

Getting Golfers in the Swing of Things

Educating golfers about realistic and environmentally sound golf course management practices.

BY JEAN MACKAY

It seems so obvious, so simple: golf is a game that's played on plants. Yet, how many golfers remember that fact when they're out there smacking the ball off a tee?

For ten years now, working with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, I've listened to superintendents relate story after story about golfer demands for spotless perfection on the golf course, flawless playing quality, and smooth, fast greens. I've watched superintendents take cutting heights lower and lower, knowing that they risk greater insect and disease outbreaks due to stressed plant health. If that's not enough, they roll their greens, plant ultra-dwarf turf varieties, and apply the necessary chemicals to keep plants alive and their jobs intact. And still, golfers smack their balls off the tee, leave divots unearthened, and complain about the greens.

So what's to be done?

The USGA Green Section and Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, as well as the coalition of organizations involved in the Golf and the Environment forum, have undertaken a variety of initiatives to educate golfers, not only about proper etiquette, but also about environmental issues

related to golf. Among the most successful strategies, however, are the on-the-ground efforts of superintendents reaching out to their own golfers and encouraging an attitude of environmental stewardship.

Why is this approach so effective? Superintendents know their course, they know the game, they know their golfers, and they can be persistent in targeting specific environmental issues and promoting good stewardship.

Superintendents involved in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program have pioneered many strategies to educate golfers about realistic and environmentally sound golf course maintenance. They have involved golfers in a variety of projects to raise awareness of the vital link between overall environmental quality and the natural heritage and enjoyment of the game of golf.

If you would like your golfers to be a bit more on the ball when it comes to supporting environmentally sensitive golf course maintenance, try one or more of these ideas. The greater the number of superintendents involved, the more successful all our efforts will be to get golfers in the swing of things.

THE BENEFITS OF REACHING OUT

Communicating with golfers about your environmental efforts can help you:

- Gain recognition and support for your management efforts.
- Increase golfer understanding of wildlife and environmental quality on the golf course.
- Counter negative stereotypes about golf courses as polluters of the environment.
- Communicate your commitment to good stewardship.

OUTREACH AND EDUCATION STRATEGIES

• **Join the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP).** The ACSP provides a framework for integrating environmental management strategies into your day-to-day routine. Equally important, it lends legitimacy to your environmental stewardship efforts and rewards you and your course for your positive efforts.

• **Invite golfers to get involved.** Contact golfers at your course, inform them of your involvement in conservation projects, and invite their participation. A newsletter article or announcement on the bulletin board requesting help from individuals to assist with projects, such as wildlife surveys or nest box construction and monitoring, may result in more positive responses than you think.

• **Teach good stewardship.** If your course offers golf lessons or has a junior golf program, include lessons on how golfers can support good environmental stewardship while they play. Repairing ball marks and divots is just the beginning of what golfers can do. Discuss how golfer demands for fast play and perfect conditions can stress turf and pose risks to turf health and the environment. Encourage people to view natural areas as integral to the nature of the game and to respect wildlife and natural habitats on the property.

Post the Environmental Code of Ethics for Golfers in a visible location

ENVIRONMENTAL CODE OF ETHICS FOR GOLFERS

The American golf community is dedicated to preserving golf's treasured links to nature. We recognize our historic tradition of integrating the game with the natural heritage, character, and challenges of the landscape on which it is played. As golfers, we accept our responsibility to ensure that golf courses are managed in harmony with the environment.

We commit to . . .

- Use and protect natural resources on the golf course in an environmentally responsible way.
- Foster wildlife and natural habitats in non-play areas of the golf course.
- Respect designated environmentally sensitive areas within the course.
- Support golf course management decisions that protect and enhance the environment.

- Encourage maintenance practices that promote healthy turf.
- Plan long-range conservation efforts on the golf course.
- Educate others about the benefits of environmentally responsible golf course management for the future of the game and the environment.

Adapted from "Environmental Principles for Golf Courses in the United States," March 1996, Golf and the Environment Summit, Pinehurst, N.C.

- **Use tournaments to showcase environmental aspects of the golf course.** If you are hosting a tournament, use the opportunity to educate people about the environmental quality of your golf course. For example, highlight your ACSP involvement through the media or put up a simple display to show some of the environmental projects you've undertaken. Create a simple media fact sheet that highlights stewardship accomplishments and key natural features of the golf course.

- **Lead a golf course tour.** Consider hosting an outing once per year for members, regular golfers, or specific golfing groups (e.g., seniors, ladies). Such a tour can showcase various aspects of your stewardship efforts and convey information about what golfers can do to support you.

- **Create a display.** Create a display in your clubhouse to educate members about wildlife species, habitat conservation, and golf course maintenance. It also can promote the positive efforts you have undertaken to maintain a high degree of environmental quality at your golf course.

- **Write newsletter articles.** Newsletter articles about your stewardship activities are an easy way to reach your audience. Include a variety of topics, such as: wildlife or habitat management,



Signs and displays, such as this one at Glendoveer Golf Course (Portland, Oregon) can effectively showcase a golf course's commitment to environmental quality. Glendoveer G.C. received certification in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program in 2001.

best management practices, water quality testing, dealing with problem wildlife, water conservation measures, and what golfers can do to support environmental quality.

- **Mount signs.** Mounting signs can be an effective education strategy, as well as a way to protect areas of special concern. The primary objective of any sign is to concisely communicate your message to all who will see it.

- **Request help with nest boxes.** Nest boxes are a good starter project that raise awareness about birds on the golf course and often serve as a catalyst for greater involvement in conservation activities. Invite golfers to "adopt a box" by donating money for one or more boxes and agreeing to check and maintain them throughout the spring and summer.

- **Host projects for kids.** Get kids involved by making bird feeders or nest boxes for the course or their own backyards, hosting a fishing derby, or leading a school tour. Getting kids involved in environmental activities pulls parents into the golf course for non-golf activities and helps people begin to see the property not just as a golf course, but as a community asset.

JEAN MACKAY is the Director of Educational Services for Audubon International, where she has worked closely with members of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for 10 years. She can be contacted at jmackay@audubonintl.org. For information on the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses, call (518) 767-9051, extension 12, or visit www.audubonintl.org.