

# All for the Creek, All for the Course

Elks Club of State College, Boalsburg, Pennsylvania.

BY DAVID WILLIAMS AND KATIE OMBALSKI

Large projects can be daunting to approach, and it is in the best interest of a golf course to partner with local organizations. Not only can local partners provide on-the-ground assistance, but they often can bring expertise to a project that will benefit project efficiency and outcome. Partnerships also can bring credibility to a project, which can lead to further partner involvement and grant funding.

David Williams, golf course superintendent at the Elks Club of State College in Boalsburg, Pa., came across a newsletter published by a local conservation organization, the ClearWater Conservancy of Central Pennsylvania. The special edition of *Springs & Sinks* detailed the findings of a 2001 Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection report about Spring Creek, which runs through the Elks Club course. It was reported that parts of the creek were impaired and not supporting aquatic life as they should.

Williams became concerned as he read the newsletter. Although the risk that the Elks Club itself posed was not explicitly known, he recognized that there was certainly room for improvement. "I didn't know where to start," he said. "I needed help figuring out what role the Elks Club could play in improving the watershed."

He decided to call ClearWater Conservancy. A partnership quickly developed, and with the help of Katie Ombalski, the Conservancy's conservation biologist, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service soon became part of the effort to improve the Elks Club's



With just a few phone calls and some coordination meetings, Elks Club now saves about \$5,000 per year in reduced maintenance costs.

stretch of Spring Creek. "We're hoping to foster a healthier marriage between this recreational activity and the environment. The two can peacefully coexist," says Ombalski.

Through the partnership, it was determined that the Elks Club would focus on enhancing the water quality of Spring Creek by reducing nutrient loading and decreasing the temperature of the water. The first step was to create several low-maintenance areas. Approximately 15 acres of carefully manicured turfgrass were taken off the maintenance schedule, and natural vegetation was allowed to grow freely. This change allows a more biologically diverse habitat within the buffer zones surrounding the creek. "Some golfers don't like it that way," admits Williams.

"But some prefer it and recognize its value. The members who prefer the natural look really liked the work done on the stream. It's a matter of personal choice, but it's what is right for this initiative."

Williams also placed signs labeling Spring Creek at several cart crossings and on Elks Club Road. "We knew there was a problem when some members of the Elks Club referred to Spring Creek as 'the ditch,' says Ombalski. "Installing stream crossing signs on the course was an easy way to let people know that this is a resource that needs protection."

The next step was to develop a long-term plan to ensure that further actions would be taken to conserve and restore the creek and its surrounding areas.



Spring Creek underwent quite a change when volunteers came out to Elks Club to plant nearly 800 native trees and shrubs.

Ombalski contacted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, the Centre County Conservation District, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, and Penn State to help gain support and aid. The Penn State Landscape Architecture Department came up with a planting design for the project, and Ombalski applied for grants and secured plant donations from local businesses. Approximately \$3,000 was donated.

On May 6, 2006, 57 volunteers from the Elks Club and ClearWater Conservancy planted more than 800 trees and shrubs along a 500-foot riparian buffer. The area had been set aside for habitat in 2000, and the low-maintenance area provided food and

shelter for wildlife, helped filter runoff, and controlled erosion. The new trees and shrubs increased the value of this area by providing additional nesting sites and food sources. The habitat value of the project was immediately evident, as birds perched in the trees even before they were planted. The plantings also will shade Spring Creek, helping to protect the creek from thermal pollution (increased water temperatures), common in streams where trees and plant materials have been removed from the edges. The sun warms the creek as it flows through open areas, increasing water temperatures and reducing dissolved oxygen levels, which can be detrimental to fish and other aquatic organisms.

The donations allowed Williams to finish the project with only an investment of labor. He projects that the restoration will save him approximately \$5,000 in reduced maintenance costs. "Everybody, including the naysayers, was delightfully surprised that this project was completed at basically no cost to the Elks Club," stated Williams.

In addition to guidance from ClearWater Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Williams is ensuring that he will be able to maintain the property efficiently and in an environmentally sensitive way on his own for years to come. Through Williams' initiative, the Elks Club was designated as a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary by Audubon International. Williams hopes that the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program will help the club to continue as a good steward of the land. "The course will be more aesthetically pleasing for golfers, and we will contribute to the revival of Spring Creek," he says. "I really think this is a win-win situation."

The partnership with ClearWater Conservancy helped Williams to organize a large restoration project with little effort on his part. "Katie pretty much did all of the leg work and organizing," stated Williams. "She is amazing and deserves much more of the credit on this project than I do. I would definitely recommend getting the local conservancy group involved with any type of environmental project or issue."

For more information on the Elks Club of State College, please call (814) 466-6451. For more information about the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses, call (518) 767-9051, extension 12.

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