" [78], and that "By taking action to embed sustainability into the sport, the cycling family will improve and contribute to the state of public health, the preservation of the natural resources, the promotion of social justice, and the wellbeing of society and the economy" [78]. The International Canoe Federation (ICF) expressed that "Thousands of ICF athletes paddle millions of kilometres every year and are in a unique position to act as 'Guardians of the Waterways'" [70]. At an International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) Executive Committee meeting, they "stressed the importance of reducing the negative impact on the environment" [97], and The International Judo Federation (IJF) proposed that "it's our responsibility to preserve . . . the state of our planet and the preservation of the environment" [98]. The International Golf Federation (IGF) stated that they were "United to make a real difference" [73], and that it is the responsibility of the sport organization to preserve the natural environment [73]. Yet another example is that the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) stated that sport has an environmental "duty of care" [99]. However, time will tell if these pronouncements and programs lead to successful environmental sustainability by meeting the three requirements of congruence. Much work needs to be undertaken, and time will tell if these sport organizations have continued to utilize their evolving governance to make a difference.

4. Concluding Remarks

This study has examined the websites of the ASOIF members for their environmental policy and initiatives concerning sport safeguarding the natural environment. In particular, the study explored whether the ASOIF is governing sport to achieve congruence within environmental policy, strategy, and implementation within practice. Such congruence is noted as critical for successfully safeguarding the natural environment. Content analysis was used to systematically examine the websites of the member organizations of the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) for data on their environmental sustainability disclosures and initiatives.

This study offered baseline data concerning these key international sport organizations and the state of governance for safeguarding the natural environment.

The results reveal that 44% of the organizations under study did not report any disclosures or initiatives on their website concerning environmental sustainability. This was interpreted to mean that sport and environmental sustainability is not a priority topic for these sport organizations.

The results also reveal that 56% of these sport organizations support the growth of environmental action by sport with disclosures on their websites. Importantly, no declared sport environmental policy was then associated with specific strategies and implemented initiatives. This was interpreted to mean that congruence was thus not found to be achieved by any sport organizations, as their environmental strategies, sport policy, and implementation could not be found to be fully articulated and aligned with practice. Such congruence is noted as necessary for successful environmental policy and implementation [39,47]. This result was interpreted to mean that there is a current general state of incongruence with respect to these sport organizations and efforts towards safeguarding the natural environment. Such incongruence impacts sports' ability to successfully safeguard the natural environment.

The sport organizations that did have website disclosures offered a variety of environmental initiatives. These initiatives illustrated a smattering of effort, and that sport is dabbling in having a role in sport and environmental sustainability, but it is not yet fully playing a significant role. The initiatives were interpreted to be generally individualized and not offered as a coordinated effort between sports—with the exception of working with outside environmental agencies. Sport thus has room to coordinate environmental actions to advance environmental sustainability with its own global reach and recognition.

The multiple initiatives found fell within six themes, which included advancing environmental awareness, commitments to become carbon-neutral, generating (voluntary) guidelines that underscore environmental activities, supporting the development of sustainable sports equipment and facilities, and conducting projects that will produce data to support the development of standards for environmental action in the future.

It was theme 6, with pilot projects, that offered a promising trajectory towards achieving congruence in the future. World Athletics and their air quality program are seeking to build a large base of data with a growing number of pilot projects around the world, and then link the knowledge acquired to future policy development and strategies for implementation. This theme was interpreted to illustrate that there is movement towards sport and environmental congruence with pilot projects that aid in the “strategic capability to be more clearly understood before a policy is defined” [39]. This interpretation leads to the logical extension that there is the likelihood of achieving congruence in successful environmental sport governance in the future. There is hope that, in the future, sports will advance their efforts to achieve congruence in their safeguarding of the natural environment for successful implementation. Time will tell.

Overall, this paper contributes to the literature with a never-before-held discussion on congruence and governance in sport environmental sustainability. Further, the paper outlines the current state of environmental governance amongst the ASOIF members by outlining six themes that encompass the sum of the collective environmental disclosures and initiatives. Finally, the paper reveals that the sum of environmental activities are not congruent, or aligned, with respect to their formulated strategies, policy development, and implementation, as noted as needed for success in environmental sustainability. Theme 6, concerned with the conducting of pilot projects, illustrates a trajectory towards potentially achieving such congruence in the future.

Future research is needed to understand any knowledge acquired over time from global sport governance concerning pilot projects in environmental sustainability. Further research is also necessary on sport organizations, whether they are working towards the three outlined areas for congruence in policy development and implementation, and whether there will be a continued state of incongruence—which is common [39,47]. This common state of incongruence has the potential to impact sport organizations’ environmental policy development and success during implementation over time, and an understanding concerning generating inertia to move from incongruence to congruence is needed. Additionally, future policy trajectories need to be examined for their contributions to the global issue of environmental sustainability.

It will be interesting to see whether ASOIF’s environmental initiatives, initiated in an international non-governmental framework, will have an impact on global sport governance and environmental sustainability over time. Additionally, we must see if congruence matters in practice, or if successful environmental sustainability can still be achieved within a state of incongruence.

Note: World Athletics was formerly International Amateur Athletic Federation, IAAF (1912–2001) and international Association of Athletics Federations (2001–2019).

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