

Good News for the Bottom Line and Environmentally Sensitive Golf Course Development

Yes, you can have it both ways.

BY NANCY RICHARDSON

Whether there is an economic advantage to environmentally sensitive golf course development is of central importance not only to investors and developers, but to environmentalists as well. If the answer is *No*, the added costs of building in an environmentally sustainable way will be a burden that many in the golf industry will not choose to pay. If the answer is *Yes*, there is a much greater likelihood that environmentally sensitive golf course development will continue to gain support.

Over the past year, members of Audubon International's Signature Programs (for properties in the design and development stages) have been reviewing their economic bottom lines and reporting their findings as part of a survey to gauge the business value of environmental stewardship. The programs' 118 Signature golf courses — comprising 50,000 acres in 33 U.S. states, as well as in Canada, China, Portugal, Puerto Rico, and South Africa — are being designed, built, and managed according to stringent environmental standards. Members considered operational costs, up-front investments, and the importance of the program in marketing and promotion.

Their responses bode well for the future of sustainable golf course development.

- 96% viewed their participation in the Signature Program as “a good business decision,” with the remaining 4% indi-

cating that they “don't know” at this time.

- 90% of respondents reported that they believed annual operation and maintenance costs for their facilities were either “lower than” or the “same as” the costs of an equivalent, non-Signature member golf course. 43% of respondents attributed lower operation and maintenance costs to their participation in the Signature Program.

- 63% of respondents stated that participation in the Signature Program, including up-front monetary and staff investment in the program, has saved or will save money, as compared to a course designed, constructed, and managed without Audubon International assistance. Another 20% of the remaining respondents stated that they “don't know” yet.

- 90% stated that they believed the *Certified Audubon Signature Sanctuary* status earned through following program guidelines has or will have value in marketing and promotional efforts, with the remaining 10% indicating only that they “don't know.”

“In Austin, or anywhere in the country for that matter, environmental stewardship is a great business decision,” says Anne Hickman-Hudgins, Environmental Landscape Coordinator for Barton Creek Resort and Spa in Texas. “Community outreach and education is a benefit to establishing our club as a role model for other properties.”

“Combining wildlife preservation and development is not only the right

thing to do, but it makes good business sense,” agrees Jim L. Awtrey, CEO of PGA of America (PGA Golf Club in St. Lucie, Florida, is a Certified Signature Sanctuary). “Long-term operating costs can be significantly reduced while providing valuable environmental benefits to the community. It is a business-environmental partnership that serves everyone.”

“The concepts incorporated in the Signature Program will absolutely pay for the cost of what we're doing over five to ten years . . . We'll have better-managed water and irrigation systems and use less chemicals,” reports Bill Fiveash of East West Partners, developers of Old Greenwood Golf Course in California.

Just as wildlife inventories and water quality data help to determine environmental outcomes, data about operational costs and return-on-investment are critical in evaluating the financial value of environmentally sensitive development and management. Taken together, these benchmarks are beginning to demonstrate clearly that embracing sustainable development benefits the quality of life, the environment, and the bottom line.

NANCY RICHARDSON is the director of the Audubon Signature Programs, based in Henderson, Kentucky. She can be reached at (270) 869-9419 or e-mail nrichardson@audubonintl.org.