

On Course *With Nature*

Seeing is Believing

Certification verification yields public relations benefits.

BY JEAN MACKAY AND JEREMY TAYLOR



Active participation in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program helps golf courses highlight their environmental efforts and promote the fact that they are doing right by the environment (Beaver Creek Golf Club, Avon, Colo., fully certified in 2003).



Site visits offer a great opportunity for golf courses to showcase their environmental efforts. Larry and Jan Schlippert of Commonwealth National Golf Club in Horsham, Pa., show off their Audubon display during their site visit.

Verification. It's a critical issue when it comes to running a certification program. How do you know that people are doing what they claim? Without verification, the credibility of the program and the integrity of its members are both at stake.

We know that only too well at Audubon International. Since the inception of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses (ACSP) in 1991, we have grappled with how to verify the environmental best practices of members without adding undo costs or burden to participants. Though written and photographic documentation have always been required, and certified golf courses have long been environmental leaders in the golf industry, the question of on-site verification remained crucial for program critics and supporters alike.

To address the credibility gap, Audubon International changed its

certification requirements in 2005 to include a site visit — and the results have exceeded all expectations. To date (December 1, 2006), 110 golf courses have hosted a site visit. Within the next four years, all 595 currently certified golf courses will have had a third-party site visit.

ABOUT SITE VISITS

Site visits are designed to help Audubon International verify some of the more visible aspects of golf course environmental management activities. They are conducted by a third-party representative not affiliated with the golf course, such as a local conservation organization, governmental agency, cooperative extension, or Audubon International staff or steward. The site visit generally takes several hours, with course personnel touring the course with the third-party verifier, who then completes a checklist and returns it to Audubon International for review. Used in combination with written and

photographic documentation, certification is strengthened dramatically.

Equally important, the site visit provides an opportunity for golf course representatives to demonstrate some of the voluntary actions they have taken to protect the environment. In some cases, the reviewer is already aware of the ACSP and somewhat familiar with the efforts that the golf course has taken to protect the environment. But for the majority of golf courses, the site visit brings new eyes and a fresh perspective to the course — with much to be gained by both parties.

"[The reviewer] was impressed with the program and said 'I had no idea' quite a few times," reported Greg Blik at Tahoe Donner Golf Course in Truckee, Calif. "I think it comes as a shock to most people that we actually care about the environment."

Blik's perception was echoed independently by Scott Terrell of the Truckee Donner Public Utility District, who conducted the site visit. "As an

individual who has been involved in green business and personal practices, I was very pleasantly surprised to see the amount of green practices being conducted at Tahoe Donner Golf Course,” Terrell commented in the site visit report.

Blik and Terrell’s experiences are not exceptions. Similar comments appear again and again on site visit reports:

“It was a great opportunity to show an independent third party the projects we are involved in at our course. It allowed us an opportunity to receive constructive criticism and new ideas for existing and future projects.” —

Ben Kozlovsky, Assistant Superintendent, Barton Creek Resort, Palmer Lakeside Course, Spicewood, Texas.

“Our [third-party verifier] just reviewed our golf course and had some very insightful and positive things to say. He seemed to be quite happy about the whole situation. It was actually a very good experience.” — Chris Hart, Assistant Superintendent, Coyote Moon Golf Course, Truckee, Calif.

“After visiting Brooks Golf Club for the ACSP, I am very impressed with all the efforts they are putting forth to maintain and improve the environment and water quality.” — Mark Ingwersen, Commissioner, Dickinson



A clean, well-organized maintenance facility speaks volumes during a site visit at Commonwealth National Golf Club.

County Soil & Water Conservation District, Recertification Site Visit for Brooks Golf Club, Okoboji, Iowa.

“Forest Hills Country Club exceeds the expectations of environmental stewardship that an ecologist would expect from a golf course.” — Cory Ritterbusch, Ecologist, Native Landscapes, Recertification Site Visit for Forest Hills Country Club, Loves Park, Ill.

“Heron Lakes Golf Course staff and management practices demonstrate a strong commitment to good environmental stewardship in the Columbia Slough watershed.” — Charles F. Sams III, Executive Director, Columbia Slough Watershed Council, Recertifi-

cation Site Visit for Heron Lakes Golf Course, Portland, Ore.

“Notre Dame and the managers of the Warren Golf Course have done a terrific job at preserving this property as wildlife habitat while simultaneously keeping a lot of golfers happy. Audubon International could use Warren Golf Course as a model for training other golf courses.” — Laura Fuderer, Conservation Chair, South Bend-Elkhart Audubon Society, Recertification Site Visit for Warren Golf Course, Notre Dame, Ind.

By participating in the ACSP, golf course representatives gain assurance that they are doing right by the environment and the ability to invite others in with confidence. It is clear from the site visits that have been conducted thus far that ACSP golf courses are making new allies while maintaining Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary certification. And who would have guessed that on-site verification might become some of the best public relations a golf course could have?

“I have had amazing wildlife encounters on golf courses, and I run a nature center!” reports Dr. Karen Shragg, who has conducted numerous site visits for ACSP members. Shragg is director of the City of Richfield’s Woodlake Nature Center in Richfield, Minn.



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