

Green Music Australia ‘Party with the Planet’

Roundtable on Climate Risks and Australian Music Festivals

Discussion Paper

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Executive summary

Australian music festivals are increasingly being impacted by climate change, and the risks to successful festival delivery and the viability of the sector are escalating. To be as resilient as possible in the face of more frequent and increasingly severe extreme weather events, the industry needs to understand the risks it faces and the adaptation strategies available.

This paper presents insights from a roundtable discussion with stakeholders in the festival sector about their experiences and perceptions of climate impacts and risks and adaptation strategies.

The roundtable was held in Sydney on the 1st of July 2024, on the theme of ‘Climate Risks and Australian Music Festivals’. Forty-one stakeholders from the festivals sector attended, including organisers, government representatives and peak body representatives, as well as the research team and Green Music Australia and Australian Festival Association staff. Following presentations about climate risks and adaptation, participants considered how climate change has and might impact festivals, and what is needed to reduce climate change risks.

Key climate change risks to successful festivals

- **Rising costs:** participants noted that cost increases for staff, goods and services are already difficult to manage, and that both adaptation and greenhouse gas mitigation strategies for climate risks are adding to costs in various ways.
- **Insurance** is becoming harder, or impossible, to secure for festivals as the insurance industry adapts by altering policies.
- **Increasing pressure on resources:** at festivals, climatic conditions are increasing demand for resources such as shade and reliable water. At the same time, it is likely that resources **will become harder to obtain**, including **staff**, who may look elsewhere for employment if festivals operation becomes too uncertain.
- **Changing audience behaviour** was seen as likely under shifting conditions (e.g. more just-in-time ticket purchasing to manage weather risks).
- **Less government support** if compounding climate change pressures increase demands on government.

Key suggestions for helping adapt festivals

- **Reduce exposure to climatic extremes by shifting from high-risk locations or times** to safer ones. Doing this effectively would involve understanding what risks will be highest where and when. This may include more **purpose-built sites** that could be used by multiple festivals.
- **Technological solutions** are possible but need much more development.

- **Good planning**, including clear policies and procedures led by other stakeholders, particularly government and emergency services, are needed to enable music festival adaptation.
- **Development of trust and clear communication** across wider stakeholder groups including audiences is crucial for sector-wide adaptation.

The discussions suggest that more work is needed to embed adaptation as fully into the discussion on festivals as greenhouse gas mitigation. Adaptation of the sector is vital to extend the cultural, social and economic benefits of the Australian music festival sector into a climate changed future. Such work is especially important because by connecting community, boosting local economies and fostering creativity, music festivals contribute to the adaptive capacity of the wider community. Suggestions for further research are included at the end of this document

Introduction

On July 1, 2024, the fifth iteration of Green Music Australia's 'Party with the Planet' roundtable series¹ was held in Sydney. Co-presented by the Australian Festival Association, the theme of this session was 'Climate Risks and Australian Music Festivals'. The session was planned and run by a team of academic researchers, Professor Lauren Rickards (Latrobe University), Associate Professor Catherine Strong (RMIT) and Dr Ben Green (Griffith University), in close consultation with GMA staff, and was used as a data-gathering exercise for emergent research on this topic. To this end, all attendees signed a consent form agreeing to have their input to the session used anonymously as part of a dataset on this topic.² This discussion paper brings together the main themes that emerged from this discussion and makes some recommendations for future investigations and actions.

Background

Anthropogenic climate change is impacting on many aspects of life in Australia, and under current projections this is expected to continue and accelerate. Australia is projected to experience more severe weather impacts, including floods, drought, extreme heat and storms (IPCC 2022). These impacts will play out in different ways in different parts of the country, and will have different effects depending on preexisting vulnerabilities of communities and how prepared they are for these events. It has been noted that:

... as climate change intensifies, we are now seeing cascading and compounding impacts and risks, including where extreme events coincide. These are placing even greater pressure on our ability to respond' (Mackey et al. 2022).

Indeed, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has concluded that such cascading and compounding impacts are one of the Key Risks for Australia, with disasters likely to cause significant flow on effects throughout supply chains and infrastructure in this country (Lawrence et al. 2022).

One area where climate impacts need further investigating is in relation to music festivals. Peer-reviewed research on music festivals has established that:

- between 2013 and 2023, at least 41 Australian music festivals were cancelled, evacuated, postponed or relocated due to extreme weather events including heat, fires, rain, and floods;
- there was a dramatic increase in such disruptions from 2019, with more than half occurring after the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- the impacted festivals spanned ACT, NSW, Queensland, SA, Victoria, Tasmania and WA, with capacities from 500 to 50,000. (Green and Strong 2023)

Since this research was published, there have been a number of other high-profile disruptions, including the evacuation of 17,000 patrons from west Victoria's Pitch Music & Arts Festival due to heat and fire danger in March 2024. Due to such events, industry awareness of climate risks is increasing: in a 2023 survey of 51 music festival organisers by Creative Australia, 49% identified extreme weather events as having a moderate to severe impact on their festival (Creative Australia 2024).

¹ The *Party With The Planet* Alliance is supported by the NSW Environment Protection Authority and the NSW Government through Create NSW.

² Project number 27766, approved by the RMIT DSC CHEAN 24 June 2024.

These risks are especially significant for the festivals sector. It is highly exposed and sensitive to climate change stresses and disruptions across the diverse domains it relies on. To function effectively, the industry requires many interdependent and diffuse parts to work in sync, from musicians to the wider public, from musical instruments to wider electricity systems, from festival sites to general transport networks, and key organisations in Local and State Government, insurance and emergency services. The festivals sector is also already vulnerable to any further stress, as illustrated and worsened by COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.

Together these risk factors have contributed to the closure of a number of high-profile festivals recently, including Splendour in the Grass, Falls Festival, and Dark Mofo (Whiting and Green 2024). Festival closures have significant flow-on effects in terms of opportunities for artists and audiences, and lost employment and income for festival staff, vendors and tourism and hospitality operators. Beyond this, the lost opportunities in terms of creativity and the building of social bonds that can be facilitated by music may impact on the outcomes of climate-related disasters as cohesive communities and strong social connections can be a factor in climate resilience. Conversely, making festivals more resilient can generate broader positive effects, over and above those to just the festivals sector.

Key to the capacity of any group to adapt to climate change is their awareness, acceptance and understanding of the challenges. If the festival sector – and Australian music industry more broadly – is not focused or knowledgeable about climate change risks, the industry is made more vulnerable.

Any analysis of climate change risk needs to start with a robust understanding of the system to be adapted. For music festivals, it is vital to include the many interrelated people and agencies needed to successfully stage a festival, and then to consider how each will be impacted, and how these impacts will interact and compound. Diverse music sector stakeholders, including audiences, musicians, peak bodies, suppliers, skilled industry workers, and government at all levels, need to be part of the conversation to improve understanding of the risks faced and develop practical tools to increase resilience.

The Session

The session was run over three hours, in a hybrid mode, with 41 attendees in total (including researchers and GMA staff). Participants came from across the festivals ecosystem, including festival organisers, festival suppliers, and representatives of peak industry bodies, local councils, and organisations working on various aspects of sustainability and logistics in the festival space.

Session organisers used an online whiteboard to gather initial ideas from participants around seven key themes decided on beforehand in discussions between the research team and GMA. These were:

1. Infrastructure
2. People
3. Services and supplies
4. Sites
5. Government and policies
6. Finances and economics
7. Other

Participants were given time in an initial brainstorming session to consider what they think is needed in each of these categories to put on a successful festival, and to use virtual 'sticky notes' to enter their responses. Each of these categories had space for what was needed 'on the day', and for 'broader' considerations. The results of this brainstorming session are included in Appendix 1. Two breakout sessions were then run, of around 25 minutes each, with 4 to 10 people in each group. The first breakout session took place after a short presentation on climate risks, and in this session each group was assigned one of the categories on the virtual whiteboard and asked to consider how climate impacts affect their ability to put on a successful festival with relation to answers people had put up in that category. The second session took place after a short presentation on adaptation to climate risks, and in this breakout the participants were asked what they are already doing to make festivals more resilient, what more they could do and what they needed to succeed in this. This second discussion was not focused on any specific categories, but was more wide-ranging.

Findings

Perceived climate change risks to successful festivals

Almost all of the considerations in this discussion were related back to **rising costs**, with participants noting that cost increases for staff, goods and services are already difficult to manage, and that both adaptation and mitigation strategies for climate risks are adding to costs in various ways.

A common theme that emerged was in relation to **insurance**, and how changing conditions are making it harder, or impossible, to secure insurance for festivals. One festival organiser described already having a great deal of difficulty getting insurance that covered bushfire, and discussed the flow-on problems from this in terms of what could be put in contracts with artists around cancellations. There was also discussion of how there is increased pressure on artists to have insurance, which can be particularly challenging for emerging artists. This can limit opportunities for new talent to gain the exposure they need for success.

Participants considered how there will be an **increased need for certain resources**. For example, in the case sites that might experience extreme heat more shade and more – and more reliable access to – water will be needed. Shade was noted as something that is in short supply, both in that many festival sites do not have sufficient existing shade, and there is a lack of suppliers to bring in temporary shading. Any shade brought on to a site will also need to be resistant to the impacts of other types of extreme weather, particularly wind, and ensuring that extra shade is also safe in this regard was noted as another factor that could push costs up. One participant noted how the need for such resources can increase quickly, using ground cover as an example:

The more we're impacted by these extreme weather events, the more venues or regulatory agencies are requiring us to put some of these mitigation measures in, which just puts the cost up. So you might not always have needed ground protection, but you have one flooding event and destroy the turf, and then they expect it every year, and that's hundreds of thousands of dollars in some cases.

These types of impacts were noted across many different resources needed for staging festivals.

At the same time as need for them will increase, participants discussed how **resources will become harder to obtain**. Availability of goods required to hold the events was one example discussed, with a participant elaborating on issues around food supply chains:

...access to produce, you know, if there's extreme weather, look at what's happened with something as simple as eggs at the moment. When you get floods, or you get a cyclone that

goes up north and you get no bananas. Tomatoes go out, or your ground crops go out. Anything like that can have an effect on your catering as well in terms of what access they have to ingredients.

This quote shows an understanding of how climate impacts well beyond a festival site or day can still affect outcomes for organisers. A similar discussion took place in one group in regard to fuel prices, with participants noting that increased fuel prices impact not only the costs of bringing people and supplies to a site, but also the running of an event where diesel generators are needed.

This also shows a consideration of the intersection between different crises – in this case, the cost-of-living crisis, which, while intersecting with the climate crisis, is generally discussed in broader discourse as a separate issue – and how they contribute to the vulnerability of festivals. Along these lines, one group also discussed how items needed for festivals, such as fencing, may also be needed for disaster response and would likely be prioritised for this and become unavailable to their events. (A prominent example of such prioritisation occurred during the 2019-20 bushfires, when the Yours & Ows festival set for New Year's Day in Wollongong had to be cancelled because the WIN Stadium venue was placed on standby for emergency use.)

Another essential element that discussion participants considered was **staff**, including the increasing demands that climate adaptation places on staff, and the increasing difficulty of securing skilled staff. Participants discussed how a festival sector operating with too much uncertainty around whether events will go ahead will struggle to keep staff, particularly in a professionalising environment where predictable employment patterns are valuable.

Changing audience behaviour was also seen as likely under shifting conditions. For example, on the day extreme weather conditions can severely affect both the festival experience and attendee safety. Participants discussed how during hot weather, attendees may seek shelter in their tents or gather in whatever areas of shade there are, reducing their participation in daytime activities and performances. This can potentially deter people from attending future events due to negative experiences. Similar to staff, audiences may also come to see buying tickets to festivals as too risky if the sector is seen as being vulnerable to climate risks.

Participants discussed the need for **effective planning** to deal with disasters, but noted the difficulties in doing this effectively in situations that change quickly and that may be unexpectedly severe. In thinking about flood events, one participant noted that:

sometimes you can't make decisions on that until 2 days before when you know the amount of water that is travelling down the river and what the estimated height is going to be. Six months out, you can account for it but it doesn't mean anything sometimes.

Another noted:

a traffic management plan from a local council point of view is based on a really normal set of circumstances where cars are moving this way, that way, and are not necessarily built around like a Splendour where all the cars are bogged, so what are you going to do with your traffic management plan?

These quotes show that festival stakeholders feel there is a limit to what can effectively be planned for.

It was also discussed that there is a need for plans to be very specific for different sites as they will have different risks associated with them, and the risks will be different in different types of extreme events. Examples of participant experiences included the way that tents became an additional hazard in a fire, as did staging in severe wind. Therefore, while there are common risks and solutions

that can be considered across festivals, there is no 'one size fits all' approach that can be taken to risk management and planning.

In terms of **government support**, participants mostly had a positive view of government relationships with festivals, and – based on what had happened during covid, where local government in particular was seen as being supportive of live music – there was an expectation that festivals will continue to be looked after in the face of extreme weather events. However, participants anticipated that there would be a limit to this:

I think there's the potential for government to put a lot of funding into these events because there are so many ticks of boxes for them to be able to do this, whether its visitor economy, the tourism side of thing, there's a whole heap. So that, but then too, as you're saying, on the other side of it, if we have an extensive period of extreme weather events or massive climate change that we're seeing in these cancellations, they're going to redirect those funds to areas that are more necessary at that point.

Participants discussed how too many unpredictable extreme events could lead to government help being withdrawn, both because events that are constantly having to cancel become too much of a risk, and because under such circumstances resources would need to be redirected to essential services.

Proposals for adapting festivals to reduce climate change risks

Discussions of adaptation were wide-ranging, with participants often talking about how the consequences of possible adaptations strategies would play out, and how these could lead to other problems that would also need to be solved.

A common theme in relation to adaptation is the idea that festivals **could move from locations or times deemed to be high risk** to safer ones. Doing this effectively would involve understanding what risks will be highest where, and when. In particular, it was noted that the current peak festival season, in summer and particularly around New Year's Eve, would become increasingly risky. Participants noted, however, that moving the current summer festivals would mean the window for festivals to be held would be contracted, meaning more festivals would be in closer competition with each other. They also discussed how festivals in the Australian summer are currently a drawcard for big international acts who may not have the same incentive to tour in an Australian autumn or winter.

A sub-theme that emerged here was that there could be more **purpose-built sites** – possibly government-owned and administered – that could be used by multiple festivals. This would give festival organisers and attendees security in relation to some key aspects of festival safety and infrastructure – for example, a purpose-built site could include robust water and waste facilities, sufficient shade, and more reliable power and communication infrastructure, to better ensure safety of attendees and staff. Purpose-built sites also offer the opportunity to optimise various aspects of the festival lay-out, from ensuring that there is good access for emergency vehicles, to making sure stages are not west-facing.

There were, however, drawbacks that could be seen to both moving festivals and having purpose-built sites. Participants noted that many festivals are strongly associated with specific locations, to the point that moving them would change something fundamental about what the festival was and its appeal (sometimes expressed as being part of the festival's 'brand'), so that a festival that moved from one place to another would not be guaranteed the same attendance. Hence, moving to avoid climate risks incurs a different type of risk. Similarly, participants spoke about how a purpose-built site that hosted many festivals might also pose a 'brand risk'. Such a site would need to be a true 'blank canvas' to encourage use for different types of events, and for these events to be able to

make it their own. A shared site would only be successful if sufficient trust was built up in the community of festival stakeholders for them to feel confident that the facilities would be in good order and they could use the site in the ways they needed to for their event. Strategies to ensure that such sites were available to different types of festivals, including niche and experimental events, were highlighted as being desirable to prevent dominance by ‘the big players’.

Technological solutions to some of the issues highlighted were also discussed. Some participants had experience with using solar or hydrogen powered generators, and these were seen as being potentially useful solutions to the issue of losing power to a site, as well as being themselves more environmentally friendly. Neither was seen as currently completely viable however, and one participant noted the need to ensure that new technologies are accompanied by appropriate upskilling and training to ensure they are used efficiently and safely. It was noted that a significant step towards energy adaptation is to measure the current energy usage of a festival and its elements, which is not common practice.

A key aspect of adaptation that was discussed was **planning**. Good planning was seen as involving many different aspects, including:

- Strong systems and processes across the event
- Backup plans for sites and services, eg, generators, ability to connect to mains, evacuation plans
- Contingency plans for all aspects of the event, including having multiple contingencies for key features or for different possible impacts.

Doing this well was seen as related to having a good culture and effective leadership associated with the festival. This was described by one participant as:

having a really well-organized team that knows how they need to come back together to resolve things that haven’t been thought about, I think that particularly needs to be part of the planning going into an event. The resilience comes from knowing that you’ve got a leadership team that is flexible and nimble.

Good planning also required clear policies and procedures to be put in place by other stakeholders, particularly government and emergency services. The ability of key stakeholders such as these to be able to work with festivals to ensure decision making processes – especially around disasters and when to cancel festivals – are transparent and clearly communicated was seen as vital.

Good planning was also related to the need to develop **trust and clear communication** across wider stakeholder groups including audiences. To the stakeholders at this roundtable, this meant being able to effectively convey the values of the festival, and the culture it is trying to create. Creating a sense of community around a festival, including open communication around potential climate impacts, was seen as improving trust and understanding if things go wrong. This trust was also seen as developing out of festivals ‘walking the talk’ in regards to climate, in implementing mitigation strategies and also encouraging broader conversations on climate issues.

It is noteworthy that across the discussion of adaptation of festivals, in all groups, there was a tendency for the discussion to turn to *mitigation* measures being taken by the participants. There are many, often very innovative mitigation measures being implemented in the festivals sector in Australia at this point in time, and participants were keen to describe and discuss these. The recurring nature of this topic, however, does raise a question about how to most effectively move the conversation to adaptation strategies. On the one hand, adaptation and mitigation are related, with mitigation strategies engaged in now impacting on what type of adaptation may be needed in the future. Furthermore, participants noted the ways in which their mitigation strategies can be related to strategies for adaptation:

... taking action on climate change starts with understanding your own impacts, then reducing your impacts, and the more sustainable you are the more likely you are to succeed in environments that are becoming increasingly difficult to operate in.

Participants also discussed the way that climate impacts could affect mitigation efforts; for example, one participant talked about how during a festival that was impacted by severe rain, one of the outcomes was that reusable cups organisers had supplied 'just sank into the mud' and were lost.

However, the overall difficulty on the day of keeping discussion focused on adaptation, and the stronger focus on mitigation, suggests that there is a long way to go to embed adaptation as fully into the discussion on festivals as mitigation has been. It may be worth considering how the keen understanding that participants had of the multi-layered and compounding nature of the problems being faced, and their unpredictability, may be a demotivator for people to focus on adaptation, whereas mitigation measures are more in the control of festival stakeholders.

Conclusion

This workshop represents the beginning of the Australia music festivals industry coming together to address the need for climate change adaptation. The outcome of the workshop indicates the vulnerability of music festivals, building on earlier research that has identified the increasing number of cancellations (Green & Strong 2023). The workshop has raised key insights for the sector and the research team to address in subsequent work:

1. Climate change is increasing the costs of running festivals in many ways, including insurance, staff, catering, planning and site infrastructure. This is occurring at the same time as the cost-of-living crisis and increasing the vulnerability of the sector.
2. There is a need for government support to sustain Australian music festivals, but the participants in the workshop saw that this needs to be balanced against other priorities, including funding the decarbonisation transition.
3. Technical and infrastructural solutions offer some positive adaptation outcomes, such as shading and greening of power supplies, but also come at a cost to festival organisers. One proposal was for purpose-built festival sites designed to be resilient, albeit with some discussion about what that might mean for the industry and its wide array of offerings.
4. Good planning was also discussed as a way to address issues in the sector. The multi-faceted nature of the types of events that need to be planned for was evident in discussions, and festival stakeholders will need support in navigating planning in the face of many aspects of uncertainty and vulnerability.

More work needs to be done if the cultural, social and economic benefits of the Australian music festival sector are to be realised into a climate changed future.

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Appendix 1: Brainstorming session results

Prompt: What does a successful music festival rely on?

Categories	On the day	Broader
Infrastructure	Power systems, Security, first aid, BOH areas, Waste stations, Sorting area, Refuelling, Pumping, Bars, Plumbers, Fencing, Waste management systems front and back of house, Electricians, Barriers, Police and/or security, Amenities, Stage/s, Info point, Access Equipment, Radios, Crew & Production, Buggies, Water drinking water, audio equipment and technicians, water refills points, Signage, showers / toilets, shade, Ground Protection, water, Recycle points, gates/entry, waste vehicles and disposal, portaloos and accessible toilets, Accessibility infrastructure, Sensory tent, Shelter	Event Site, IT systems, Setting up infrastructure to reduce waste that is removing petro chemical issues like single use and camp gear
People	Trained staff, Punters, Performers, Volunteers, Efficient gate team, Crew & Production, First Aid, Accreditation staff, Cleaning contractors, Security, Trained staff for sensory tent, Ambulance, Chief Warden, Police, Harm Minimisation, Traffic Management, Volunteers, Auslan, Production crew, Fire Marshall, Safety Officer, Staff	Industry engagement, Good preproduction and planning, Local traffic committee approval for road closure if required, Stakeholders, Allied industries: hospitality, builders, electricians, emergency services, Event Team, Artists, Local police, Local business engagement
Services and supplies	Specialised cleaning contractors, Chronosoft, First Aid, Transport, Security, Fire service, Emergency Services, Poo truck, Security, Crowd Care, Police, CFA etc, Cleaning contractors and vendors know waste streams in place, Equipment & Production, Catering, Effective comms channels, Safety management plan, Electricity!, Power for accessible device charging, Solar audio systems are getting better, Waste management, Sustainable travel options (buses), Water, Wifi operating	Awareness of site amenities, Online platform, social media, Drug checking, Back up sites, Escalation processes and protocols, Power requirements, Risk Assessments
Sites	Evacuation, Accessible entry and exits, Venue site - road access, Accessible amenities, Attendance counter - digital monitors, clickers, Camping space, Decent weather, Emergency Assembly Area, Helipad, Sensory space or quiet space, Water source, First aid tent, Weather protection is a must but budgets for this are not viable, Wheelchair accessibility	Contemporary open space design does not support festivals well. Can sites be built for mixed use? Office, Access onto and off the site, Are outdoor sites even viable at all? Planning weather, emergency evac.

<p>Government and policies</p>	<p>Liquor Licence, WHS, Electrical sign off, Festival Licence, Relationship with Govt Agency leaders, SWMS, Approvals, Local govt: advice on local knowledge re: sites or times of year where exposure or vulnerability to climate impacts are felt most (so avoid these places/times), Org chart, Show stop procedures</p> <p>DO we talk about the ability to use event platforms to bring about large scale change in communities external of t the event? Events should be benefiting from government and other policies and modelling to reduce impact on the planet.</p>	<p>Policies that enable successful delivery - structural, liquor licencing, etc , Support from gov stakeholders & services, Solutions to the policies that get rolled out e.g. bans on single-use, need reliable and coset effective alternatives, Approval from Council parks team if festival is in a park , DA, PopE, etc. Event approvals, Sustainable Supplier Policy to mandate standards for all stakeholders, Section 68 where DA is not required, Permits, Local traffic committee approval for road closure, Huge - policy, funding, venues, equipment... Internal policy & procedures Govt owned and approved sites</p>
<p>Finances and economics</p>	<p>Ticket payments to work, Note: not all festivals are paid! Floats, Volunteer insurance, Food, drink and merch payments to work, SMP, Cancellation Insurance, Public Liability Insurance, Marina insurance, Workers comp, Budget, AMP, EMP</p>	<p>Funding grants philanthropy, Super clarity for artists, Early ticket Sales, Funding and/or operational budget approval, Monetary Investment / Sponsorship, Affordable insurance, Surely more viable to reduce single use waste and camp waste saving on risnl management, Stallholder revenue, In Kind support, Marketing, Accessible tickets, Paying superannuation to artists, Flow on effect of finances - do you use products/services that pass on profits to causes: environmental/social, Discretionary income for consumers (to buy tickets), Government underwriting, Who do you bank with - bank with sustainable / ethical, Super fund - ethical/green?, Localising events - local community & artists, Increasing costs of living</p>
<p>Other</p>	<p>Cash Flow, Info Tent, Signage, Festival Guide</p>	<p>Market demand, ie appetite from local audiences, Power Audit planning, Event Success = no harm to the planet, Communication strategy - pre, and during, People car pooling, Trust/confidence from audiences that festival will go ahead (or that they'll be reimbursed if it isn't), Social licence, Risk management plan, Data on audience wants, Marketing plan, Accessible comms including website, ticket buying process etc</p>