

Half Full or Half Empty?

The state of golf's environmental game.

BY KEVIN A. FLETCHER

Obviously, protecting the natural environment is critical to the future of the game of golf and golf courses, and we all know that environmental leadership in any business sector depends on the people in the industry. In the golf industry, golf course superintendents, golf professionals, club managers, and other individuals all have a unique opportunity to demonstrate environmental leadership through their actions on the golf course, providing excellent models for managing golf courses from an environmental perspective. Yet, for nearly ten years, there have been two seemingly competing positions regarding the environmental status of golf courses.

1. Many golf courses serve as good examples of protecting wildlife, water,

and other natural resources through the environmental leadership by those who manage them.

2. Although many golf courses, through the actions of those who manage them, may be making some effort at protecting environmental resources, the relative number is actually pretty small.

So which position is accurate? Is it half full or half empty? While it's difficult to prove either statement, golf courses that serve as models and those who take a leadership role in managing them with an eye toward protecting and enhancing the environment may be measured by participation in voluntary environmental programs.

First, consider one simple number for the sake of discussion — 12%. That is the percentage of golf courses in the

United States enrolled in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) for Golf Courses. Some use that number as a means to define and celebrate the state of environmental leadership in golf, especially when adding the 100-plus newly built and renovated courses enrolled in the Audubon Signature and Classic programs, respectively. It's positive, but it also means that 88% of all golf courses in the United States are not currently enrolled and working through the program.

Two questions follow: (1) Is this percent participation rate, from just one voluntary environmental program, an accurate reflection of the state of golf's environmental game right now? (2) If it is accurate, or somewhere in that range, is that number a positive or

This mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) at Des Moines Golf and Country Club (Iowa) is just one example of the thousands of wildlife species that benefit from voluntary environmental actions and enhanced wildlife habitat management through programs like the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses.



negative indicator of the state of the broader golf sector?

To get to the first question, we have to ask, what, besides participation in the ACSP for Golf Courses, should be added to a formula for identifying *environmental leadership* in golf? A few years ago, we went through the process of trying to identify other elements. We looked at voluntary programs, tools, award programs, and even environmental seminar participation at conferences — a very loose interpretation of leadership. In the process, we discovered a great deal of “leadership overlap.”

For example, over the past several years, 96–99% of all of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America’s (GCSAA) Environmental Leadership in Golf Award winners have also been Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary or Certified Audubon Signature Sanctuary program members. Likewise, while there are a number of state and regional programs designed to help golf course staff do a better job of managing environmental impacts, we discovered that a significant percentage of participants in these programs often are also enrolled in an Audubon International program — thus already part of that 12%.

Given this overlap and potential for double-counting, a generous estimate might show that 20% to 30% of all golf courses in the United States are taking at least some voluntary steps to protect the natural environment. This range also seems to be supported by the *2007 Golf Course Environmental Profile Survey* produced by the GCSAA. In this national golf course survey, 29% of participants reported that they were involved with one or more of a set of nine different environmental programs or tools. However, 24% of

survey respondents stated that they participated in the ACSP for Golf Courses specifically. The actual national average of participation is 12%. In other words, respondents to the survey participated in the ACSP for Golf Courses at twice the rate of the national average. So, some of the numbers still are not crystal clear.

For the sake of argument, assume that 20% to

have participation rates in the 10–15% range. Looking at these figures, golf should feel pretty good. We know at least 12% of courses are working through the ACSP for Golf Courses and, although it is a high-end estimate, it may be as much as 30%. Yet, there are another 70% to 88% of U.S. golf courses, based on these low- and high-end assumptions, that could be doing a better job.

So what’s the verdict? Golf should feel good about its environmental game right now, but not satisfied. It’s still a double-digit handicap with plenty of room for improving the overall score.



Golf courses can serve as excellent examples of protecting wildlife and natural resources through environmental leadership by those who manage them (cedar waxwing — *Bombycilla cedrorum*).

30% of golf courses are exhibiting environmental leadership. Using that approximation, we can address question number two: Is this a positive or negative indicator of the state of the broader business sector?

Looking across other industry sectors that have established voluntary environmental programs or other ways to measure the state and scope of voluntary environmental leadership, the magic range is often 10–15%. Industry, government, and nonprofit run voluntary environmental programs in almost any business sector typically

Leadership is not about doing just what’s expected. It’s about going above and beyond those expectations. It’s about striving for excellence. No matter what actions golf courses take, whether through the ACSP for Golf Courses or some other program or tool, it’s important just to know that action is still needed.

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